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Offensive versus Defensive Realism
Russia’s Policy of Countering the United States in Syria and Beyond

ABSTRACT This article approaches Russia’s strategy of countering the United States indirectly by way of intermediate states. It is concerned with the reasons why Russia decided to engage in the Syrian conflict in 2015 and, from this perspective, the real goals of Russia’s policy in the region. These questions cannot be considered without taking account of how they are linked with the all-out confrontation between Russia and the West in Ukraine. The Syrian conflict merely represents an external platform for Russia in countering the United States. Russia is testing her own power to force the United States out of Syria and seeks any opportunity to demonstrate American vulnerability. There is a triangle of interests for the key regional actors—Turkey, Iran, and Russia—that oppose US interests. The rising confrontation with Washington in Syria triggered Moscow to seek ways of using other potential rivals of the United States, given that there are numerous areas of tension and conflict with Washington beyond the Middle East. The author’s analysis of the actors’ behavior is based on the “security dilemma” and the “balance of power” approaches. There are well-known disputes between “defensive” and “offensive” realism in the theory of international politics concerning which of these approaches is more reliable and reasonable when considering costs and results, as well as the risk of tensions spiraling out of control (“security spiral”). The aim of this research is to make a comparison between America’s offensive strategy with Russia’s defensive approach and evaluate the efficiency of both policies. Following a particular scholarly approach, this article presumes that Moscow acquires power via the indirect, “low-cost strategies,” using any opportunity available to counterbalance US power via other countries. It is concluded that offensive or defensive behavior depends on the situation and available resources. The United States has sufficient resources to implement an offensive strategy, and Washington may raise the stakes in confrontation. Russia’s defense approach of a “buck-passing” strategy is more efficient, but Moscow suffers from a lack of resources and chooses indirect countering, using any means necessary to counterbalance US power in Syria and beyond.

KEYWORDS: Russia, Syria, Turkey, United States, defensive realism, offensive realism, buck passing, balance of power, security dilemma
INTRODUCTION

Defensive realists argue that maintaining the power balance is the best way to safeguard the status quo and secure the state (Waltz 1979, 126). In contrast, offensive realists state that great powers can secure themselves only by maximizing their own power (Mearsheimer 2001, 21). Defensive realists state that countries with a strong willingness to balance power (counterbalance and overbalance) against the threat of power-seeking states may have to face, in turn, the countermeasures that jeopardize the very survival of the maximizing state and be forced to pay a high price. Excessive concentration of power may be self-defeating when triggering balancing counter moves.

Increasing confrontation between Russia and the United States makes it possible to compare the effectiveness of the US offensive realism approach and Russia’s approach of defensive realism in combination with the latter’s “buck-passing” strategy. When a great power is trying to prevent rivals from gaining power at the expense of its security, it can choose to act by favoring “buck passing” (transferring the responsibility to act to other states while remaining on the sidelines).

The questions about why Russia decided to get involved in the Syrian conflict in 2015 and what the real goals of Russian policy were in this region still remain controversial for Western politicians, as well as for scholars. Four years on, it is clear that the presence of the Russian army in Syria delivered some desirable results for Russia. Moscow reaffirmed its position in international relations after the annexation of Crimea: Bashar al-Assad’s government has been spared, and the options of using modern weaponry and the decisiveness of the Russian leadership were demonstrated. Nevertheless, questions remain about whether these were the only goals sought by Russia and if there were other objectives inherent in the Russian policy. Western policy-makers and “think tanks” have their own perceptions of Russia’s policy. They perceive Russia as having engaged in a broad, sophisticated, well-resourced, and surprisingly effective campaign to expand its global reach. These objectives include, first and foremost, the undermining of US positions as a leader of the liberal international order and the cohesion of the West, promoting specific Russian military and energy interests, and pushing back the United States from areas of traditional American influence (Hanson and Strobe 2018).

