

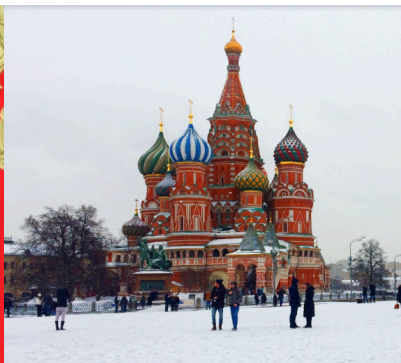
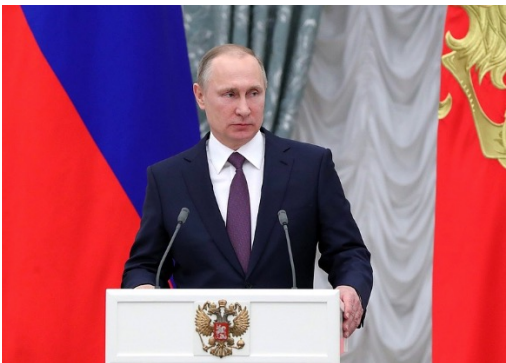
PUTIN THE PREDICTABLE?

An Examination of the Foreign Policy Strategy of Putin's Russia

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Abstract

This master's thesis seeks to investigate Russia's use of military intervention as a foreign policy tool under Vladimir Putin's administration. Since Putin first became President, Russia has been involved in three major conflicts outside its borders, in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. From a Western perspective, Russia is almost always labelled the aggressor in these conflicts, however this project seeks to examine what led Russia to intervene militarily in these conflicts and whether or not the actions of Russia can in fact be characterised as offensive or not.

This is examined through two hypotheses, generated from the two-neorealist schools of international relations theory, defensive and offensive realism. With due regard to the actual empirical reality, these theories are tested to support the research in determining whether Russia's foreign policy is to be considered defensive or offensive. The project finds that neither of the two hypotheses can unambiguously be confirmed to describing the Russian motivation for military intervention in all three conflicts. Rather, it finds that Russia's actions should be seen in the context of the actions of other actors within the international system as well. When Russia engaged in the Russo-Georgian War, it did so after decades of NATO expansions, in spite of repeated Russian criticism that it was considered a threat to the security of the Russian State. When NATO declared its intention to admitting Georgia into the alliance, Russia deemed prone to act. Similarly, when Ukraine decided to pursue a more Western path following the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014, Russia feared that the expanding Western influence could jeopardise its strategically important military installation in Sevastopol, Crimea, which led to the annexation of the peninsula. The subsequent destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine however, indicates a more offensive motive to signal to Ukraine and the West that Russia still has significant influence within its near-abroad and Western influence here will not be tolerated. When Russia launched its Syrian intervention a year later, it did so to protect its

interests rather than to protect its security. Through its comprehensive effort in the conflict, Russia has managed to position itself as the power broker of the conflict and has reemerged as a great power in international politics once again.

The research conducted in this thesis clearly reveals a shift in the foreign policy strategy of Russia. In Georgia, Russia used its offensive capabilities as a means to defend itself against the expanding NATO threat. But as Russia has become more powerful over the years, it has increasingly been using its military capabilities to defend its interests abroad, rather than primarily the security of the Russian state. Concurrently with increasing U.S. absence from the international system, Russia has pursued a more interventionist foreign policy strategy, allowing it to fill the power vacuum, for instance in the Middle East. This clearly illustrates an attempt to re-emerge as a major power and to diminish the United States-led unipolar world order.

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Introduction

On the 26th of December 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed and with that, the world order was immediately changed from a bipolar system featuring the communist Soviet Union on one side and the market capitalistic United States of America on the other. Since then the world has been dominated by one primary hegemon, the U.S. Through the 1990's and the beginning of the 2000's there was an expectation that the Russian Federation would endorse this new world order and it was expected that the relation between the U.S. and Russia would improve significantly. In March 2000, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin was elected President of the Russian Federation and initially it seemed that the increasingly warm relation between Russia and the U.S. would continue, as Russia in 2001, following the 9/11 attack declared its support for the U.S' war against terror. However, when NATO announced its planned enlargement of 2004, the relationship between the two states immediately started becoming colder. During the same period of Putin's presidency Russia started changing its democratic course, distancing itself from the rest of the Western world.

Concurrently with the turn away from the West, the foreign politics of the Russian Federation has been characterised by a number of conflicts with other states. In particular the war with Georgia in 2008, the involvement in the Ukraine Conflict from 2014 and onwards and most recently the engagement in the Syrian Conflict.

The scope of this project is to examine the foreign policy of Russia since Vladimir Putin assumed office and until now, in order to understand what drives the Russian engagement in the various conflicts it engages in and determine what the desired outcome of this high degree of military intervention is. The research question selected to explore this topic is as follows:

Why has Russia under Putin's administration pursued a foreign policy characterised by a high degree of military intervention?

The research of this question will include considerations such as, what led to the shift in Russian foreign policy with the war in Georgia in 2008. Furthermore, it will examine why Russia initially focused on its geographical neighbourhood, but with the engagement in the Syrian Conflict decided to broaden its interventionist policy further. During recent years it has often discussed within the international relations field, whether Russia's foreign policy should be regarded as offensive, because Russia tries to gain territory and influence in the international system or if it should be regarded as defensive as Russia considers the threat, from in particular NATO as increasing, and tries to defend its position in the international system. The ambition of the research conducted in this project is to present a possible answer to this dilemma. The means to answering the research question and this dilemma, are two hypotheses generated through inspiration from the theoretical perspective of this project, the two neorealist schools of thoughts, defensive and offensive realism. These two theories have inspired to generating the following hypotheses, which in this project, will be examined with due regard to the actual empirical material:

Russia has not been reluctant to use its military capabilities under Putin's administration in order to create a balance of power between Russia and the West, thus ensuring the security of the Russian State.

and

Since Putin assumed office, Russia has repeatedly used its military capabilities for the purpose of becoming a great power in the international system.

Relevance

In December 2017, Vladimir Putin declared victory in Russia's intervention in the Syrian Conflict and announced the immediate-beginning drawback of Russian troops from Syria (Roth, 2017). This marked the official 'end' of the third of Russia's three major military interventions in foreign states in the last decade. With regard to its engagement in the other two conflicts, the war with Georgia has been concluded, but has locked Georgia into a frozen conflict, as the two disputed regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia are still de facto independent, supported by Russia. Similarly, in respect to the Ukrainian conflict, the annexed Crimea Peninsula is still de facto Russian and the war continues to rage on in the regions of Donbas and Luhansk in Eastern Ukraine. Therefore, it is perhaps legitimate to assume, that Russia has not yet completed all of its activities in Syria, and Russia has also already announced that it will continue its military presence in Syria (Roth, 2017). These examples clearly illustrate the continued relevance of the topic addressed in this project.

Especially, following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the tension between Russia and the western democracies has been increasing rapidly. This has amongst other things led to a continued rearmament along both sides of the NATO-Russian border. Today, NATO has multinational battalions stationed in the NATO countries bordering Russia and Russia has relocated much of its military capacity to its western military district (McDermott, 2016). On many security related topics,

Russia and the West have been supporting opposite sides, whether it being United Nation Security Council resolutions, support to different sides of other conflicts, for instance in Azerbaijan and Moldova, or leading the Syrian Peace Process. In many ways Russia has provided or supported the "alternative" to the Western-led world order and vice versa. In Western media, Russia is often portrayed as the aggressor of the conflict between Russia and the West. But is this in fact the case? In Russian media, the West is portrayed as the aggressor and within the Russian political elite, much of the initiatives launched by Russia are articulated as defensive measures taken to counter a hostile NATO aggression. This project will therefore seek to examine the antithesis between the two discourses in order to provide an answer to which of the two comes closest to the actual reality. In this regard, it is of course important to recognise that Russian foreign policy cannot be seen as an isolated phenomenon, but rather that the Russian foreign policy is of course affected by the policy of the West and that the conflict between the two sides should be regarded as nuanced rather than black and white. Therefore, it is also important to understand that the tension between Russia and the west is characterised by a constant interplay between actions and reactions from both sides.

Furthermore, following the re-election of Vladimir Putin for another six-year term in March 2018, with a strong mandate, there is no reason to believe that the current tendencies of Russian foreign policy will change remarkably. These circumstances further stresses that the topic addressed in this project remains relevant and that the research of Russian foreign policy strategy during the Vladimir Putin administration is indeed of its time.

Delimitation

As the scope of this project is to examine the foreign policy strategy of Russia under Putin's administration, this project will clearly have a historical delimitation, as the timespan will focus on the period from 2000 until today. However, the project will encompass some historical references to before this timespan, as a means to compare and understand the change in the strategy. Often, the current relationship between Russia and the Western democracies are compared to that of the Cold War and therefore this project will also feature some historical recollections from before Putin assumed office.

The President of Russia is constitutionally vested with the power to extensively determine Russia's foreign policy, but over the last two decades the power of the presidency has been expanded further to also cover a wide range of other policy areas, which has transformed the Russian Federation to, by a large extend, an autocratic regime. In addition, Vladimir Putin enjoys remarkably high support with the Russian population and his party, United Russia, has a clear majority of the seats in the Russian State Duma. United Russia, which is chaired by Dmitry Medvedev, the Prime Minister of Russia. Therefore, this project will also include the four years of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency from 2008 to 2012, which in many ways is broadly considered a continuation of the existing foreign policy outlined by Vladimir Putin, who during this period served as Prime Minister. Putin assumed office again in 2012 and Dmitry Medvedev rotated back to the position as Prime Minister. Within the international society this rotation between president and prime minister is often seen as a formality and the foreign policy of Russia is therefore regarded as interchangeable. Throughout this project, the full period from 2000 until today will therefore because of this, be regarded as one collective period in respect to the foreign policy of Russia. Due to the autocratic degree of the Russian Federation, the terms Russia, Moscow,

Putin and the political elite of Russia will therefore be used interchangeable throughout the research of this project.

As this project seeks to examine the military intervention of the foreign policy of Russia, this project will focus on the three major conflicts that Russia has been militarily involved in over the last decade, the war with Georgia and the conflicts in Ukraine and in Syria. However, Russia has also to a certain degree been involved in a number of other violent conflicts, for instance in Moldova, and to a certain extend Libya. While these conflicts will not hold a central role in the project there will be some references to these conflict, as they serve as an illustrator of the broadness of Russia's involving foreign policy strategy as well as to provide an understanding for the Russian motives.

Russia's foreign policy strategy, characterised by a high degree of military intervention, has undoubtedly a domestic political dimension as well. Since Putin began his military interventionist strategy abroad, his domestic popularity has become higher than ever before. Even despite the decline of the average income for Russian citizens since the annexation of Crimea and the following sanctions on Russia by the West (Ogilvy, 2017). However, it is a well-tested hypothesis that an external enemy creates a more united population and increase the popularity of the political leaders - and some of Putin's popularity can most likely be ascribed to this effect. This shows that there is a potential domestic angle to Russia's foreign policy strategy shift as well. However, well-knowingly of this factor, the project will be delimited from focusing on this, as this is not the initial scope of this project. Instead, it will focus narrowly on foreign political elements of the Russian foreign policy.

The theoretical foundation of the research will be based on defensive and offensive realism, two sub branches of the International Relations realism theoretical perspective. Therefore, the project will also be delimited from using other theoretical frameworks for understanding Russian foreign

policy - although the project does understand that this can indeed be interpreted through a number theoretical angles within the International Relations field. The theoretical perspective as well as the scope of including this theoretical perspective will be addressed further in the theory section of the project.

Methodology

In order to understand the foreign policy strategy of Russia, this project will understandably apply a qualitative approach in order to find an answer to the research question, which underlie this research. The research conducted in this project is both of descriptive and explanatory character, as the research seeks to not only describe Russia's foreign policy, but also to attempt to explain why Russia is pursuing this particular policy and which greater intentions are sought to be achieved through it (Bryman, 2012). In order to answer the research question at hand, two hypotheses will be generated based on the two theories applied to the empirical data. The two hypotheses will lay out the central arguments of the theory and test these with due regard to actual, empirical reality in order to determine which theory provides the best hypothesis describing the Russian foreign policy strategy. The two hypotheses will be of a competing character, strengthening the research field of the project by taking account of a greater spectrum of the international relations field, thus allowing the research of this project to apply two approaches to the same issue. Despite the fact that the two hypotheses are considered competing, it cannot unilaterally ensure that the project can conclusively verify one hypothesis and reject the other as the reality could be somewhere in between the two extremities.

The approach, through which this analysis will be conducted, is of deductive character, as this project will generate two hypothesis based on the two neorealist theories, in order to examine the foreign policy practice

exerted by Russia in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. As it is not possible to gain direct insight in the minds of the Russian decision makers, the research will, through descriptive analysis, identify pattern and trends in the Russian foreign policy practice that can give hint to the greater foreign policy strategy Russia is pursuing. The project will then aspire to explain these patterns through a theoretical framework in order to explain why the given foreign policy strategy of Russia is pursued and what Moscow is attempting to achieve through exerting this policy.

