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The Role of Power Plays in the Syrian Crisis

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1. Introduction

The theory of Realism, which emphasized the omnipresent of power and the competition among nations in world politics, became an influential school of thought since the end of Second World War. According to a professor of Political Science at Yale University, Robert Alan Dahl, “the idea of power is like A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.”

It was the Arab Spring in the Middle East that causing a large-scale protest against President Bashar al-Assad and his government. The Syrian army sent a column of tanks to end the anti-government movement. It soon escalated into a military conflict as well as a civil war in March 2011. In May 2015, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) took advantage of the Syrian Civil War to conquer Syrian territories. Also, the Western meddling made it no longer a civil war, but a battle between great powers instead.

Some scholars have researched the rise, features and rationale of the ISIS. Others have researched the tension between Syrian opposite groups and the Syrian government. This term paper is going to focus on how power plays its role in the Syrian Crisis. To answer the research question — how does the use of power influence the ongoing development of the Syrian Crisis? —this paper analyses the central feature of power, dominance, and two other features derived from dominance. To complete the research, several types of sources related to the topic like books, academic journal articles and web sources have been cited in this paper.

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2. **Power acts as a dominance**

The New World Order promoted by the former US President George Bush gives the significance of global governance. Great Power can be defined as “a nation that has exceptional military and economic strength, and consequently plays a major, often decisive, role in international affairs.” The permanent five members (P5) of the UN Security Council, namely the United States, China, the United Kingdom, Russia and France, are mostly recognized as Great Powers. Great powers have power to veto, bargain and determine the final outcome. They can dominate the state of affairs with their powerful status. The Syrian Crisis is no exception. Syria actually is the battlefield between The US and Russia.

In February 2012, Russia and China vetoed the Western-backed Arab Resolution, which was a plan calling on President Bashar al-Assad to resign, at the U.N. Security Council. The US was angered by their vetoes and blamed them for sheltering Bashar al-Assad’s killing. Russia and China actually acted in self-interest: Russia intended to preserve its influence in the region through its military ties with Syria. China abhorred challenges to sovereignty all the time.

The Syrian crisis is no longer a purely internal matter. Instead, Russia and China expressed their interests in the Middle East through their vetoes. The United States and its allies were no longer the only preserve in that particular region.

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3 Syria veto: No heroes, no villains. (2012, February 8). *The Straits Times*.

2.1 Division

The Syrian Civil War began in 2011. Until now, it still has not come to an end. The contradiction of solutions among states leads to the unsolved Syrian crisis. One of the causes, or simply the fundamental cause, of the endless Syrian tragedy, is Western meddling. The US offered military training and provided a large number of military resources so as to recognize the legitimacy of the opposite camp, while Russia provided military and financial support for the Syrian army.

US-Syrian relations started on an equal base after the Second World War. The relations between them were shaped by the politics of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Cold War. After the September 11 attack, the US intended to ally with Syria in its war on terror. Syria’s long-standing hostility toward Saddam Hussein, US-Syrian cooperation against Al-Qaeda and the Bush administration opposed a congressional bill placing sanctions on Syria at the end of 2002 reflecting a relatively stable US-Syrian relations.

However, Hezbollah activities on the Israeli border created tension between Syria and the US. The US-led war against Iraq was the breaking point. Syria did not join the US coalition against Iraq but became a vocal opponent of the war. Syrian’s mufti called on Muslims to take arms against the United States. After the death of Hafiz al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad was elected as president in 2000. Bashar was rather interested in reform and the contact with such groups accused of terrorism as Hezbollah and Hamas. Bashar would lead Syria toward more freedom. He depended

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7 A mufti is a high religious judge and an Islamic scholar who is an interpreter or expounder of Islamic law.
on the authoritarian structure of power. For instance, Bashar ordered the Syrian army to send a column of tanks to suppress anti-government protests by killing protesters and even the civilian. President Barack Obama said, "Assad must halt his campaign of killing and crimes against his own people now. He must step aside and allow a democratic transition to proceed immediately." In the Syrian Crisis, the United States supported the opposition faction to overthrow Bashar Assad's regime.

Russia has decades-old interests in the Middle East, particularly in Syria. Russia’s association with the ruling Assad family could be traced back to 1970. In 1971, a Russia-Syrian agreement under Hafez al-Assad’s regime permitted the Soviet Union to build the naval military base in Tartus, letting the Soviet Union stably present in the Middle East.

The Western-sponsored regime threatened Russian with the oldest and most important alliance with the Middle East. It was the increasing suspicions of Western intentions that Russia supported Bashar Assad's regime. Alexander Golts, a Russian military editor said, “Russian leaders view Syria as our major ally in the Middle East, with whom we have good political, military, and economic ties,” Foreign policy experiments which cooperating greatly with the West would not probably occur under President Vladimir Putin’s regime.