GOAL SETTING IN SYRIA

A deal, signed by Turkey, Russia, and Iran in 2017 (Memorandum on the Creation of De-escalation Areas in the Syrian Arab Republic 2017), called for an
end to hostilities between the rebels (but not the terrorists) and government forces in de-escalation zones in four regions of Syria. This caused some degree of puzzlement, as it looked like Russia was bombing Idlib while talking about a peaceful settlement, and at the same time was forcing rebels from the de-escalation zones of Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta, and Deraa. There were two reasons behind this policy of bombardment. First, to threaten the opposition in an effort to force it to conclude a deal with the Syrian government; and second, to repress any opposition against President Assad as a long-term goal.

It is now clear that the Russian policy had the goal to cease fighting on one frontier, so as to transfer forces to other frontiers and to defeat enemies one by one. The Syrian Arab army (SAA) does not have the necessary resources to fight simultaneously on all fronts. Hence, four de-escalation areas were established: they included Idlib province and certain parts of the neighboring provinces of Latakia, Hama, and Aleppo; a certain part in the north of Homs province, and included Eastern Ghouta, Deraa, and Al-Quneitra provinces.

One year later, there was only one de-escalation zone remaining: Idlib. In helping the SAA to free one rebel-held territory after another, Russia stated that the rebel groups included al-Qaeda and IS-linked fighters, and that there would be no “de-escalation” with terrorists. Russian jets stopped pounding Idlib province when the leaders of Russia, Iran, and Turkey agreed to meet for talks about the future of the last remaining de-escalation zone.

A second issue that caused puzzlement was Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who strongly opposed an advance on the rebels in Idlib. Resulting from President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin’s talks with him, a new demilitarized zone was established. Russia and Turkey agreed to create a demilitarized zone along the contact line between the armed opposition and government troops, with the radically minded rebels withdrawing from there. This demilitarized zone was not the same as the de-escalation zone, according to Erdogan (2018). On this point the Russians had to change their previous policy and find new ways to eliminate the Syrian rebels. However, it could not be excluded for Moscow and Ankara to make a new deal in order to prevent the armed opposition groups from staying in Idlib. For Turkey, the deal on Idlib was based on their will to clear Manbij of their own “terrorists” (Office of the President Recep Tayyip Erdogan 2018)—the Kurdish organizations of the YPG1 and the YPJ —that form part of the Syrian

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1. The YPG is an acronym whose translation means People’s Protection Units.
2. The Kurdish YPJ, Women’s Protection Units, is an all-female Kurdish fighting force.
Democratic Forces (SDF) supported by the United States. This offered a space for cooperation between Moscow and Ankara, on the one hand. However, Idlib was never a top priority for the Turks, since fighting the Kurds was their superior goal. Moreover, further attempts to protect Idlib from Assad’s power carried the risk of escalating tensions with Russia. On other hand, taking control of the Kurdish-held territory east of the Euphrates and along the Turkey–Syria border was not the highest priority for the Assad government. There was room for a deal and Russia concluded it.

The third key part of this puzzle looks like an opportunity for Russia to use the contradictions between Turkey and the United States regarding the Kurds. In Erdogan’s view, all Kurds are terrorists and Turkey has ambitions to gain full control over northeastern Syria. In this perspective, Moscow will need to prevent the confrontation between Ankara and Damascus about Idlib and the northern part of Syria because there are territorial claims between them. Erdogan’s policy is a kind of domestic interests-motivated policy, which aims to present him as a leader of the Ottoman world and a modern leader of the Islamic world. It was important for him to save face: He could not look weak and could not yield to Russia in the eyes of domestic public opinion. He considered Turkish-speaking Syrian Turkomans to be under the security umbrella of Ankara. Ankara did not agree that Idlib and other territories were cut off from Turkey after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and Erdogan stated Turkey’s right to protect Idlib’s habitants from the Syrian “massacre” government.

In turn, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem stated that Turkish-controlled Iskenderun province was Syrian territory, and the Syrian government would return it under its own sovereignty (Muallem 2018a, 2018b). Meanwhile, the defeat of the Kurds was a key goal of Erdogan’s domestic policy and for that he was ready even for a confrontation with the United States. This is evidenced by a tough phone conversation in early 2018 when President Donald Trump urged Turkey to exercise caution in Afrin, Syria, and to avoid any actions that may lead to a conflict between Turkish and American forces (White House 2018). Trump also expressed a concern about the destructive and false rhetoric coming from Turkey, and also about Americans and local employees detained in Turkey under false accusations.