Empirical Data

The empirical data used throughout this project will be based on a broad selection of material, in order to ensure the highest possible validity of the research. The research will consist of official material from the Kremlin, this includes first and foremost 'The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation', also called the Putin Doctrine, but also Putin's own statements and speeches will be addressed in order to include unprocessed information to the analysis and gain insight into the reasoning for the foreign policy practices, which are being exerted. Having let the official Russian side be heard, it is equally important to ensure a balanced discourse between Russian-friendly sources and the more sceptical. Therefore, western sources are included as well to ensure a counter-frame. These constitute of various western think tanks, the Council on Foreign Relations and their articles published through Foreign Affairs, as well as various reports and the work by political analyst Professor Dmitri Trenin. Dmitri Trenin, one of the founders of Carnegie Moscow Center is a well-known expert on Russian foreign policy, having published a number of works on Russian Foreign Policy, especially covering the period after Vladimir Putin assumed office. These empirical choices serve to ensure a nuanced picture of Russian foreign policy and improve the validity and reliability of the findings of the research.

Theoretical Outline

The theoretical perspective of this project will originate from two subsections of neorealism or structural realism, namely defensive and offensive realism. As neorealism was initially coined by Kenneth Waltz in his work *Theory of International Politics* of 1979, this will serve as the defensive neorealism perspective of the research. The offensive aspect will focus on the positions stated by John Mearsheimer, the initial proposer of the offensive theory. While there are many similarities between the two neorealism approaches in comparison to other international relations theories, they differ on a key topic; whether or not states by nature are to be considered aggressive. They are therefore highly relevant for the research of this thesis, as they serve to support the empirical data in determining if Russian foreign policy is to be considered for the most part offensive or defensive. These two theories will be accounted for in the following chapter and then used to generate hypotheses that can be tested through empirical research, in order to determine which theory provides the best theoretical explanation of Russian foreign policy practice.

Theoretical Perspective

Realism

The realism theory first formally emerged as a theory within the international relations field following the Second World War, but the realism theory claims to originate from ancient political thought. According to the realist school of thought, the primary actors in the international society are states, but the theory focus mostly on great powers and their role, as these states dominate international politics and can cause the most devastating wars. Great powers are capable of exercising their power in the international arena if they reach a dominant position and smaller states will therefore have to adapt to the reality imposed on them by these great powers or risk being dominated. Furthermore, the actions of these great powers are primarily influenced by external factors rather than domestic politics. Therefore, the theory does not distinguish much between "good" and "bad" states, as their actions are mostly a product of the nature of the system - and for that reason realists tend to have a pessimistic view of international politics, because there is no way to escape security competition and war, they argue (Mearsheimer, 2001; 13f). States compete for power - and in this process states may at times cooperate with others, but as states by nature distrust each other and have conflicting interest, this will only be temporarily. The competition for power is by realists considered a zero-sum game, where there is only a said amount of power in the international system, and a state can therefore only increase its power at the expense of other states. In this pursuit of power, warfare is considered a necessity and therefore also an acceptable instrument to use (Mearsheimer, 2001; 17f).

In this project the realism theory will be represented by the subsequent neorealist theories - defensive and offensive realism. Defensive realism will be based of Kenneth Waltz' work and offensive realism on John

Mearsheimer's work, as both of them are considered the founders of their respective branches of realism.

Defensive Realism

The neorealist or structural realist school of international politics was first founded by Kenneth Waltz (1924-2013) in his work *Theory of International Politics* in 1979. After his work was published, it quickly gained international recognition and since then, Waltz and his thoughts have been one of the dominant schools of thought within the international relations theory. The theory focuses on the relationship between sovereign states in the international system as well as on determining which principles characterises the relations of these states (Sørensen, 2009; 970). According to Waltz, the international system consists of sovereign states that want to protect their independence, and as there are no supranational institutions guaranteeing the safety of states and because some states may resort to violence at any given time, it leads all states to having to be prepared to use violence or see their independence become the subject to the will of other states. As a result, the international system is characterised as anarchic. This does of course not mean that war between states constantly occurs, but rather that the possibility of a war breaking out at any time, is always there. Similarly to how an internal conflict is inevitable sooner or later within a nation with the absence of a government or a state (Waltz, 1979; 102). The main units of analysis from Waltz' perspective are states, however, he also recognises that "those who act for them", for instance strong state leaders are important actors in the international system. While Waltz asserts that all states by a minimum will seek their own preservation, he also recognises that potentially some states could drive for world dominance. Therefore states will use all means, or capabilities, available to them in order to preserve their sovereignty and the more capabilities a state has, the safer it will be in the international system (Waltz, 1979;

118). Generally seen, there are two types of capabilities: internal efforts and external efforts. Internal efforts are increased by increasing the total economic capabilities, leaving more resources for increasing military strength. External efforts are increased by strengthening or forging alliances, or even by weakening an opposing alliance. In an anarchist self-help system, states are motivated to helping themselves, because failing to do so, will lay them open to danger and sufferings, and this motivation will lead to a balanced system. If a state fails to follow suit of other opposing states, it will be in danger and this fear of unwanted consequences stimulated states to act in a way that leads to a balance of power. While every state might not strive to increase its dominance, the possibility that one or more other states do so, will make it impossible for a state to break out of the competitive system, forming a prisoners dilemma (Waltz, 1979; 119).

Waltz distinguish himself from other realists before him, by arguing that a balance of power system will not require at least three or more great powers to be stable, but rather that a bipolar system will increase peace and stability. This is because, instead of increasing external efforts, in a two-power system, states will compensate for a beginning disequilibrium by increasing their internal efforts until an equilibrium is again reached and in a bipolar system it will always be transparent who is in danger to whom and who is expected to deal with which threats (Waltz, 1979; 118ff). In fact, Waltz argues that a bipolar world will be more peaceful than a multipolar system, because great power conflicts are less likely to occur and because other states are not able to tilt the balance of power by siding with either pole. The only way to increase capabilities is therefore through internal efforts, which are more transparent and sluggish than external alliance forging efforts (Waltz, 1979; 167ff).

The theory is today referred to as defensive realism or defensive neorealism, because other scholars followed Waltz, and while he believes most states strive to secure their own survival, offensive realists believe that states seek to maximise their power.

Offensive Realism

The offensive realist school was founded by John Mearsheimer (1947) and in his work *"The Tragedy of Great Power Politics"* from 2001, he describes how the international system is characterised by a rational desire for great powers to achieve hegemony, rather than only ensuring their own survival. According to Mearsheimer, the international system provides an incentive for great powers to strive to increase their power because power creates security. While Waltz also recognises that it makes sense for great powers to pursue power to a point where it reaches a balance with other great power, Mearsheimer argues that this status quo bias is a false premise (Mearsheimer, 2001; 19f). Status quo powers can exist, but it is rare, as the international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of one's rivals. It is a constant calculation of whether the advantages of acting outweigh the costs. In other words, great powers will behave aggressively, not because they have a drive to dominate, but because the best way to maximise their security and the odds of survival, is by increasing its power. Ultimately, a state's goal will therefore also be to become the hegemon of the system (Mearsheimer, 2001; 21). While the ultimate goal of great powers will always be to become the hegemon, it is not possible for one state to become a global hegemon as the world contains too many barriers and because power is difficult to exert over long distances and world oceans. Therefore a great power will aspire to increase its power all the way until it has achieved the exalted position of becoming the regional hegemon. But even as the regional hegemon it is important to keep a close eye on aspiring great powers within ones own hemisphere, because the stronger a state is to its potential rivals, the less likely the rivals will be to challenge it and threaten its survival (Mearsheimer, 2001; 33). According to Mearsheimer, power and fear is closely connected and how much states fear each other affect the likeliness that they will fight a war. The more profound fear is, the more intense the competition for security will be and thereby increasing the risk of war. Fear among great powers

derives from the fact that they have some offensive capabilities that they are capable of using against each other, and at the same time a state can never be sure that other states will not use their offensive capabilities against them (Mearsheimer, 2001; 42f). Mearsheimer argues that a state's actual power depends on two assets, the size of its populations and its wealth. These two factors are the building blocks for military power and therefore wealthy states with large populations can usually build strong military capabilities. Roughly, military power can be divided into four components, army, naval forces, air forces and its nuclear capacities. Whereas the army is the central component of military power, as it is the army that are used for conquering and controlling territories - naval and air forces serve as supporting roles. Mearsheimer does not diminish the role of nuclear weapons but argues that it mostly is a defensive measure, that can increase the fear other states have of attacking a nuclear state. However, he argues, that the level of fear between the two superpowers in the Cold War due to nuclear weapon, presumably reduced the likeliness of war, but did not preclude it (Mearsheimer, 2001; 44).

Bipolarity is the power configuration in the international system that produce the least amount of fear between great powers because usually there is a roughly balance of power between the two major powers in the system. Mearsheimer and Waltz are therefore also in concordance on this matter. However, Mearsheimer argues that while bipolarity is the power configuration that produce the least fear in the international system, it is important to note that during the entirety of bipolarity from 1945 to 1990, both superpowers have had nuclear powers and therefore it is impossible to account for the absence of nuclear powers in a bipolar world. Besides the bipolar world, Mearsheimer accounts a "balanced multipolarity", when the international system is without a potential hegemon state, as a rather prudent power configuration, also very unlikely to generate fear and conflict (Mearsheimer, 2001; 45 & 358).

In sum, offensive realism argues that the international system promotes power maximising behaviour and that states are rational actors, which will act on a given opportunity in case the benefits of acting outweigh the risks of doing so.

Hypotheses Development

There are obviously a lot of similarities between how the two subsequent realism theories believe that the international system works. However, there are also a number of areas where they differ. They both agree that power is one of the most important factors in the international system and that all states pursue power to maximise their own security, yet one of the most important differences between the two are to which degree they believe states will pursue power. Defensive realists believe that states will seek power in order to reach a balance of power with their opponents, whereas offensive realists maintain that a state will always strive to gain enough power to dominate its rival in order to maximise its own security.

From a defensive realist point of view, the security of the Russian state is best secured through demonstrating its will to protect the state by increasing its military capabilities and demonstrating the will to use said capabilities, enabling Russia to increase the balance of power with the U.S. and the West. Based on this assumptions made by the defensive realist theory, a hypothesis is generated to explain Russia's foreign policy during Putin's administration:

Russia has not been reluctant to use its military capabilities under Putin's administration in order to create a balance of power between Russia and the West, thus ensuring the security of the Russian State.

In order to provide a counterbalance to the defensive realist point of view, as well as to make it possible to examine whether Russia's foreign policy strategy is best described as offensive or defensive, a hypothesis is generated based on the assumptions made by the offensive realist theory as well. From an offensive realist point of view, Russia's ultimate goal is to become the regional hegemon in order to maximise its state's security. In order to accomplish this goal, Russia will look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of the West. If using its military capabilities will bring it closer to reaching this goal, it will calculate whether the advantages of using military force outweighs the costs of doing so. If the advantages are deemed to outweigh the consequences, Russia will use military force. Based on this rationalisation, the following hypothesis has been generated:

Since Putin assumed office, Russia has repeatedly used its military capabilities for the purpose of becoming a great power in the international system.

The two hypotheses will be tested in order to investigate, whether Russian foreign policy strategy is best described as offensive or defensive.

Historical context

"There are hardly any important international issues that can be understood, let alone solved, without knowing a lot about the historical processes that created them." - Stephen Walt (Walt, 2018).

As elegantly stated by Stephen Walt, in his recent article criticising the American International Relations schools for not taking the historical context of international conflicts into consideration, in order to understand international issues, it is important to know their historical ties. The following chapter will therefore also explain the historical background for Russian foreign policy, Vladimir Putin, and the conflicts in which Russia has interfered, examined in this project.

The Russian Federation

The Russian Federation was founded in 1991 following the dissolution of the Soviet Union on 26 December 1991. The Russian Federation is not only the largest of the former Soviet republics, but the largest country in the world by area and with its population of 144 million people, Russia is the ninth most populous country in the world. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin was elected the President of Russia and thus became the first leader of the Russian Federation. Boris Yeltsin was a strong supporter of market-oriented capitalism and following his election he started a massive wave of privatisation of Russian state-owned companies as well as the abolishment of state controlled pricing. This of course led to hyperinflation of the prices for various necessities, which until then had been held artificially down - and the reaction to the rise in prices was immediate. Mass demonstrations took place outside government buildings in Moscow and in order to contain the protest, the government increased the minimum wage by 100 %, increasing the inflation even further (Grant, 2017: 350d). The inflation and economic

deflation continued throughout the 1990's until 1997, when Russia for the first time since the 1991 experienced prosperity, but the situation to be very unstable. When the Asian financial crisis of 1997 spread to Russia in 1998, Russia was hit hard and when the Central Bank decided to set the rouble free, it collapsed all together, leading to huge inflation and to the Russian state going bankrupt (Grant, 2017; 373d). Following the financial meltdown of Russia, the support for President Yeltsin dropped rapidly and in combination with his declining health, this paved the way for a change of power and in return for judicial immunity of corruption charges, Yeltsin drove his political apprentices, Vladimir Putin into position (Grant, 2017; 388).

Vladimir Putin

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin was born in 1952 in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) and has a working class background, where his mother worked in a factory and his father served in the Navy. In 1970 Putin enrolled in Saint Petersburg State University where he studied law and graduated in 1975. During his time at St. Petersburg University he became an active member of the Communist Party, which he was a member of until it was dissolved in 1991. Immediately after graduating Putin joined the KGB and worked in counter-intelligence, monitoring foreigners in Leningrad. From 1985 to 1990 he was stationed in Eastern Germany, where he worked undercover, using a cover identity as a translator. After the fall of the Berlin Wall Putin returned to St. Petersburg, where he worked at the St. Petersburg University as a recruiter for the KGB, meanwhile he also served as an advisor to the mayor of St. Petersburg on international affairs. He quickly rose through the political ranks, being appointed Deputy Chief of the Presidential Staff in 1997 by Boris Yeltsin and in 1998 Director of the Federal Security Service (FSB), the successor to the KGB. After a year in the FSB, Yeltsin appointed Putin Prime Minister in August 1999. When Yeltsin

unexpectedly resigned as President of the Russian Federation on December 31, 1999, Putin as the Prime Minister of Yeltsin's cabinet, became acting President. The resignation of Yeltsin led to a presidential election being held three months later and on 26th of March 2000, Vladimir Putin was elected President of the Russian Federation with a majority of 53 % in the first round. This marked a huge change for Vladimir Putin, who had served as a state official rather than a politician throughout his career (Jack, 2004; 44ff).