Due to the Russia-Syrian weapons contracts, Russia is increasingly resisting international pressure to sanction against the Assad regime. In 2015, Russia suggested

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that Syrian opposition groups pushed for the democratic revolution with the help of the US and its Western allies led to the Syrian Civil War. Russia set up T-90 tanks, howitzers, armored personnel carriers, marines and the prefab housing for personnel in the airbase located in Latakia.\textsuperscript{12} US President Obama said those military build-ups would threaten the world peace and stability. He then blamed Russia for its presence and military establishment in Syria.

Russia continued to support the Syrian regime due to the national interests in the long run. Syria actually was the battlefield between The US and Russia. The military actions of both the United States and Russia added fuel to the Syrian Civil War. They widened the gap between Syrian opposition groups and the Syrian government, causing the endless Syrian tragedy.

2.2 Invasion

An original conflict between Syrian opposition groups and the Syrian government converted to a civil war and finally escalated into a global issue because those Great Powers stepped in. Western intervention causes the problem of invading the internal sovereignty of Syria.

Sovereignty, by definition, is the supreme power or authority of a state to govern itself or another state.\textsuperscript{13} In other words, one will not have power over another one. There are two types of sovereignty. Internal sovereignty implies every state can act as it wishes and independent of other powers within its own territory; External sovereignty implies all states are legally equal and no legitimate authority tell a state what to do. This fundamental principle of international relations can be traced back to

\textsuperscript{12} Bodansky, Y. (2015). Russia, syria, and the west: Finally at the crossroads? Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy, 43(9), 4

the Treaty of Westphalia in the Thirty Year’s War.

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) expanded their influence and conquered more and more territories in the Middle East. In May 2015, the ISIS took advantage of the Syrian Civil War to conquer Syrian territories. The idea of interaction between political communities has been present in the Islamic tradition since the 7th century. Islam recognizes no distinction between religion and politics. In theological terms, Islam does not draw a line between worldly power and divine authority, representing itself as a faith system as well as the moral guidelines of which apply to all aspects. However, certain Islamic conservatives argue that sovereignty belongs to the God only, so the sovereign claims of governments are illegitimate. According to the Islamic view on the dichotomous world, the world is separated into two domains: The domain of Islam (dar al-Islam) which implies those land under Muslim rulers’ control; the domain of war (dar al-harb) includes territories without Muslim rule and with which they are potentially in conflict. This concept gives a footing to Jihad, a holy war, to bring the surrounding political entity into compliance with Islam.14

The expansion of NATO was also a concern. Russia suddenly raided on Syrian opposite groups triggered a response from NATO. A Russian warplane was shot down by the Turkish army (Turkey is a NATO member) on the Syrian border on 24 November 2015 because the plane had invaded Turkish airspace several times within five minutes, so they shot it down.15 NATO continued to strengthen and enlarge the Response Force. The Force was consist of 40,000 troops at this moment. NATO

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Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said the NATO prepared to send troops to Turkey to defend its ally after the incident of Russian violations of Turkish airspace on the Syrian border. Six new command centers were being built to plan military strategies and facilitate military exercises. Sharat G. Lin, President of the San Jose Peace and Justice Center said, “The main thing to understand is that no matter what the conflict is in Syria—and there are many factions—this is something that the Syrian people will have to solve on their own,” In other words, Intervention in Syria by NATO or Great Powers might probably further destabilize Syria.

The intervention of Great Powers, expansion of the NATO and invasion of ISIS worsened the original civil war in Syria. Those factors make the civil war no longer an internal matter, but an interstate conflict. Syrian people are difficult to make own decisions.

3. Conclusion

The question—How to achieve peace and maintain peace?—is the fundamental question of International Relations. The balance or use of power plays a decisive role in determining the outcome of a military conflict and even a war. In the Syrian Crisis, power acts as a dominance, a divide and an invader, resulting in an ongoing state of affairs.

If the Great Powers continued to struggle for power, it will destabilize and arouse resentment among Syrian people, and thus can never promote democracy. Instead, a NATO-European-Russian agreement or alliance may be a new trial to better

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coordinate actions with the US, Europe and Russia. Also, a dialogue within Syria should be encouraged so that Syrian people can try to establish their own institutions and choose leaders in a democratic way so that leaders will accountable to the electorate but not the interests of the US hegemony.

Under the current situation, it is time for every country to forgo individual interests and join force to face the terrorist attacks. It is ineffective to use the old way, like defeating a terrorist group to solve those new problems such as terrorism. Defeating the Islamic State will never solve the problem of terrorism. The Islamic State is not the only current terrorist group. Before the Islamic State, there was Al-Qaeda, which triggered the 911 attack, Hezbollah, Hamas and many other groups.\textsuperscript{18} State leaders need to stop treating terrorism as a sudden shock, but rather plan to manage this ongoing problem.

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