The Russian mission in Syria is there not only to protect Assad’s government but also it has a clear goal to put pressure on the United States indirectly through third countries. Turkey is not Russia’s ally, but it drifts away from the United States inside NATO. Moscow tries to increase and use this discord.
AFTER THE DEAL WITH TURKEY ON IDLIB

Turkey is valuable for Russia as a situational partner. The deal made between Russia and Turkey on Idlib demonstrates that Moscow prefers to make concessions to Ankara. Any deterioration in relations with Ankara would have unacceptable consequences for Russia. Supplying the Khmeimim Russian air base in Syria is highly dependent on supplies coming through the Black Sea straits. Moreover, Turkey can at any time improve relations with the United States just as easily as Ankara and Moscow turned from war to peace in 2016. While, on the one hand, Russia has no means to force Turkey to comply with the Treaty of Montreux on the Straits. Turkey, on the other, has a right to block the straits if its own security is threatened. Russia has to avoid confrontation with Turkey. The most difficult task for Russia is pushing Turkey out of northern Syria. According to the Russian scenario, this should happen without conflict. Expulsion by force could hurt the next stage of interaction: breaking the alliance between the Kurds and the United States, and putting an end to the American presence on the borders of Turkey and Syria. At the end of 2018, Trump decided to withdraw American forces from Syria after talks with Erdogan. Previously, Trump was supposed to tell Erdogan to back off on his repeated threats to attack the Kurdish-led SDF, America’s main partner in Syria. However, his attempts at forcing Turkey to agree to de-escalation and a limitation of military action against the Kurds failed. Hence, the Russian objective was achieved. Trump chose to withdraw forces from Syria and not to jeopardize Turkey’s membership of NATO. This is one reason why Moscow considers Ankara as a valuable tool for countering the United States in Syria.

Russia is not interested in igniting a direct confrontation with the United States and hopes that Turkey will oblige instead. This is an example of the “buck-passing” strategy as described by Mearsheimer (2001, 158–60). The expulsion of the United States from Syria is in the common interests of Turkey, Russia, Iran, and President Assad. Each country has its own reason to push the American policy to fail. This creates a context for buck-passing. The Kurdish area offered a terrain for US operations. Now the Kurds are closer to “official” Damascus. The withdrawal of US troops is likely to be viewed as a betrayal of America’s Kurdish allies, and this betrayal opens a way for cooperation between the Assad government and the Kurds against Turkey.

The Kurds had previously been partners of Assad in fighting radical Islamists, but the tension between the allies increased in the dispute over the oil-rich territory. Moreover, the Kurdish troops are not Russia’s enemies, but after they chose to ally themselves with the United States, Russian troops see
now themselves on the opposite side. The Iranians, too, have a problem with the Kurds in parts of Iran. Nonetheless, the main objective of the Russian defensive approach has been achieved insofar as Russia’s attempts to push Turkey against the United States have succeeded. In addition, it may well be possible that Turkey wants to be perceived as moving toward Russia in order to obtain a better bargain from the United States. The flexible policy of Russia in the region has resulted in the improvement of relations with Turkey. Their interests coincide at specific moments in specific places. Turkey follows its own interests, but the result is also beneficial to Russia as long as a face-to-face confrontation between Erdogan and Trump increases. In late 2017, Turkish and Russian officials signed an agreement for a guaranteed delivery of a US$2.5 billion S-400 “Triumph” anti-aircraft weapon system (Reuters 2017), which irritated the United States (Reuters 2018). Turkey has since been on the receiving end of threats because of the surface-to-air S-400 missile deal, with the White House warning Turkey’s officials about the consequences they will face if they refuse to abandon the deal. In the meantime, the deterioration of Turkish–American relations satisfies Russia’s interests. Moscow has no illusions about the sustainable alliance with Ankara in the long term. However, Turkey represents a valuable market for Russia in respect to the tightening of anti-Russian sanctions. Furthermore, this has the potential of causing a rift within NATO, which weakens it. This, indeed, is one of the desirable goals of Russia’s countering policy. Moreover, the disagreement of Brussels with Washington’s plan to apply new anti-Iran sanctions opens new perspectives concerning the deterioration of US–NATO relations.