Putin continued the market oriented path laid out by Yeltsin and as the economy started improving, Putin's success did the same. As the rouble fell throughout 1999, foreign goods became inaccessible to the Russian population, which gave rise to domestic production, leading to a growth in Russian economy. Another factor, which assisted the rise of Russian economy, was the rise of international oil and gas prices. This led to the rise of Russia's economy in the beginning of the 2000s until the financial crisis of 2008. The wealth increase led to a large degree of optimism in the Russian population, which for the first time in the history of the Russian Federation experienced financial prosperity, a prosperity which to a large extent benefitted Putin and his popularity in his first presidential term (Grant, 2013: 390f). He was therefore also re-elected with an approval rate of 71 % when he ran for his second term in 2004. As a result of the limits of the Russian Constitution, in 2008 Putin was barred from running for a third presidential term, as the constitution only allows for two consecutive terms. Instead, Putin recommended his Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev as the next president of Russia and he was elected in 2008 with 73 % of the votes. On 7th of May, Putin handed over the presidency to Medvedev and the following day on 8th of May Putin was nominated Prime Minister of Russia. During Medvedev's presidency one of the very remarkable reforms was the amendment to the constitution, changing the presidential terms from four years to six years, which were to come into effect from the beginning of the next term, in

2012. Before the election of 2012, Medvedev announced that he would recommend Putin as his presidential successor and revealed that it had been the plan for several years to reinstate Putin as President (Osborne, 2011). This led to massive public demonstrations in Russia before, during, and after the election of 2012. Nevertheless, Putin was elected with 63 % of the votes and on the day of his inauguration he renamed Medvedev Prime Minister of Russia. The power switch was by many, both nationally and internationally, criticised as being undemocratic and the election as being rigged to elect Putin (Ball, 2012). Eventually, the criticism quieted down, perhaps because Putin is known as a tough leader who does not hesitate to increase the pressure or imprison those who go against him (Grant, 2017; 395). Despite the criticism, Putin held office throughout his third term and when he announced his plan to run for a fourth term in the 2018 election, it did not come as a surprise to most. On March 18th 2018, on the four-year anniversary of the annexation of Crimea, Putin was re-elected for his fourth term, with 76 % of the votes - His strongest electoral result ever (Talmazan, 2018).

Russian Foreign Policy and Conflicts

With a young Russian state in a state of depression, with huge domestic problems and on the brink of collapsing during the 1990s, the foreign policy of Russia was not the policy area of the highest priority. The most important priority for Russia within the foreign policy field, was initially to pursue an integration into the political economy of the Western hemisphere, as well as a close relation to its security community. However, it soon became clear to the Russian political elite that there were far more pressing issues in the Russia's post-soviet periphery to attend to. These constituted of Soviet nuclear weapons, now placed on foreign soil of the former Soviet republics, Ukraine, Belarus and especially Kazakhstan, the disruption of economic ties with former Soviet republics, outbreak of wars in the region, and tens of millions of Russian citizens

living abroad in these now independent republics. Furthermore secession movements within the Russian territory, especially in the Northern Caucasus were of vital concern for the Yeltsin administration (Lynch, 2002).

Chechen Wars

In order to address the issue of secession movements, Yeltsin in 1992 drafted up a federal treaty to be signed bilaterally with 20 regions within the borders of the new Russian state. Out of the 20, 18 autonomous republics of Russia chose to sign, while the two remaining, Tatarstan and Chechnya, which had declared independence in 1990 and 1991, respectively, refused. In 1994 an agreement was reached with Tatarstan, but due to immense tension between the ethnic Chechens and ethnic Russians, which left the region by the tens of thousands in the early 1990s, Yeltsin's administration did not manage to reach an agreement with Chechnya. On 11th of December 1994, Yeltsin dispatched 40.000 Russian troops to the region to overcome the insurgency. Due to Russia's massive military supremacy, it managed to capture the besieged unofficial capital, Grozny, within two months, following deadly airstrikes and artillery fire. Despite the Russian military supremacy, Chechen guerrilla forces took thousands of Russian soldiers hostage and kept fighting until a ceasefire was agreed on in August 1996. The ceasefire led to a formal peace treaty in 1997 (Oliker, 2001; 5ff).

Despite the peace treaty between the Russian government and the Chechen rebels, in 1999, Islamist fighters from the Chechnya infiltrated the neighbouring region Dagestan and declared it independent from Russia. This was mere days after Vladimir Putin was named acting Prime Minister, and Putin could not ignore this. Therefore Moscow launched a massive military campaign in both Dagestan and Chechnya to destroy the insurgencies. In less than a year Russia managed to crush the secession attempt and put Chechnya under direct administration. The victory was

essential for Putin and positioned him as strong leader in the eyes of the Russian population, where an anti-Chechen sentiment, following the First Chechen War, was widespread (Jack, 2004; 89f & 102ff). During the conflict, a large number of terrorist attacks were carried out against civilians in Northern Caucasus and Russia in general. These continued after the military operation, which was then converted into a counter-terrorist operation continuing till 2009, when Medvedev declared that the operation was officially ended. However, it was replaced by yet another anti-terror operation against militant Islamists, fighting for independence in the Northern Caucasus, which still continues today.

Following 9/11 the foreign policy of Russia was characterised by a warmer relation to the U.S. Despite the widespread anti-Americanism in Russia following the Cold War and more recently the NATO bombardments of Kosovo in 1999, Putin pledged that he would allow the U.S. to use Russian airspace for its War on Terror (Jack, 2004; 257). The U.S. War on Terror in Central Asia was in good coherence with Russia's own strategy to fight militant Islamism in Northern Caucasus and the cooperation between the two countries expanded to cover a wide range of shared intelligence as well. This continued until U.S. President Bush launched his war in Iraq. Russia, which was against the war, declaring that negotiations with Saddam Hussein was still the path to pursue, stated that it would veto the resolution to declare war on Iraq in the UN Security Council in 2003. However, the United States initiated the war anyway (Jack, 2004; 286ff). Shortly after, NATO's fourth enlargement in 2004 took place comprising of 7 new states, including the Baltic states, directly bordering Russia. Russian President Putin did not directly express concern regarding this expansion, while senior officials, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, criticised it heavily (La Guardia, 2004).

Russo-Georgian War

When Georgia also began its efforts to join NATO in 2004, the rhetoric changed and it became a foreign policy priority of Russia to prevent this from happening. This was particularly the case, due to the two Georgian regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union the two regions on the borders of Russia and Georgia became part of Georgia. However, in South Ossetia there was a strong movement wanting to reunite with North Ossetia located on the Russian side of the border and in Abkhazia there was a resolute movement for independence. This led to two separate regional conflicts in the beginning of the 1990's, between the Georgian federal military on one side, and those who fought for secession from Georgia, on the other. The rebels in both conflicts were supported by the Russian Federation and in both cases Russia mediated a peace treaty, which included Russian peacekeeping troops in the regions, creating frozen conflicts and de facto autonomy for the two regions (King, 2008). In 2004, Georgia experienced its Rose Revolution, leading to the election of the more Western-oriented President Mikheil Saakashvili, who declared that the restoration of control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia remained a high priority. Simultaneously, he made efforts to approach the West, including admission efforts towards NATO. This was inconsistent with the aspirations of the two autonomous regions, which pursued closer ties to Russia. The tension kept rising and in the beginning of August 2008 it came to clashes between South Ossetians and Georgian troops, ultimately leading to Russia launching an offensive into Georgia to assist South Ossetia on August 8th. The following day Abkhazian troops, also supported by Russian troops, opened up a second front against the Georgian troops. Through the assistance of the greatly superior Russian Land and Air Forces, the South Ossetians and Abkhazians managed to push back Georgian federal troops and following heavy shelling of Georgian capital Tbilisi and substantial international pressure, a peace treaty was signed on August 15th. On the same day Russia withdrew its troops back to South Ossetian and Abkhazian territory

and eleven days later Russian President Medvedev signed two Presidential decrees recognising the independence of the Republic of South Ossetia and the Republic of Abkhazia (King, 2008).

Ukraine and Russia Relations

Ukraine, another and the second largest of the former Soviet republic, consisting of 42 million people, gained independence in 1991. An independent Ukraine created two major concerns for Russia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the first that more than 5.000 Soviet nuclear weapons were now stationed on Ukrainian territory and secondly the status of the Crimean Peninsula. During the early 1990s Ukraine agreed to voluntarily give up its nuclear weapons. However, the dispute over the status of Crimea, which Russia regarded as part of Russia until handed over to Ukraine as a present during the Soviet rule, continued until 1997. In 1997 it was agreed that Crimea was to remain a part of Ukraine, in exchange Ukraine agreed to continue to lease the territory in Sevastopol, home to the largest Russian Black Sea naval base, to Russia for another 20 years (Specter, 1997).

Since its independence, Ukraine has experienced two revolutions. The Orange Revolution in 2004 following the presidential election won by Viktor Yanukovych, who was considered a Russian protégé. Demonstrators, who felt that the election was tampered with, took the streets by the mass, demanding a re-election. After the Supreme Court of Ukraine ruled the election invalid a new election was held which his opponent, Viktor Yushchenko, won. Yushchenko laid out a pro-Western course and when Yanukovych won the subsequent election in 2010 he initially continued this course by negotiating with the European Union about a comprehensive association agreement between the EU and Ukraine. In November 2013, when Yanukovych was to sign the agreement he refused at the last minute and instead signed an association agreement with Russia granting Ukraine a multi-billion dollar loan (Götz,

2015). Ultimately, this led to the Euromaidan Revolution in February 2014, Yanukovych hastily fleeing the country and a new election, electing President Poroshenko. His government reversed the actions of Yanukovych and signed the EU Association Agreement. However, Russia refused to recognise the new government, claiming that it had illegitimate seized power through a coup.

In the aftermath of the revolution, the so-called "little green men" started to appear all over Crimea in the end of February 2014. The soldiers, who wore plain green uniforms without any insignias, spoke Russian and were in possession of advanced weaponry, surrounded official buildings and military installations. The Ukrainian troops all remained calm as they surrendered to the alien troops, almost as if they were commanded to do so, to avoid inciting further escalation. On 17th of March a referendum was held on Crimea, proposing to reunite with Russia. 97 % allegedly supported a reunification and the following day Putin signed a decree, declaring Crimea an autonomous part of the Russian Federation, de facto annexing Crimea. The annexation led to massive international criticism and sanctions on Russia by the U.S. and the EU. Following the annexation of Crimea, pro-Russian protests emerged in the two Eastern Ukrainian provinces, Donetsk and Luhansk bordering Russia. The protests soon escalated into full-scale armed conflicts between the Ukrainian government forces and the self-declared republics. Internationally, it is widely accepted that Russia was behind the "little green men" as well as backing the well-equipped pro-Russian forces in Eastern Ukraine (Götz, 2015). While substantial amounts of evidence supporting these claims have been put forward, the involvement of official Russian forces in Eastern Ukraine, has to this day not been recognised by Russia. However, in 2015 Putin for the first time confirmed that Russia in fact had been behind the annexation of Crimea (BBC, 2015). Despite international efforts to end the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the war still rages today and in spite of the tremendous international pressure on Russia, Crimea still

remains de facto part of Russia, with next to no hope for returning to Ukraine.

The Syrian Conflict

A year later, Russia launched another major military operation, this time in Syria. In September 2015, following an official request by the Syrian Assad regime, Russia launched its military intervention in Syria and became an active part in the Syrian Civil War, siding with the Syrian Dictator, Bashar Al-Assad. The uprising against the dictator began in the wake of the Arab Spring movement, which swept across North Africa and the Middle East in 2011. When Syrians took the street in peaceful demonstrations to demand democracy, the regime decided to crack down hard on the demonstrators. This resulted in Assad alienating himself even further from large parts of the population, and eventually the conflict developed into a full-scale civil war, involving several different factions. When Islamist groupings started emerging and gaining terrain, a U.S.-led Western coalition entered the war in the summer of 2014, providing weapons and aerial support to the more democracy-oriented rebels fighting extremists. Inevitably, the weapons provided to them were also used in the fight against the regime and this changed the tides, hard-pressing the Syrian regime (Hokayem, 2013). When Russia intervened in the Syrian Civil War in the autumn of 2015, there were already a number of international and regional actors present in the conflict, supporting different factions. When Russia launched its operation, it announced that one of its main goals were to defeat terrorist, and where the Western coalition distinguished between the so-called moderate rebel groups and extremist groups, Russia labelled all groups fighting against Assad as terrorists. This became a turning point of the Syrian Civil war, as Russia invested massively in the conflict, providing mostly aerial support for the Syrian Regime's boots on the ground and its other allies, including Iranian troops and Hezbollah militias. Since then, the Syrian regime has steadily

been gaining terrain and decimated the opposition groups, to the point where there no longer are any real alternative to the existing regime. In December 2017, Putin announced that he overall regarded the mission in Syria as completed and that Russia would start withdrawing its forces from Syria, although Russia will continue operation from its Khmeimim airbase as well as its naval base in Tartus, in order to continue fighting terrorism (Lunch, 2017). Furthermore, In January 2018 an agreement between Russia and the Syrian regime was reached, practically allowing Russian presence in the two military bases indefinitely (Reuters, 2018).