Russia’s next short-term goal is to restore the power of Assad’s government over all Syrian territory. This needs to be done without a confrontation with Turkey, which would demonstrate strong support for the rebels in the north of Syria, or that would seem like a betrayal. Sweeping away all Syrian opposition would not be a good decision for Russia. Moscow seeks ways to force the opposition, or part of it, to agree with the smart plan of legitimizing Assad’s rule under a new constitution to be drafted by constitutional committee.

Such a committee is needed, on the one hand, to prepare the constitutional reform in accordance with United Nations Security Council (UNRC) Resolution 2254. However, on the other, Russia is working on the formation of the Syrian Constitutional Committee in its own interests. Talks with the Syrian opposition began in Geneva. However, Moscow then organized the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi. Russia continues attempts to reconcile the opposition in the Astana format (MID 2018b). The goal of Russian policy
is to force the Syrian opposition to collaborate with the constitutional committee, without which its formation is impossible. The answer to the question of how Moscow is going to achieve this end can be found in the proposal to include representatives of Syrian civil society in the constitutional committee. This “third party” of the deal should act as an ally of Assad. Those who will agree to collaborate with Moscow and Damascus may be rewarded with top positions in the new Syrian government. The rule of Assad will not be threatened if the leaders of the opposition get seats without power. As a result, Moscow and Damascus would appear to be peacemakers and adherents of democracy. There is no doubt that part of the opposition may agree to play this game. They have a choice either to be demolished or to believe that Assad will give them something on the advice of Russia. This plan may be considered as more tricky than smart, because it does not eliminate the possibility of new setbacks in future. If it succeeds, Russia will celebrate another success in countering the United States.

**LONG-TERM GOALS**

Russian policy in Syria is analyzed in the broad context of Russian–American deterrence. It has many aspects, of which Syria is only one. Democratic theory argues that democratic values always prevail over national interests and that democratic states are not worried by the security dilemma; and that Western policy-makers believed that Russia would not oppose the United States and its allies after the Cold War. However, even a small democracy such as Serbia does not want to sacrifice its national interests and still continues to resist Western countries. Russia challenges the West much more. The supporter of defensive realism, Kenneth N. Waltz (Waltz 2000, 10) even mocked the thesis of the theory of democratic deterrence that purported that democracies do not fight democracies. Nevertheless, the deterrence in democratic theory does not work in the case of Russia. Russia’s entry into the Syrian conflict on Assad’s side in 2015 was a reaction to the isolation of Russia after its reunification with Crimea. In fact, considering the reason behind the military operation in Syria, it seems even stranger in light of the fact that the conflict on Russia’s own domestic borders with Ukraine is still not resolved. The case of Crimea and the case of Syria should be considered in connection with attempts by Moscow to seek ways to deter the expansion of NATO that began in 1997. Moving the borders of NATO to the East did not help to solidify democratic and market reforms in Russia nor strengthen a united Europe.
Instead, Russia has been pursuing a policy based on the conviction that the post-Cold War order in Europe is an expansion of the area of American interests. It did certainly challenge Russia and had nothing to do with keeping peace. Russia’s position after reunification with Crimea does not seem to have been a solution to the security dilemma. ³ Russia does not want to be challenged, but is finding it difficult to secure its borders and interests without provoking a new batch of countermeasures against the Western powers.

THE WEST’S PERSPECTIVE AFTER THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

The US Senate Committee of Foreign Relations has published a report of Russia’s asymmetric assault measures and implications for US national security (Report of the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations 2018). Senators tend to picture Russia’s policy as an assault on the world’s democracy and liberal order, but in the geopolitical view, they consider Russia’s measures as a hybrid war against US interests. The policy of Russia is called a hybrid war with asymmetrical threats. US politicians are irritated by Russia’s activity in the cyber, media, and energy space. They also suspect the Russian government’s attempts to break the unity of NATO’s allies through its impact on domestic policy. All that should be recognized as an indirect or kind of soft kind of threat or smart power. This, of course, was in addition to the US-imposed sanctions against Russia in retaliation for its support of Assad.