Analysis

Russo-Georgian War

Georgia was the first of the former Soviet republics to join NATO's Partnership for Peace Program in 1994 and since then NATO, and in particular the United States, have been cooperating with Georgia on a number of areas. This includes assisting Georgia with its military and economic build up following the civil war with the two break-away regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which left the Georgian state almost collapsed. Furthermore, the U.S., to a large extent financed the Baku-Tbilisi pipeline, in order to loosen the Russian grip on the energy resources in the region. As stated earlier, President Saakashvili, who won the election in 2004 following the Rose Revolution in Georgia, made it very clear from the start that he would pursue closer ties with the West and ultimately a NATO membership. Following the election of Saakashvili, Georgia initiated a number of Western inspired democratic reforms, contributed with troops to the U.S.-led missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as increased its defence spendings to 8-9 % of its GDP for 2008-2009. The increased defence spendings, according to Saakashvili, were initiated in order to live up to NATO standards and increase the chance of a NATO membership in the foreseeable future (Mourtizen & Wivel, 2012; 64f). During the NATO Summit in April 2008, it was considered admitting Georgia and Ukraine into NATO. Especially the United States supported doing so, while France and Germany were reluctant, as they feared it would antagonise Russia. The European considerations were legitimate, as since Georgia joined the NATO Partnership Program, Moscow has at numerous occasions opposed these steps towards a closer NATO relationship for its neighbouring states and as more NATO enlargements have occurred, the critique has only intensified. Ultimately, the NATO countries reached the agreement that Georgia and Ukraine would eventually become members of NATO. This was however not positively received by Moscow, who called it a huge strategic mistake (Mearsheimer,

2014). From a realist perspective, the Russian criticism of the NATO expansion is indeed rational, provided that NATO is considered an adversary by Russia at this point in time. In order to understand the Russian criticism of NATO expansions, it is important to understand the argument for it being a threat towards Russia.

A Broken Pact?

In 1990, following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the negotiations between East and West regarding the unification of Germany was initiated. According to the Russian narrative, the condition for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Eastern Germany was that NATO would never expand eastwards beyond Eastern Germany, and as NATO has numerous times expanded further eastwards, Russia considers this a broken promise. NATO however, refuses that such an agreement was ever made. Vladimir Putin himself has at several occasions referred to this as a pact broken by the West and it is therefore also likely to believe that this could have further fuelled his actions in Russia's neighbouring states. While much indicates that no official written agreement regarding future NATO expansions has been made, it of course remains possible and imaginable that something along those lines could have been discussed during the reunification negotiations (Sarotte, 2014). Whether such an agreement has been made or not, from a realist perspective, the international system provides an incentive for great powers to pursue power to increase the security of the state and when NATO borders are getting closer to the borders of Russia, it is reasonable for Moscow to consider this diminishing for its state security. As a result of Georgian rapprochement towards the West, the Russian Duma on 21st of March 2008 declared that if Georgia was granted NATO membership or if armed force was used against Abkhazia or South Ossetia, this could pave the way for the independence of the two de facto republics. Both of the two self-proclaimed republics had then not been recognised by any other

states, beside each other, but following the Russo-Georgian War in August 2008, Russian President Medvedev on 26th of August signed a decree that recognised the two regions as independent states (Mourtizen & Wivel, 2012; 83). By doing so, Russia created a de facto frozen conflict, as Georgia would not be able to restore its territorial integrity and reintegrate the two break-away regions into its territory without Russian consent. A reasonable action, considered from a realist perspective, as the strengthening of alliances increase the external efforts and by recognising the two regions, Russia has increased their dependence of Russia, while at the same time weakening an opponent state and the Western alliance by demonstrating the limits of its influence in the region. Furthermore, the action creates a buffer zone between Russia and Georgia, from the Russian perspective, a western surrogate state, sending a clear signal that NATO approachment within its near-abroad is unacceptable.

While this does explain why Russia could consider the Georgian rapprochement to the West as a threat and explain Russia's subsequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the reason for launching a full-scale military operation into, not only the two autonomous regions, but further into undisputed Georgian territory, remains unaccounted for.

As stated during the introductory chapters, Russia's foreign policy strategy cannot be seen as an isolated phenomenon but rather as a constant interplay between Russia itself and its adversaries, where actions from either side trigger a reciprocal action from the opposing side. Furthermore the realism view of the international system substantiates this approach to understanding Russian foreign policy.

Internationally, it is disputed who started the Russo-Georgian War. However, there is a broad consensus that the conflict sparked between pro-Georgians forces and pro-South Ossetian forces. Which of these sides actually initiated the conflict of course depends on what is regarded as prelude to the actual conflict, as incidents of violence between the two

sides had occurred for years. However, if the actions internally within the disputed regions are disregarded, most evidence point to that the conflict was escalated into an actual war by the Georgian side with the shelling of South Ossetian self-declared capital Tskhinvali on 7th of August. From a defensive realist point of view the Georgian action makes sense, as Georgian President Saakashvili before the conflict, at several occasions had stated that the two regions are suffering from a "creeping Russian annexation" (Mourtizen & Wivel, 2012; 67). As Waltz argues states will use all means, or capabilities, available to them in order to preserve their sovereignty and as Georgian sovereignty was already breached, the use of military capabilities is rational. Yet, it is only rational provided, that the use of those means does not endanger the overall survivability of the state even further, which a full-scale Russian invasion undoubtedly would. The Georgian shelling occurred despite several warnings by Moscow against Tbilisi attempting to reintegrate the regions into its territory. From an overall realist perspective, the Georgian escalation of the conflict is puzzling as Georgia must have realised that Russia had a much larger military force and in case of a full-scale war, Georgia was greatly outnumbered (Mourtizen & Wivel, 2012; 62f). Furthermore, in July 2008, less than a month before the war, Russia held its large scale Kavkaz (Caucasus) military exercise, leaving a great number of Russian troops in its southern military district near the border to Georgia. It seems difficult to find a reliable explanation as to why Georgia launched its operation on Tskhinvali, as it had the potential of endangering the overall security of the Georgian state. Perhaps, the most reasonable explanation is that Georgia failed to realise that Russia would come to the aid of the two regions. According to offensive realism, the more profound fear is, the more intense the competition for security will be and thereby increase the risk of war, which could explain why Georgia attempted to reintegrate the two regions. By attempting to reintegrate the two regions that Georgia feared it could lose permanently to the "creeping Russian annexation" it however created a self-fulfilling prophecy and started the war that ended

up manifesting the frozen conflict. From the perspective of international law, Russia would in case it honoured its redlines be violating international law and as the general perception was that “no such thing would happen in the 21st century”, it was perhaps deemed implausible (Mourtizen & Wivel, 2012; 68ff). The Russian will to take up arms were therefore likely greatly underestimated by not only Georgia, but by the international community in general.

While Russia was undoubtedly violating international law by violating Georgia’s territorial integrity, Moscow had repeatedly stated that they would not passively accept attempts to reintegrate the two regions into Georgia. Furthermore, even in the days leading up to the war, Russia stated that it was prepared to defend its Russian peacekeepers and its Russian citizens in the regions against a potential Georgian offensive (BBC, 2008). From the way the conflict is portrayed by Moscow, it becomes evident that it is presented by Moscow as a defensive measure, taken to protect Russian citizens and interests and this claim is of course supported by the general consensus that Georgia reacted unproportionately and escalated the conflict into an actual war. From a Georgian perspective however, Georgia was acting within its jurisdiction by entering the provinces that from the perspective of international law, were Georgian, to defeat the insurgencies.

Russian Critique of the Unipolar World Order

Russia's argument for engaging in the conflict, in order to protect Russian citizens, is of course logical in order to support the narrative that Russia’s action was an action of defence, but it is impossible to know whether this explanation is consistent with the actual justification when Moscow took the decision. A year earlier, in February 2007, Putin was a keynote speaker at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, where he held a speech which was later dubbed very significant and iconic for understanding Putin's and Russia's foreign policy. In his speech, which

focuses on the historical shift from bipolarity to unipolarity following the collapse of the Soviet Union, he railed against the ruling unipolar world order. Putin spoke warmly of the bipolar world order during the Cold War *"Only two decades ago the world was ideologically and economically divided and it was the huge strategic potential of two superpowers that ensured global security."* (Kremlin, 2007). He further continues by stating *"I consider that the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world"*, and to compare the unipolar periods of history to the strive for world dominance. According to him, by creating one centre of authority in the international system, the system itself becomes in danger (Kremlin, 2007). Instead of diminishing the number of conflicts, the unipolar period has increased the number of wars, local and regional conflicts, and significantly increased the number of deaths from these. His viewpoints regarding the security of the system and bipolarity clearly resemble those of neorealism. During his speech, he also addresses NATO expansions and declares that he does not consider the expansions related to the modernisation of the alliance or to increasing security in Europe. On the contrary they represent a provocation and reduce the level of mutual trust between Russia and NATO and he further implies that these expansions are clearly directed against Russia and that they are against the guarantees given during the German unification negotiations (Kremlin, 2007). Putin makes it clear in his speech that Russia will work with like-minded states to create a *"(...) democratic world order that would ensure security and prosperity not only for a select few, but for all."* Thereby stating that Russia is willing to actively change the world order. Putin's Munich speech is generally seen as iconic because it has given important insight to how the dominant world order is perceived by Putin and his inner circle - and perhaps the Russo-Georgian War a year later illustrates exactly these viewpoints put into action.

From an offensive realism perspective, the Russian military intervention in Georgia was the first direct sign of Russian military strength against a foreign state since the collapse of the Soviet Union. While Putin, at

numerous occasions had criticised the United States-led unipolar world order and highlighted the advantages of a bipolar world order, the Russian intervention marks the first time U.S. unipolar supremacy was challenged by Russia. By sending its troops into Georgia, Moscow signalled that it would only accept NATO enlargements up to a certain point. The fact that Russian troops did not only move into the disputed regions, but advanced further into Georgia, closer to Tbilisi, could perhaps be an indication that it was not only an act of defence, but also a signal of military might and that Moscow was able to conquer Tbilisi, had it wanted to. Beyond securing the break-away regions, this manoeuvre could plausibly be interpreted as a signal, not only to Georgia to stop its efforts to joining NATO, but also to the U.S. to cease its efforts to expanding NATO. According to the defensive realism school of thought, by acting aggressively Russia sends a clear signal that it does not accept further advancement of NATO into its hemisphere. For Russia it is a calculation of whether the advantages of acting aggressively outweighs the costs of doing so, and as Russia has most likely reached the conclusion that a swift military operation into Georgia would not endanger its security, by antagonising the NATO Alliance, as Georgia was not a full member of the alliance, it chose to intervene. As army forces are the most vital according to the offensive realism and are not quickly mobilised over long distances, Russia could conduct a swift military operation without risking NATO forces would come Georgia to aid before Russia had withdrawn - even if the alliance had decided to do so.

While it remains unclear whether or not the initial scope of the military operation was to not only assist Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as protect Russian citizens, but also to send a signal to Georgia and NATO that a membership for Georgia is unacceptable, then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in November 2011, stated that this was in fact the case: *"We were able to calm down some of our neighbours by showing them how they should behave with regard to Russia and small adjacent states. For some of our partners, including NATO, it was a signal that they*

must think about the geopolitical stability before making a decision to expand the alliance. I see this as the main lessons of what happened in 2008” (Kremlin, 2011). Nevertheless, this quote shows that the operation served a purpose beyond the claimed defensive purpose initially presented to the public by the Russian government. Overall, the swift war must be regarded as a great Russian success, first and foremost as Georgia is no closer to a NATO membership today than in 2008. Furthermore, the subsequent NATO enlargements have not moved the NATO border closer to the Russian border, as the only three countries admitted to NATO since, Albania, Croatia, and Montenegro, are located geographically further West than existing NATO members.

Georgian War Recapitulation

Georgia had declared its aspirations to eventually join NATO since the Rose Revolution in 2004 and as both Georgia and NATO approached each other over the following years, Russia numerous times warned that it would not accept Georgian NATO accession. Furthermore, Russia had drawn a red line in March 2008 declaring that it would consider an attack by Georgia on South Ossetia or Abkhazia as a hostile action, which could pave the way for the independence of the two de facto autonomous republics, thereby indirectly indicating that it would assist them in those efforts. While Moscow, at the time of the military intervention, declared that it was an action of defence to aid the two break-away regions and protect Russian citizens, Russian President Medvedev later stated that it was also a signal to NATO and its neighbouring states that NATO presence this close to the Russian borders was considered unacceptable. This clearly sends the signal that the war is characterised by an offensive element as well. It is however noteworthy that the Russian actions cannot be assessed as an isolated phenomenon but rather as a constant interplay between Russia and NATO. NATO had continued to expand the alliance closer to the Russian border over the years, despite the Russian warnings

and therefore Moscow's decision to invade Georgia, can be interpreted as an offensive action with a somewhat defensive goal; to increase the security of the Russian state. It seems clear that Moscow took a calculated risk sending its troops into Georgia. By conducting a swift military operation against the inferior neighbour, it would send a strong signal to NATO and Georgia, without risking its own security, as NATO would most likely not aid Georgia.

While Georgia's choice to attempt to restore its territorial integrity is reasonable, it is also a somewhat reckless move taking Moscow's repeated warnings into action. Why Georgia went ahead and attempted to do so despite those warnings is difficult to comprehend, but the most likely assumption is Russia's will to take up arms were greatly underestimated, perhaps because it was unprecedented. Overall, Russia's decision to conduct a military intervention in Georgia must be regarded as a great success, as it prevented further NATO expansion eastwards, without significant Russian costs.

Ukraine Conflict

As mentioned in relation to the Russo-Georgian War, at the NATO Summit in April 2008, it was considered admitting Georgia and Ukraine into the NATO Alliance, two of the former Soviet republics that Russia considers within its self-perceived "sphere of influence". As with Georgia, Russia opposed admitting Ukraine into NATO and Vladimir Putin insisted that such an action would represent a direct threat towards Russia. In fact, a Russian state-controlled newspaper reported that Putin, during a talk with George Bush *"very transparently hinted that if Ukraine was accepted into NATO, it would cease to exist"* (Mearsheimer, 2014). In addition, the view of NATO as the main military threat to Russia is also reflected in its Military Doctrine of 2014, where it positions the NATO threat above other critical threats, such as proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, etc.:

"The main external military risks are: a) build-up of the power of potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (...) bringing the military infrastructure of NATO member countries near the borders of the Russian Federation, including by expansion of the alliance (...)" (Russian Foreign Ministry, 2014).

While Ukraine, following the Russo-Georgian War, either did not have as clear NATO ambitions as Georgia did, or refrained from speaking about them as openly as Georgia, it did continue to develop its relations with the West and in particular the EU. The ambition of obtaining a closer relation with the EU has been clear since the 1990's, especially within its more Western-based population, which both the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan Revolution reflect. Relations between Ukraine and EU intensified especially following the Eastern Partnership Program initiated by the EU in 2008, which sought to bring prosperity to countries like Ukraine and integrate them further into the economy of the EU. From the Russian perspective however, closer relations between Ukraine and EU was unfavourable. As stated by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in February 2014, before Ukrainian President Yanukovich was removed from office, the EU is trying to create a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, and in the eyes of the Russian leaders: *"(...) EU expansions is a stalking horse for NATO expansions."* (Mearsheimer, 2014).

When Yanukovich was overthrown following the pro-Western Euromaidan Revolution, and the new Poroshenko government signed the EU Association Agreement, it concerned Moscow, as it feared this had the potential to lead to a Ukrainian EU membership and subsequently a NATO membership in the long term.

If there is in fact a correlation between an EU membership and a subsequent NATO membership, the Russian annexation of Crimea and subsequent destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine is rather reasonable, provided that this intervention can keep Ukraine from joining EU, and therefore subsequently NATO. From a defensive realism point of view, this is therefore a very important claim, because in the Russian perception,

the NATO threat would be moving closer to the Russian borders, if Ukraine gained a closer relation to the West.

While there are no empirical data, as presented in the following table, which support that a EU membership leads to a NATO membership, as no countries admitted to NATO since the end of the Cold War were already members of the EU at the time of joining the NATO Alliance. This of course disproves the Russian argument that EU is a stalking horse for NATO. However, if the date upon officially filing the application for EU accession is included as well, it is evident that all countries, except Albania, joining NATO since the end of the Cold War had already filed an application to join the EU as well, at the time of joining the NATO Alliance, and were thus in prospect for becoming potential future EU members as well. While this does not directly prove that there is a correlation between an EU membership application and a NATO membership, it does however illustrate that countries filing for EU membership usually also aspire to becoming future members of NATO - And this could be what Lavrov refers to when calling the EU a stalking horse for NATO.

Table 1: *Members of NATO since the end of the Cold War and their relation to the European Union*

Country	EU accession application	EU membership	NATO member
The Czech Republic	17. January 1996	1. May 2004	12. March 1999
Hungary	31. March 1994	1. May 2004	12. March 1999
Poland	5. April 1994	1. May 2004	12. March 1999
Bulgaria	14. December 1995	1. January 2007	29. March 2004
Estonia	24. November 1995	1. May 2004	29. March 2004
Latvia	13. September 1995	1. May 2004	29. March 2004
Lithuania	8. December 1995	1. May 2004	29. March 2004
Romania	22. June 1995	1. January 2007	29. March 2004
Slovakia	27. June 1995	1. May 2004	29. March 2004
Slovenia	10. June 1996	1. May 2004	29. March 2004
Albania	28. April 2009	Not yet member	1. April 2009
Croatia	21. February 2003	1. July 2013	1. April 2009
Montenegro	15. December 2008	Not yet member	5. June 2017

Data from Europa.eu and Nato.int

Regardless of whether or not EU in reality can be considered a stalking horse for NATO, as long as the Russian perception is that the Ukrainian EU Association Agreement poses a threat to the Russian sphere of influence, it will lead to countermeasures. From a defensive realist point of view, fear of unwanted consequences in case of an incipient disequilibrium in the balance of power, will lead great powers to act accordingly in order to restore the former balance of power. From a Waltzian perspective, the shift in Ukrainian policies could pose a threat to Russia, as it has the potential to shift the balance within its sphere of influence - thus the annexation of Crimea and destabilisation efforts in Eastern Ukraine, could be considered countermeasures taken by Russia to attempt to restore the balance of power and bring it back to the former equilibrium. By showing the willingness to act against the threat, Moscow shows that it feels it has privileged interests in the former Soviet states and therefore will not accept increased Western influence here, even if it requires Russia to punch above its weight.

Sevastopol Naval Base

Another important triggering factor of the Ukraine Conflict - and in particularly the annexation of Crimea - is the Russian naval base located in Sevastopol. As part of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Ukrainian independence, an agreement concerning the coexistence of Russia and Ukraine had to be reached. One of Moscow's most crucial concerns was the future of Crimea, which Russia considered a historical part of Russia. When an agreement about the status of the peninsula was reached in 1997, it remained an autonomous part of Ukraine, under the condition that Russia could continue to lease its naval base in Sevastopol, home to Russia's largest Black Sea fleet, for another 20 years - Until 2017 (Specter, 1997). When Ukraine decided to sign its association agreement with the EU, it is reasonable to presume that Russia feared that the

possibility for an extension of the lease could be jeopardised. Taking the Russian perception, that the EU is a stalking horse for NATO, into account, if Ukraine assumed closer ties with the West it could likely force the Russian Black Sea Fleet out of Sevastopol. Putin has at numerous occasions stressed the importance of Crimea for the regional stability; in the actual speech of declaring the annexation of Crimea, Putin addresses this issue: *"Crimea is our common historical legacy and a very important factor in regional stability."* (Kremlin, 2014a). He continues this discourse by saying: *"Let me note too that we have already heard declarations from Kiev about Ukraine soon joining NATO. What would this have meant for Crimea and Sevastopol in the future? It would have meant that NATO's navy would be right there in this city of Russia's military glory and this would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia"* (Kremlin, 2014a). The assumption that the expiring lease of Sevastopol could be a contributing factor to the annexation is clearly supported by the fact that Putin repeats this argument a few months later during a conference of Russian ambassadors in July 2014. He addresses this issue when speaking about the Crimean annexation: *"(...) we could not allow our access to the Black Sea to be significantly limited; we could not allow NATO forces to eventually come to the land of Crimea and Sevastopol, the land of Russian military glory, and cardinaly change the balance of forces in the Black Sea area."* (Kremlin, 2014b). From a Waltzian, defensive realist viewpoint, states are able to choose their own paths in consideration of their own capabilities. However, if their actions create structural changes to the international system, which affect the position of other states, they will navigate these structural changes and act accordingly. In reality, when the pro-Russian Yanukovych government was overthrown and Ukraine decided to instead pursue closer ties with the West, it shifted the balance, particularly in the Black Sea region, leading Russia to act as well, in order to restore the balance. According to Mearsheimer, this factor was greatly underestimated by Ukraine, when it signed its association agreement with the EU and

Ukraine failed to realise that its decision affected the position of Russia, a much stronger power in the international system (Mearsheimer, 2014). Judging from this perspective, the Russian decision to annex Crimea can to a certain extent be deemed a defensive action, as Russia was looking to have both its external capabilities crippled from having Ukraine side with the West, and its internal capabilities crippled by losing its most strategic naval base in the Black Sea region, strategically important to the southern parts of Russia. Naturally, as Moscow feels that its security is challenged it will take countermeasures in order to attempt to maximise and restore its own security.

Hybrid Warfare and Protection of Russian Citizens

While there obviously are a lot of similarities between the motivation for Russia to intervene in Georgia and Ukraine, the actual interventions have been very different. Where the Russo-Georgian War was characterised by a large scale conventional war between the two nations, the conflict in Ukraine was orchestrated through much more subtle means. Through the use of the so-called “little green men” as well as pro-Russian political formations and paramilitary groups, Russia managed to gain full control of Crimea, without having to fire a single shot (Trenin, 2016). This method has in the West been classified as hybrid warfare. Whereas it in the war with Georgia was evident that Russian troops were present on foreign soil, the nature of Moscow’s hybrid military action in Crimea made it difficult to document direct Russian military intervention in Ukraine, and thus hold Russia accountable for it. That Russia did in fact plan the annexation was denied by Moscow for more than a year, until Putin finally admitted to planning the annexation in 2015 (BBC, 2015). Nevertheless, Russia is yet to recognise that it orchestrated the insurgencies in Eastern Ukraine. Furthermore, where Russia in Georgia sought to conduct an open, quick military intervention, the war in Eastern Ukraine is still on-

going, creating a frozen conflict in the two regions, Donetsk and Luhansk, under de facto pro-Russian control.

Another argument used in the war with Georgia, was that the intervention served to protect Russian citizens abroad. This argument was also among the arguments for supporting the pro-Russian forces in Eastern Ukraine as well as annexing Crimea. Thus, framing the operation as of a defensive character seeking to protect pro-Russian Crimean citizens demonstrating against the EU Association Agreement and the overthrowing of President Yanukovych. This foreign politics priority is further stressed in the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation: *"The Russian Federation has legitimate right to employ the Armed Forces (...) to repel aggression against itself and or its allies (...) as well as protect its citizens abroad"* (Russian Foreign Ministry, 2014). In the speech Putin gave on the day of annexing Crimea he also used this argument: *"All these years, citizens and many public figures came back to this issue, saying that Crimea is historically Russian land and Sevastopol is a Russian city. (...) Those who opposed the coup were immediately threatened with repression. Naturally, the first in line here was Crimea, the Russian-speaking Crimea."* (Kremlin, 2014a). Putin clearly present Crimea as Russian and as something that was taken from Russia, therefore he also argues that the annexation is merely a restoration of Crimea's Russian identity. According to Putin the restoration of Russian territory would have been a fact already following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, had Russia not been at a weakened position: *"And what about the Russian state? What about Russia? It humbly accepted the situation. The country was going through such a hard time then that realistically it was incapable of protecting its interests"* (Kremlin, 2014a). By stating that Russia then was unable to defend its interests and reclaim Crimea, he also indirectly states that Russia no longer will "humbly accept the situation" but are prepared to use force to defend its interest. From an offensive realist perspective, the fact that Putin is prepared to defend Russian interests to an extent

where it violate the territorial integrity of other states and seizes foreign territory, clearly illustrate an offensive approach to military intervention.

By labelling the Euromaidan Revolution and the subsequent governmental change a coup, Putin emphasises the illegitimacy of the new pro-Western "nationalistic" government, supporting the narrative that pro-Russian opinions risk becoming repressed. His argument for classifying the regime shift as a coup is rather reasonable as the boundary between coup and revolution is subtle and often depends on the perspective. Had a Pro-Western Ukrainian president been overthrown in a similar manner, it is not unthinkable, that it by Western governments also would have been labelled a coup.

Through the classification of the regime change as a coup, orchestrated by Western agents, Putin uses it to justify Russia's action to the international society, but most of all to his own citizens. It enhances the West as the primary enemy of the state. In Putin's July speech he said: *"We have to work consistently to rule out any unconstitutional coups in Europe, any interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, the use of blackmail or threats in international relations or the support of radical and neo-Nazi forces."* (Kremlin, 2014b). It is however rather paradoxically that Putin criticises the election following the overthrow of Yanukovych in Kiev as undemocratic with one hand, while at the same time justifies the annexation of Crimea with the other, by stating that *"A referendum was held in Crimea on March 16 in full compliance with democratic procedures and international norms"* (Kremlin, 2014a).

He further argues that it is important for "all of us in Europe", that such coups does not become contagious, because it is especially dangerous in the post-Soviet area. According to Mearsheimer, Putin cannot allow Ukraine to side with the West and gain success, because if other pro-Western movements in the post-Soviet area look to Ukraine and see a successful Western path, Moscow worries that other neighbouring post-Soviet states could be next. And not only that. If the Russian population

can look to Ukraine and see a prosperous country in line with the West, Russians too might want to pursue a Western democratic path, one which does not include Putin and his inner circle (Mearsheimer, 2014). That this in fact is part of the reasoning for destabilising Eastern Ukraine is supported by Russia's massive investment in making Crimea a success, and in particular the investments in its infrastructure, for instance by building a bridge from Crimea to Federal Russia in order to make Crimea landfast with Russia (Retson, 2016).