But this begs the question of what all this means in terms of defensive and offensive realism. How can the United States be considered an offensive realist power given Trump’s policy of disengagement, and the US withdrawal from Syria? This could be the overturning of offensive policy. But words and deeds should not be confused. The recent case of Washington’s confrontation with Russia was in Venezuela. Moreover, there are the increasing economic sanctions and longstanding fight of Trump’s administration against Russia’s pivotal Nord Stream-2 gas pipeline. Thus, the United States cannot be considered as a defensive realist player.

Russia opposes the United States indirectly; the hybrid asymmetrical steps Russia takes are a kind of defensive strategy. Settling the Russian military base in Syria and assisting Assad on the battlefield also created a new position by

³ John Herz stated that the security dilemma was a structural notion in which the self-help attempts of states to look after their security needs tend, regardless of intention, to lead to rising insecurity for others, as each interprets its own measures as defensive and the measures of others as potentially threatening (Herz 1950, 157).
balancing power with Washington. Five years after the annexation of Crimea, Russia’s position has improved. The conflict with Ukraine has moved to a secondary position in the media’s coverage. It now seems to be partially frozen. In the Syrian conflict Russia presents itself as a fighter against Islamic terrorism on the world stage, and as a mediator of the Syrian crisis settlement.

Revolutionary Iran called the United States “the big Satan” and the Soviet Union “the little Satan.” Although nowadays Iran is not an ally of Russia in all tracks, both states oppose the United States in the Syrian case. Russia handles Iran as a situational partner. The interests of Tehran and Moscow are close not only in Syria. Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Paris Agreement and the Iran Nuclear Agreement) were the other remarkable events that changed the geopolitical situation. This opens the next chapter of the US–Iran confrontation. Iran threatens to block the Strait of Hormuz if sanctions stop the exportation of its oil. The United States promises to ensure freedom of navigation by force. At the same time, Iran’s influence in Iraq is growing, and Iraq is a new arena of the standoff. Russia still follows the restrictions on the supply of arms to Iran, which are part of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. That means that for each trade deal involving arms supplies, Iran needs to obtain a case-by-case approval from the UNSC.4 But should Moscow be obliged to respect the rules of a treaty from which Washington has withdrawn? This new situation creates leverage for rebalancing power in favor of Russia.

BALANCING THE POWER BEYOND SYRIA

Russia sees the Syrian conflict as being an external platform for countering the United States, and it is better to do this in the Middle East than in Ukraine, which is uncomfortably close to Russia’s borders. The engagement in the Syrian crisis gives Moscow the possibility to act together with other states opposing US interests. This is a defensive realism strategy to strengthen the opponents of the United States and give them the possibility to act first.

Mearsheimer (2001, 28–34), pointing out the differences between offensive and defensive realism, claims that the states acting as defensive realists look for opportunities to alter the balance of power by acquiring additional increments of power at the expense of potential rivals. The United States acts

4. The nuclear deal also endorsed United Nations Resolution 2231, which prevents Iran from transferring arms directly or indirectly out of its territories without the approval of the UNSC.
as an offensive realist in contrast to Russia’s choice of a defensive realism strategy. The defensive neorealists note that the powerful states gaining excessive concentration of power in the international system are acting in a self-defeating mode in triggering balancing countermoves (Yuan-Kang 2004, 177).

The American “think tanks” have no doubt that both countries continue the permanent confrontational strategic competition with far-reaching global implications. With regards to security and prosperity, Russia has long been preoccupied with the challenge of securing itself against external foes, and has taken refuge in adopting a complex strategic. It is inevitable that Russia will push its borders outward as far as possible from the Russian heartland and will limit foreign influences within Russian-controlled territory (Graham 2019).

Following a defensive realism strategy, Russia may not limit itself to using only Turkey and Iran. The rising confrontation with Washington on Syria (the new possible strike of cruise missiles against Syrian bases or threats to retaliate against Russian air forces) triggers Moscow to seek ways on how to use other potential rivals of the United States. Washington has many hotbeds of tension and conflict beyond the Middle East. The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation was approved by Putin on November 30, 2016, in response to the American declaration of the right to respond firmly to hostile actions, including the bolstering of national defense and taking retaliatory or asymmetrical measures (MID 2016).