According to Mearsheimer and the offensive realism school, the overthrow of the democratically elected president, rightfully labelled by Putin as a coup, was the culmination of a long trend of opposing NATO enlargements. Russia had for long stood by and watched its strategically important neighbouring states becoming Western bastions (Mearsheimer, 2014). This assessment is supported by Putin's own words, as he in his speech of July 2014 stated: *"I would like to stress that what happened in Ukraine was the climax of the negative tendencies in international affairs that had been building up for years. We have long been warning about this, and unfortunately, our predictions came true."* (Kremlin, 2014b). According to Mearsheimer, the coup was only the last straw that broke the camel's back and Putin merely saw this opportunity and seized it. Putin describes how Russia tried to open a dialogue regarding the expansion but was turned down by the West: *"When we rightfully asked: 'Don't you find it possible and necessary to discuss this with us?' they said: 'No, this is none of your business.' Those who continue insisting on their exclusivity strongly dislike Russia's independent policy. The events in Ukraine prove this."* (Kremlin, 2014b). Putin clearly intends to assert that the West directly forced Russia to act in Ukraine, and that the situation in Ukraine is directly the fault of the West, as they have been warned to not interfere in Russia's area of privileged influence. The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation manifests that Russia is prepared to use force abroad by stating: *"The Armed Forces of the Russian Federation may be*

employed outside the country to protect the interest of the Russian Federation and its citizens (...)" (Russian Foreign Ministry, 2014). On the 18th March 2014, on the day of the Crimean Annexation, Putin repeated this mantra in his speech declaring the annexation: *"I would like to make it clear to all: our country will continue to actively defend the rights of Russians, our compatriots abroad, using the entire range of available means – from political and economic to operations under international humanitarian law and the right to self-defence"* (Kremlin, 2014a). Despite Putin phrasing it as "self-defence" he states that Moscow is prepared to use *"the entire range of available means"*, directly stating that offensive measures are on the table as well. This clearly illustrates an offensive realism view of international politics and a power maximising Russian behaviour. The annexation speech is in general characterised by a strong emphasis of Russia's return to the international political stage as a superior actor - and the speech has by experts been labelled one of Putin's most important speeches in relation to Russia's foreign policy during his administration - in line with his Munich speech. During this speech he also addresses the current world order and align himself with the neorealist school, by stating that the world no longer is as stable as it was during the Cold War: *"After the dissolution of bipolarity on the planet, we no longer have stability."* (Kremlin, 2014a). He further continues: *"Our western partners, led by the United States of America, prefer not to be guided by international law in their practical policies, but by the rule of the gun. They have come to believe in their exclusivity and exceptionalism, that they can decide the destinies of the world, that only they can ever be right. They act as they please: here and there, they use force against sovereign states, building coalitions based on the principle "If you are not with us, you are against us."* (Kremlin, 2014a). While Putin's assessment of U.S. foreign policy in the quote perhaps to a large extent is correct, the points of criticism is by all means applicable to explain Russia's foreign policy practice in relation to the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine as well.

Measures, that in many ways are similar to those described within the offensive realism school. The offensive element of Putin's annexation speech is further stressed by one of his conclusive notes, stating: *"Millions of Russians and Russian-speaking people live in Ukraine and will continue to do so. Russia will always defend their interests (...) But it should be above all in Ukraine's own interest to ensure that these people's rights and interests are fully protected. This is the guarantee of Ukraine's state stability and territorial integrity"* (Kremlin 2014a). This remark clearly represent a poorly disguised threat towards Kiev, indicating that if Ukraine makes any approach to joining NATO or perhaps most apparent, if Kiev decides to use all means available to crush the rebellion in Eastern Ukraine, Russia is prepared to use its own force in protecting their interests - at the expense of Ukraine's territorial integrity. According to Mearsheimer, this is further fortified by the fact that Russia has provided large amounts of advisors, arms and diplomatic support to Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine, while at the same time stationing large parts of the Russian army along the Ukrainian border, sending a threatening signal that Moscow is ready to further violate Ukraine territory, if the government cracks down hard on the pro-Russian separatists (Mearsheimer, 2014).

Ukraine Conflict Recapitulation

When the Ukrainian President Yanukovich was overthrown and Ukraine signed its association agreement with the West, it was seen by Moscow as a signal towards an eventual EU membership and subsequently, a NATO membership. As stated several times before by Putin, this was considered an unacceptable development. One of the decisive reasons for annexing Crimea was most likely the strategically important Russian Naval Base in Sevastopol. With a potential closer relation between Ukraine and the West, an extension of Russia's expiring lease of the territory in 2017 would most likely be in jeopardy. Russia could simply not accept risking to

lose its important military base. For Russia, the Ukrainian Association Agreement was the culmination of years of expansion of Western influence into its self-perceived sphere of influence and when the opportunity to annex the historical Russian Crimean Peninsula presented itself, Russia seized it. The subsequent destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine served as a reminder to Ukraine that Russia still had significant influence over Ukraine, and to NATO that its unilateralism had its limits. The annexation of Crimea clearly sends an offensive signal to the West that Russia is willing to go to great lengths to protect its strategic interests. As it was the case with the Georgian offensive, Russia proved again that the West greatly underestimated its capabilities and its will to follow through on its threats. While Russia sends the signal that it is again a power to be reckoned with and that it considers itself the regional hegemon within the post-Soviet sphere, the annexation can also be interpreted as a somewhat defensive action. The shift in Ukrainian policies, could pose a legitimate threat to Russia, as it had the potential to shift the balance of power if Ukraine eventually was to become an EU and a NATO member, not only because NATO would be right at Russia's borders, but also because Moscow would presumably be right in the assumption that it would lose its naval base in Sevastopol. Furthermore, if Ukraine was to become a prosperous western-oriented state, it would serve as a strong example for other post-Soviet states and for the Russian population itself, to also pursue a more western-oriented path. The Euromaidan Revolution represented an opportunity for Russia to prevent this development from happening, an opportunity Moscow seized, perhaps because there were no guarantees that it would see another one.

The Syrian Conflict

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia practically withdrew from the Middle Eastern political scene. In 2011, when the Arab Spring emerged in Tunisia and spread across the Middle East and North Africa, Moscow saw it as a potential major destabilising factor of the region, initiated by Western agents. Like the colour revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, Russia feared that it could potentially spread to Russia itself. However, when the Arab Spring made it to Libya and Muammar Gaddafi decided to crack down hard on protesters, the West, in March 2011, initiated a UN Security Council resolution to impose a no-flight zone over Libya. Russia, which was approaching a closer partnership with the West, decided not to block the resolution (Trenin, 2018,5ff). Putin later stated that the UN mandate quickly became an excuse for NATO countries to actively engage in the war and defeat Gaddafi and his regime, destroying Libya itself in the process (Rottbøll, 2011). In the aftermath of the Libyan intervention, according to Trenin, Moscow felt betrayed and the foundation of Russia's role in the Syrian Conflict was laid. Russia decided to veto virtually all resolutions, which could have constituted a pretext to a military intervention in the conflict.

In September 2013, Russia for the first time involved itself directly in the Syrian Conflict, following a chemical attack in Ghoutta. United States President Barack Obama, who had previously drawn a "red line" against the Assad regime, stating that in case of the use of chemical attack, the U.S. would intervene. Still, following the use of chemical weapons Obama was reluctant to launch another U.S. military operation in the Middle East, despite the pressure imposed on him by political opponents and the international community to follow through on his threat. Vladimir Putin decided to step in and propose to broker a deal with the Syrian regime to remove all chemical weapons from Syria in exchange for Washington refraining from intervening in the conflict. A deal was made, saving Obama from humiliation and placing Putin as the powerful, strong man on the international scene. For the first time since the Cold War, Russia could

position itself as equals to the United States (Radia, 2013). This marks a great victory for Moscow - also from a realist perspective. From a defensive realist point of view, because Russia prevented a U.S. intervention in Syria, which could have further manifested the precedes for U.S. interventions in support of uprising rebellions against autocratic leaders. Something that Russia by all means want to prevent, not only because an autocratic regime, from a Russian perspective, is a stable regime, but also not least following the heavily criticised 2012 re-election of Putin, where he for the first time experienced widespread protests against himself. From an offensive realist point of view, even further because this sends the signal that U.S. unilateralism has its limits and that Russia again is a power to be reckoned with in the international system, unlike during the Afghan, the Iraq, and the Libyan War.

On 28th of September 2015, during the United Nations General Assembly, Vladimir Putin gave a speech addressing the current state of the international system. Especially the Syrian Conflict was addressed where Putin accused the U.S. of creating the Islamic State in Syria through its unilateral interventions in Iraq and Libya: *"Tens of thousands of militant are fighting under the banners of the so-called 'Islamic State'. Its ranks include former Iraqi servicemen who were thrown out on the streets after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Many recruits also come from Libya, a country whose statehood was destroyed as a gross violation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1973."* (General Assembly of the United Nations (hereafter UNGA), 2015). Putin further continued to argue that the so-called moderate Syrian opposition supported by the West had joined their ranks and called upon the international system to *"provide comprehensive assistance to the legitimate government of Syria."* (UNGA, 2015). Less than 48 hours later, Russia launched its large-scale military operation in the Syrian Conflict. This marked a turning point for Russian foreign policy, not only because of the size of the operation, but because the war was an expeditionary war in a country which Russia does not share borders with. Up until then Russia, and its predecessor the Soviet

Union, had primarily been directly engaged in wars in its 'near-abroad', and had never been directly engaged in a large scale war in the Middle East, but the intervention in Syria marked a paradigm change. The Russian involvement was mostly consisting of aerial operations, as it did not deploy much of its ground forces. This also meant that Russia participated in a coalition, coordinating its efforts with the forces on the ground, consisting of mostly the Assad regime, Iranian troops, and Hezbollah and other Shiite militias, fighting to keep Bashar al-Assad in power (Trenin, 2018; 54ff). The decision to engage in the Syrian Conflict clearly represents an offensive character. Moscow was not forced to launch itself into this conflict, but it chose to do so anyway. Russia had already taken the first steps to position itself as a power to be reckoned with and to position itself in the international system as opposed to the U.S. in Georgia, Ukraine, and in Syria through the operation to removing chemical weapons in 2013. By continuing this path, Russia manifests itself as major power and continue the path to dismantle the unipolar world order and instead either restore the bipolar world order or create a multipolar world order, as Putin has declared as his ambition at numerous occasions. For instance during his speech at the United Nations General Assembly, where he stated: *"We all know that after the end of the Cold War the world was left with one center of dominance, and those who found themselves at the top of the pyramid were tempted to think that, (...) they are so powerful and exceptional"*. Later in his speech he elaborated: *"I must note that such an honest and frank approach on Russia's part has been recently used as a pretext for accusing it of its growing ambitions — as if those who say that have no ambitions at all. However, it is not about Russia's ambitions, dear colleagues, but about the recognition of the fact that we can no longer tolerate the current state of affairs in the world."* (UNGA, 2015).

Putin speaks firmly of the importance of maintaining the legitimacy of international institutions, like the United Nations, and criticises the Western-led coalition for bombing illegitimately in Syria. When Russia

launched its operation two days later, it was upon request by Syrian President Assad - and while this legitimises the operation in the eyes of international law, as the Assad regime still represents Syria in the United Nations, it is worth noting that the Assad regime was by then, to a large extent considered illegitimate by the international community, by most Western and Arab League nations (Trenin, 2018; 59ff). While Russia, since the end of the Cold War, had attempted to stay out of the Middle East, Syria was still Moscow's most important ally in the region. Beyond Syria being an important arms customer to Russia, it was also home to Russia's only Mediterranean naval base in Tartus. While Tartus was the only military installation Russia had before the conflict in the Middle East, it was a rather small base, at a rather poor state. Following the decision made by Moscow to not let Syria suffer the same faith as Libya, it increased its arms export and sent military advisors. Nevertheless, Assad continued to lose terrain and as a result Russia could either see the regime fall and suffer the same faith as Gaddafi's regime in Libya or increase its efforts to supporting Assad by launching a full-scale military intervention. Russia chose the latter, and while Damascus undoubtedly was an important ally for Moscow, it is probably dubious whether it was so essential that the survival of the Assad regime alone would be worth the sizeable expenditure of engaging in the conflict. This makes it reasonable to believe that other motives, beyond securing the Assad regime, were taken into account.

Foreign Fighters and Fight against Terror

One of these factors is likely the fight against terrorism, as indicated by Putin in his speech at the United Nations General Assembly. Although estimates vary, as many as 8.700 foreign fighters from the former Soviet Republics, and of these 3.400 from Russia, are estimated to have travelled to Syria to participate in the on-going conflict, siding with the Islamic State and other Islamist groupings. Russia is presumed to be the

top supplier of foreign fighters internationally and most of these are assumed to primarily come from the Northern Caucasus and in particular Chechnya (Barrett, 2017). It is therefore in Moscow's interest to ensure that these extremists with hard-core combat experience do not return to Russia in great numbers, creating a potential destabilisation of mainly Northern Caucasus, but to the Russian state as a whole. Thus, the easiest way of ensuring that these extremists do not return to Russia is to defeat them on the battlefield in Syria. Of course this could arguably be considered a relatively defensive matter, as the security of the Russian state and its territorial integrity could be at stake, if large amounts of extremists returns to Russia and in particular the Northern Caucasus region.

Equally important as it is to ensure that Russia's own extremists do not return to Russia, it is to ensure that Russia's strategically important Central Asian allies, with predominantly Muslim populations, do not fall victim to extremism that can endanger the existing autocratic regimes (Trenin, 2018; 55ff). From a realist point of view, this is particularly important because the countries in Central Asia and especially those that are part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) are Russia's key allies and the region where Russia is the regional hegemon. If the region was to collapse and fall victim to extremism, it would not only endanger Russia's South-Eastern flank, but also erode Russia's role as a major geopolitical power. The intervention in Syria is however a delicate balance between defeating extremists in Syria and risking to inflame and alienating Russia's own 20 million Muslim population, as well as its Muslim allies in Central Asia.

While the fight against terror was without a doubt a contributing objective of engaging in the war, the Russian definition of terrorists was not limited to the same extent as that of the West, which mostly focused on defeating the Islamic State. Instead Moscow considered most armed oppositions groups fighting against the Assad regime as terrorists, and dealt with them accordingly. This is fully consistent with the immediate

goal of stabilising the regime, as the regime itself was mostly fighting the so-called moderate groups in the Western parts of Syria, whereas the Islamic State was mostly present in the Eastern parts of Syria, fighting the Kurds and the Western-supported moderate groups.

Continuous Exercises and Arms Export

The war in Syria has without a doubt been a large expenditure for Russia, where the economy is already hard-pressed following the Ukraine Conflict and the subsequent sanctions imposed on Russia by the West. However, the Russian engagement in Syria was not all expenditures. In 2011, Russia launched a 700 billion dollar rearmament program, focusing on modernising the Russian military, up to a state where 70 per cent of Russian military equipment is new or modern by 2020 (Trenin, 2018; 125f). Russia was therefore also well on track with the modernisation when the Syrian operation was launched - and in Syria, Russia found an important combat-test ground, where the new equipment could be tested and adjusted against real combat targets. In addition, when Moscow compared the cost of the Syrian military operation to that of a continuous military exercises, it found it favourable to use the operation as an on-going exercise, allowing Russia to test new weapon systems and letting military personnel gain combat experience in using them (Trenin, 2018; 70f). Moreover, the Syrian Conflict allowed for the presentation of the new weapon systems in combat to new potential buyers.

Russia is among the largest arms exporters in the world, second only to the United States. During the Cold War, Moscow was one of the largest arms exporters to the Middle East and while the contracts declined following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has lately seen the market beginning to increase again. Obviously, the Assad regime has increased its arms purchases from Russia since the beginning of the war, but in particular Egypt, following the Arab Spring and the military coup, has signed a number of contracts on Russian weaponry and is now the

largest Russian arms export marked in the region. Other countries in the region like Iran, Iraq, and Jordan, has also increased their purchases of Russian weaponry systems over the last years and several countries outside the region has also purchased some of the systems showcased in Syria. Overall, Moscow expects that the Middle Eastern arms market will continue to develop over the coming years (Trenin, 2018; 133ff). While a war will always be a costly affair, the pay-off of the war includes invaluable showcasing of Russian military capabilities, potentially increasing the export of Russian arms. Of course, this will in return be increasing Russian economic capabilities, and the more resources a state has, the more resources it can allocate to increasing its military strength, which undoubtedly will increase its security. Another advantage of the showcasing Russian military capabilities includes manifesting Russia further as a strong military power and presenting itself as such for the Middle Eastern leaders, where Russia have not been an important ally to take into calculations since the end of the Cold War.

New Alliances

The Syrian Conflict has also opened up to the forging of new alliances for Russia. For instance with Iran, which has for more than a decade been considered part of the so-called 'Axis of Evil' by the West. Despite the Iranian nuclear deal, which was reached in 2015 and the following thaw between Iran and the West, the relationship between Iran and the West is now back to its former low, due to the repeated statements made by U.S. President Donald Trump about his intent to abolish the JCPOA agreement and his decision to go through with the withdrawal from the agreement. Besides, Russia has at the same time assumed the role as primary enemy of the West and as the two are fighting together in the coalition in the Syrian Conflict, Iran and Russia has become closer allies. An important ally in the Middle East, if or rather when, the Assad regime wins the war as the territory of pro-Iranian states will stretch all the way from the

Persian Gulf and Central Asia to the Mediterranean Sea in Lebanon and Syria.

Another, and perhaps even more important ally of Russia, is Turkey. The relationship between the two states, after Russia first launched its operation in Syria in 2015, got off from an extremely bad start, as Russian airstrikes targeted Turkey's allies in Syria. In retaliation, Turkey in November 2015 shot down a Russian military aircraft close to the Turkish border and Russia started supporting the Kurdish militias in Syria, which Turkey sought to defeat. Eventually, Turkey excused the downing of the Russian aircraft, which managed to restart the relationship between the two states (Trenin, 2018; 100ff). Since then, the relationship has improved significantly, especially as a result of American and NATO allies' choice to endorse Kurdish militias in Syria and support them with weapons in the fight against the Islamic State. Eventually the Islamic State was forced into retreat and the Kurdish militias had gained a large amount of territory in spite of Ankara's opposition against it. When Turkey launched its operation "Shield of the Euphrates" in Northern Syria, designed to prevent the creation of a Kurdish enclave, this was heavily criticised by the West. But Moscow had likely given its accept - Despite Damascus' and more importantly Washington's opposition against it (Trenin, 2018; 100ff). The relationship kept improving as the Astana Peace Process of the Syrian Conflict, designed by Russia, Iran and Turkey was initiated and led to several limited ceasefires and de-escalations zones. Something that the Geneva Peace Process failed to. The relationship between Moscow and Ankara culminated as Turkey in the autumn of 2017 signed a contract to buy a Russian air-defence missiles system - Despite of its NATO membership (Gall & Higgins, 2017). For Moscow the warm relationship with Ankara is an extremely important gain from its intervention in Syria, first and foremost because by gaining a closer relation with Turkey, it manages to drag Turkey further away from the West and create dissension at a time where Turkey already feels

rather marginalised by the West. From a realist perspective, not only does Russia increase its external capabilities by forging a closer association to Turkey, it also manages to weaken the opposing NATO Alliance, at a time where it needs it the most and by doing so, Russia manages to increase its own security by its actions in Syria. Furthermore, the aspiring partnership between the two states comes at a time, where Turkey's relation with the EU is at a poor state as well, which further increases discord in the region and increases the prospect of Russia perhaps assuming a greater role in the future.

Through Russia's efforts in Syria, it has managed to create closer relations with Tehran and Ankara and of course Damascus, which has manifested Russia as a power to be reckoned with in the Middle East once again. In particular at a time where the United States, previously the dominant power broker in the region, has taken a step back. Through its diplomatic efforts during the Astana Peace Process, it has managed to create results when the established international community failed to do so. While Russia has managed to create closer relations with certain regional actors in the Middle East, it has simultaneously managed to keep pragmatic relations to other important actors, such as Israel and the Gulf States. This has without doubt enforced Russia's role, in not only the region but also in the international system as if not yet a great power, then an aspiring great power.

Syrian Conflict Recapitulation

As the Syrian Conflict now enters its final stages, Russia has announced that it considers the military aspect of the war close to over. As a result, Putin in December 2017 announced that he regarded the mission in Syria as completed and that Russia would start to withdraw its forces from Syria. It was however later moderated, as Russia would continue its operation from its Khmeimim Airbase as well as its naval base in Tartus, in order to continue fighting terrorism (Lunch, 2017). As the conflict is not

yet completely terminated, it is still too early to thoroughly evaluate the Russian military intervention in Syria completely. That being said, the operation can in many ways already be regarded as a great success for Russia. When Russia initially launched its operation in Syria, two main goals were declared by Putin; to keep the, from Russian perspective, legitimate Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad in power, and to defeat terrorism. There is currently a broad international recognition that Assad is the only actor left, powerful enough to rule Syria in the future, as the rebel groups, supported by the West, are by now more or less decimated. Furthermore the Islamic State has almost completely lost its foothold in Syria, with only few enclaves left and Russia can therefore also regard this objective as completed. That being said, it is of course difficult to determine how many foreign fighters from Russia and other post-Soviet states, it managed to kill in the process.

What is, however, even more important for Russia is that through its military and diplomatic means, it managed to achieve great results in the Middle East by making new allies and partners, cutting deals regarding the future of Syria, and gaining a military foothold in the Middle East by reaching an agreement with the Syrian regime to maintain a naval and an air base in Syria indefinitely. In comparison to its engagement in Georgia and Ukraine, where its actions can be regarded as, at least somewhat defensive, the decision to intervene in Syria represents a more offensive approach to defending Russian interests through military means outside its immediate sphere of influence.

Through its intervention in Syria, Russia managed to prove itself as a key power broker in the Middle East, at a time where the U.S. is withdrawing from the region. Furthermore, Putin managed to prove Russia as an aspiring great power, also outside Russia's so-called near-abroad, taking important steps towards reaching one of his long term foreign politics goals: to diminish U.S. unilateralism and create a more balanced world order.

Discussion

After having analysed Russia's role and motives for military intervention in the three major conflict abroad in which it has intervened over the last the decade, the following section will now serve as a discussion of the reasoning for the Russian interventions of each individual conflict and whether or not it should be characterised as defensive or offensive. Furthermore, this sections will attempt to correlate the overall trend in the Russian foreign policy and determine the overall development. Lastly, the two hypotheses will be included in an attempt to assess if the hypotheses can be verified or rejected. The discussion will then serve as the foundation for the following conclusion.

The period before the actual break-out of the Russo-Georgian War has been characterised by a long prelude of tension between Russia and NATO. As NATO has been expanding, the critique from Moscow has steadily increased. When Georgia, openly declared its accession ambitions of the Alliance and NATO subsequently declared, at its 2008 Summit that Georgia would eventually become a member, it was merely the last straw that broke the camel's back. When Georgia launched its offensive to reintegrate the two break-away regions, Russia seized the opportunity on the pretext of aiding the two self-declared republics as well as protecting Russian citizens. However, a few years later it was declared by Dmitry Medvedev that the operation did in fact serve the purpose of demonstrating to its neighbouring states and to the NATO Alliance that NATO membership for small states within Russia's sphere of influence was unacceptable and that Russia would go to great lengths to uphold that principle. Despite this declaration, the question whether the Russian military intervention in Georgia should be classified as an offensive or defensive measure is still rather complex. The actions of Russia should not be seen as an isolated phenomenon, but rather as a result of NATO's actions and vice versa. From a Russian perspective, NATO could definitely

be attributed the offensive role. Moscow regarded the expansions eastwards as a threat to its security and as NATO ignored the Russian concerns, despite the numerous warnings, Russia found itself forced to act to restore the balance of power. When the opportunity to demonstrate the will to follow through on its warnings presented itself, Moscow seized it. Had it refrained from doing so, Georgia could very well be a member of the NATO Alliance today. The Russian military intervention could therefore certainly have served the defensive purpose: to increase the security of the Russian state, when other less offensive measures failed to do so.

While Georgia and the West failed to realise Moscow's will to follow through on its threats, perhaps because it was unprecedented, Ukraine was more careful regarding its aspirations. However, in 2013, when Ukraine signed its Association Agreement with the EU, it was regarded by Russia as the culmination of years of expansion of Western influence into its self-perceived area of privileged influence. From Moscow's perspective the EU is merely considered a stalking horse for NATO and therefore the agreement would lay one of Russia's most strategically important neighbours open to direct NATO influence. Strategically important, not least because Crimea is home to Russia's Black Sea naval base in Sevastopol, which it per agreement had leasing rights to use until 2017. With the West's expanding influence on Ukraine, it was therefore deemed likely that when the lease would expire it would not be possible for Russia to extend it. A very reasonable assessment made by Moscow, provided the EU Association Agreement would indeed lay Ukraine open to NATO influence. When Russia decided to annex Crimea through hybrid warfare instead of through a conventional war as in Georgia, it made it difficult for the West to intervene and prevent the annexation. When later it was confirmed by Russia that it did in fact orchestrate the intervention, not least because from the Russian perception, Crimea was a natural part of Russia, which it had to relinquish in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, because it was too weak to defend its interests, it also sent a

signal to the West that Russia again was a power to be reckoned with. Through the annexation and the subsequent destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine, Russia once again proved that the West had greatly underestimated its will to defend its interest through military means. As in Georgia, it is difficult to give a decisive answer to whether Russia's actions should be regarded as purely defensive or offensive. By defending its strategic military instalment in Sevastopol, it in many ways acted aggressively as a means to defend the security of the state. Whereas the annexation of Crimea to a certain extent clearly represents a defensive element, the destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine does not have an as evident defensive reasoning. The support for the rebellion in Donetsk and Luhansk, through both indirect and direct means, most of all appears to demonstrate that Russia still has significant influence over Ukraine and to ensure that the Ukrainian state does not achieve success by siding with the West and breaking off its ties with Russia. This way, Moscow not only signals to other post-Soviet states considering to choose a more Western path that it is not prosperous, it also signals that to its own population. As declared by Putin, the intervention in Ukraine also serves a greater purpose than seizing Crimea and illustrating to other post-Soviet states that a Western path is not a viable option. It is also a signal to the West that Russia will not accept Western influence in its zone of privileged interest and that Russia has aspirations to diminish U.S. unilateralism and once again become a regional hegemon. These aspirations clearly have reminiscence of the bipolar Cold War world order and signal unambiguously an offensive approach to international politics.

When the West decided to actively start bombing in the Libyan Civil War, following the U.N. mandate to impose a no-flight zone, Moscow felt mislead and betrayed by the West. In the wake of the Libyan conflict, Russia determined veto all resolutions regarding the Syrian Conflict, which could constitute a pretext for military intervention. When Russia decided to broker the deal to remove chemical weapons from the conflict

it was therefore not to aid U.S. President Barack Obama in honouring his red line, but rather a way of signalling the limits of U.S. unilateralism as well as demonstrating Russian capabilities. When Moscow launched its military intervention in Syria in 2015, Putin had stated that it did so for two primary reasons; to keep Bashar al-Assad in power and to defeat terrorism. There is no reason to doubt these two motives, as Russia is regarded as the primary contributor of foreign fighters to the ranks of the Islamist groups, primarily from its Northern Caucasus area. If these extremists were to return in great numbers to Russia they would indisputably pose a threat to the security of the Russian State, thus it could easily be seen as a preference for Moscow to defeat them on the battlefield. Furthermore, the Muslim Central Asian states, strategically allied of Russia, were also contributing with a large number of foreign fighters, which Moscow had no interest in seeing return and destabilising its near-abroad. Defeating terrorists could therefore pose a rather defensive motive to engaging in the war. Keeping the Assad regime in power is perhaps more of an offensive priority. While Damascus undoubtedly was an important ally in the Middle East, the operation marks a shift in Moscow's exerted foreign policy. Russia had not previously been directly engaged in a military conflict outside its near-abroad and when Russia managed to turn the tide, in favour of the losing Assad regime and over the course of two years to more or less defeat the moderate opposition supported by the West, it was a very important victory. By defeating the Western-backed opposition, Russia yet again managed to position itself as an important power, even outside its own sphere of influence. This further demonstrated to the Middle Eastern states that the U.S. is no longer the only important power broker in the Middle East. Over the course of the conflict Russia managed to improve its relationship significantly with especially two regional powers, Iran and Turkey. Not least Turkey was an important achievement, because Moscow managed to further increase the disunity within its primary adversary, the NATO Alliance. When Russia in January 2018 signed a contract with the

Syrian regime to allow Russia to continue using its two military bases in Syria indefinitely, Russia unambiguously manifested itself as a major power in the Middle East going forward.

The Overall Trend

Through the research it has become clear that Russia's use of its military capabilities has changed over the years. It can therefore also be difficult to determine whether the foreign policy exerted by Russia, through military means over the last decade, should be classified as defensive or offensive. It is important to recognise that Russia's foreign policy should not be regarded as an isolated phenomenon, but rather seen in the context of the foreign policy of other actors in the international system, in particular NATO, which Russia regards as its primary adversary. When a state engages in a war or a conflict outside of its territory, it will always resemble an offensive measure, however its motives for doing so could be more nuanced than being purely aggressive.

When Russia launched its operation in Georgia it happened after a number of NATO expansions closer and closer to the borders of Russia. For Moscow this was regarded as a promise broken by the West and as a threat to the security of the Russian state. Following numerous warnings made by Russia, it reached the breaking point and therefore Russia launched a swift military operation in order to demonstrate to Georgia and NATO that there was a limit to the expansions and that a Georgian NATO membership was unacceptable. While the operation in many ways was an offensive measure, it could arguably be regarded as a way for Russia to protect the security of the state, when other measures failed to do so. Initially, it was presented by Moscow as an act of defence, not least for the citizens of the two break-away regions, and later confirmed by Dmitry Medvedev, as a signal to NATO and Georgia. While it of course is difficult to determine the motives for these actions and whether or not it was the Russian perception, or merely rhetorical spin in hindsight, due

to the development of NATO expansions there is reason to believe that to Moscow this was an offensive intervention aimed at reinforcing the defence of the Russian state. An "offensive-defensive" action.

When Russia annexed Crimea and began its efforts to destabilising Eastern Ukraine, it continued the path laid out during the Russo-Georgian War, namely that Russia would not accept Western expanding influence into its sphere of influence. In this conflict it is likewise difficult to determine whether Russia's actions should be regarded as purely offensive or defensive. Crimea was undoubtable of strategic importance to Russia due to its naval base in Sevastopol and as Russia feared increased Western influence in Ukraine could endanger the lease contract for the base, it acted to restore the beginning disequilibrium and to prevent it from losing important internal military capabilities. However, the subsequent efforts to destabilise Eastern Ukraine could be a way of ensuring that a pro-Western Ukraine did not achieve prosperity, signalling to other states aspiring a closer relation with the West within Russia's self-perceived sphere of influence, that if they chose a similar path, they would face the same destiny. Through these efforts, and despite NATO's much larger capabilities, Russia managed to demonstrate that it still holds a privileged positions within its near-abroad. When Russia in Ukraine once again proved its opportunistic will to seize an opportunity whenever it presents itself, it caught the West by surprise. This clearly suggests that the West is greatly underestimating Russia.

This tendency to demonstrate to the West and in particularly the U.S., that Russia is a power to be reckoned with, continued when Russia engaged in the Syrian Conflict. Whereas this engagement of course serves a limited defensive purpose, by fighting terrorism to prevent a large number of militant extremists returning to Russia and to ensure the survival of its only military installation in the Middle East, the operation first and foremost serves an offensive purpose. As the United States withdrew from the Middle East, Russia saw its chance to become the kingmaker in the Syrian Conflict. By filling the power vacuum created by

U.S. absence, Moscow illustrates that it regards the international society as a zero sum game, where it can increase its influence and thereby increase its power. Through its massive efforts in Syria, Russia has exposed the limits of U.S. unilateralism, while at the same time manifested itself as if not a great power, then an aspiring one.

Due to the development of Russia's use of military capabilities as an instrument of its foreign policy it is therefore also immensely difficult to confirm one hypothesis and reject the other. Nevertheless, the defensive hypothesis: *"Russia has not been reluctant to use its military capabilities under Putin's administration in order to create a balance of power between Russia and the West, thus ensuring the security of the Russian State"* can to a large extent be confirmed in regard to the Russian military intervention in Georgia in 2008, as much point to the fact that Russia tried to obtain a balance of power with the West in its near-abroad as a means to ensuring the security of the Russian State. The defensive hypothesis can to a limited extent also be confirmed in regard to the Russian annexation of Crimea. However, the offensive hypothesis *"Since Putin assumed office, Russia has repeatedly used its military capabilities for the purpose of becoming a great power in the international system"* can to a limited extent also be confirmed in regard to this conflict as Russia, through its engagement in Ukraine sought to demonstrate to the West that it was a major power in the international system - at least within its near-abroad. The offensive hypothesis can furthermore to a large extent be confirmed in relation to Russia's engagement in Syria, as Russia sought to manifest its position as a major power in the international system through its engagement in Syria. Beyond the terrorism element, the defensive hypothesis can be rejected in relation to the Russian engagement in Syria, as an expeditionary war, far from its own borders, does not directly affect the security of the Russian state. This clearly illustrates that due to the differences between the three conflicts in which Russia intervened in the last decade, it is impossible to confirm one hypothesis and reject the other entirely.

Conclusion

While the research conducted throughout this project has been able to determine several common features between the three individual conflicts in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria, it has also revealed a clear shift in Russian foreign policy, making it impossible to give a single collective, comprehensive answer to the research question covering all three conflicts. When Russia carried out its military intervention in Georgia, it did so following years of NATO expansions eastwards, which had already brought NATO to the borders of Russia. At a first glance the Russo-Georgian War could resemble a belligerent, aggressive Russian behaviour. However, it is necessary to realise that the exerted Russian foreign policy should not be seen as an isolated phenomenon, but rather as a result of a constant interplay between Russia and its adversary NATO, and as a result of the alliance's expansions to the borders of Russia. When NATO, despite heavy criticism from Moscow, in 2008 declared that it intended to admit Georgia and Ukraine into the alliance, Russia felt threatened by this. And as Georgia a few months later attempted to reintegrate the two break-away regions, despite Russia's warnings, Moscow saw the opportunity to honour its threat and simultaneously send a signal to NATO that the expansions had reached their limits. The strategy worked. The two regions remains de facto independent and Georgia continues to be no closer to a NATO membership than it was ten years ago.

In Ukraine, Russia annexed Crimea following a regime change, perhaps rightfully labelled by Moscow as a coup. When the pro-western government came to power, Russia feared that the expanding western influence could jeopardise its strategically important naval base in Sevastopol and seized the opportunity of chaos and the more pro-Russian opinion on the peninsula as a pretext of the annexation. The subsequent destabilising efforts in Eastern Ukraine served as reminder to the West and the pro-Western government in Kiev that Russia still had significant influence in its near-abroad and that U.S. unilateralism had its limits, in

particularly within Moscow's self-perceived sphere of privileged influence. Not only did this send a strong signal to the West and Ukraine, it also illustrated to any other states within Russia's near-abroad that a Western path is not necessarily a prosperous path. While the annexation of Crimea clearly resembles a somewhat defensive motive, yet the defensive motive for destabilising and continuing to wage war in Eastern Ukraine for years, is less evident. Thus, the Russian military intervention in Ukraine cannot be concluded as motivated by strictly defensive or offensive motives.

In Syria however, the picture is very different. As the United States has increasingly retracted itself from the international stage, in particular in the Syria Conflict, Russia has seized the opportunity to fill this power vacuum. When Russia launched its intervention in Syria in 2015, it did so to protect its interests rather than its own security. By ensuring that the Assad regime stays in power, Russia manages to maintain an important ally and its only military installations in the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea. Furthermore, it undermines the role of the U.S. as the power broker in the Middle East, by decimating the rebel groups, supported by the West. In addition, through its campaign in Syria, Moscow gained an important opportunity to defeat terrorist and in particular Russian foreign fighters, before they would have the chance to return to Russia and the rest of Central Asia and potentially destabilise the region. Whether initially intended or not, the Syrian Conflict also proved as an important testing and exhibition grounds for new Russian weaponry, which allowed Russia to sign new arms contract with particularly Middle Eastern states. Russia has also managed to position itself as the key actor for a future settlement of the conflict through its efforts in the Astana Peace Process. Over the course of the conflict, Moscow has managed to secure important allies and partners, particularly Iran and Turkey. Especially a closer partnership with Ankara is a strategic win for Moscow, as with it comes not only a new partner but also a chance to undermine the unity of the NATO Alliance and alienate Turkey further from the collective West.

The research conducted in this project illustrates a clear shift in the foreign policy strategy of Russia. While Russia in Georgia used its offensive capabilities as a means to defend itself, as Russia has continued to become more powerful over the years, has become more isolated from the Western community, and gained more self confidence, it has increasingly been using its military capabilities to defend its interests abroad, thus pursuing a more interventionist foreign policy strategy.

Furthermore, as the U.S. has become more absent as the most significant actor in the international community, Russia has seized the opportunity to fill this power vacuum, which clearly illustrates an attempt to re-emerge as a major power and to, if not restore the bipolar world order, then to dismantle the United States-led unipolar world order.

Although it has become evident that the West time and time again has underestimated Moscow's will to follow through on the opportunities that present themselves, it has also become evident that Putin is indeed opportunistic. Whereas it is difficult to predict where an opportunity for Russia to promote its interests or to demonstrate its ambition as a major power will present itself, one thing has become evident. If anything is predictable, it must be that Putin the Predictable is prepared to use all means available to achieve it.

Perspectivation

Lastly, the project will address the prospect of possible perspectivations on this topic. Obviously, this analysis is by no means exhaustive on Russian foreign policy and more research could of course be conducted. If research were to continue on the matter - for instance, the role of the domestic policy of Russia in its foreign policy strategy could be interesting to include into the analysis as well. Since the annexation of Crimea, Vladimir Putin's approval ratings has only been rising, and in the spring of 2018, Putin was re-elected for another six-year term as President of the Russian Federation with his highest electoral result ever, 76 % of the votes. It is a well known fact that having an external enemy can increase the unity of the population within a given states, and it could therefore be interesting to examine whether this factor played a role in pursuing the current foreign policy strategy in Russia. Similarly, as briefly touched upon in relation to Russia's engagement in Ukraine, the motivation for destabilising Eastern Ukraine could also be for Moscow to send a signal to its own population that a Western path is not necessarily a prosperous path, thus preventing an uprising similar to the Euromaidan revolution to aspire in Russia. In addition, Moscow's motivation for supporting authoritarian leaders against presumed Western-orchestrated uprisings, in for instance Syria, could be for a similar domestic purpose - to prevent it from setting a precedent and spreading to Russia, which ultimately could result in the demise of Putin and his inner circle.

It could also be interesting to add another theoretical perspective to the analysis of Russia's foreign policy strategy, for instance liberalism or social constructivism. In the speeches of Vladimir Putin, there is a strong emphasis on the importance of international institutions, like the United Nations and adherence to international laws, where he repeatedly accuses the West, and in particular the U.S., for violating this. Paradoxically, Moscow uses similar methods to accomplish its foreign policy goals.

Furthermore, through the use of the social constructivist theory it could be interesting, for instance, to examine the Russian self-determined identity as a great power and how the history of the Soviet Union could be affecting this, including the lack of Western recognition of its position. In addition it could be used to explain how Russia feels marginalised by the West and how this affects Russia's exerted foreign policy.

Through the analysis it has become evident that Russia is opportunistic and seizes opportunities whenever they present themselves. Therefore seeing, as the Syrian Conflict is now drawing closer to an end, Russian military capacities could be freed up for other purposes and it could therefore be interesting to explore where new conflicts, which Russia could potentially engage in, could occur. One of these could for instance be the de facto autonomous Transnistria region of Moldova, where a pro-Russian minority has declared independence of Moldova. But other potential areas where a conflict could spark could be Armenia, where the authoritarian President Serzh Sargsyan has recently stepped down following massive protests, similar to those of the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine, or perhaps Serbia where there has been reports of extensive Russian influence campaigns and anti-western propaganda campaigns in favour of a closer relation to Russia.

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