The United States has conflicts with North Korea and China (the trade war and the South China Sea dispute). Certainly, a more powerful China wants to revise the international order to better reflect its more powerful position and to secure trade routes for its own prosperity. The United States can block China’s plans. However, if Russia supports China in a hypothetical power confrontation, the United States will fail. And this would be the case of future indirect countering.

For a long time, it seemed that Moscow was keeping its distance from Pyongyang. But on September 8, 2018, a special envoy of Putin’s—head of the upper house of Russia’s parliament, V. Matviyenko—visited Kim and gave him a letter from Putin. In response, Kim confirmed his readiness to pay an official visit to Russia (TASS 2018). He payed an official visit to Russia on April 23, 2019 two months after a failed summit meeting with President Trump. Russia called for the lifting of the sanctions on North Korea and stressed that Pyongyang would not give up nuclear weapons until the sanctions were lifted. This demand contradicts the American approach. Russia can support North Korea against the United States not only passively
but also actively, under certain circumstances. There is no doubt that Russia will take advantage, if necessary. It was remarkable that a few days later Kim Jong-un visit to Moscow North Korea released photographs of tested missile look remarkably like those of a Russian-produced Iskander.

Another example is Russia's rapprochement with Pakistan. On February 20, 2018, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, at a meeting with his Pakistani counterpart, defended the armed opposition in Afghanistan against the United States in an unbelievable statement: "The Afghanistan strategy, that was recently presented by the US administration, focuses on the need to increase the use of force and military pressure on the armed opposition, although it is clear to Moscow and Islamabad [...] that it is leading nowhere." MID (2018a) also pointed out that Mi-35M combat-transport helicopters were “transferred to our partners” in Pakistan, and stressed that Islamabad had joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a full member, and then had joined the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). As a result of Russia's counterbalancing power in Afghanistan, according to some American experts, the United States found that it was better to negotiate with the Taliban on US withdrawal (Felbab-Brown 2019).

Back to the Middle East, it should be recognized that some extraordinary events in Iraq may have great consequences. In 2018, there were attacks on the US embassy in the Iraqi capital Baghdad for the first time in several years. Rockets were also fired at the US consulate in Basra. The White House warned Iran that it would “respond swiftly and decisively” (Statement by the Press Secretary of White House 2018). Washington has no doubt that these attacks were organized by Iranian proxies. This demonstrates the unsustainable position of the United States in Iraq. Furthermore, there are many players around Iraq, including Russia, Turkey, and Iran, that are willing to force the United States out of Iraq.

Some think-tanks consider indirect countering as an early stage of hybrid warfare, known as the Gerasimov doctrine (a strategy of hybrid\counter-hybrid warfare) whereby political and diplomatic pressure, the formation of alliances and coalitions are part of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals. Moreover, there is a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace—between the defensive and offensive behavior. Wars may not be declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template (Gerasimov 2016). This may be applied when understanding Russia’s attempts to change a state’s foreign policy by striking
deals with new actors of that state's domestic policy, such as how this is happening in Afghanistan and Iraq.

This was what US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, and in his view: “Russia poses threats that have evolved beyond external or military aggression, and now include influence operations targeting America and the Western world” (Secretary of State Mike Pompeo 2019). The United States needs more resources “to counter Russia's malign influence in Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia.”

The main conclusion is that Russia tries to increase its own power and seeks for any opportunity to demonstrate to the United States how vulnerable the Americans are. Moscow acquires power, step by step, via these “low-cost strategies.” After twenty years of implementing a deterrence policy against Russia, it is now obvious where it leads. Whether or not this policy works was a question discussed by Joseph Mearsheimer in his comparison of the deterrence theory with offensive and defensive realism. According to him, the deterrence approach is unreliable. It is more of a tactic than a strategy. It works for small countries, such as Serbia. The benefits of incorporation into the common market, the common liberal values and a democratic system opened for influence keep states from confronting the Western superpowers. However, big countries behave differently.

It is obvious that Russia was faced with a choice: to agree to the rules established by the United States or to pay the high price for rejection. The deterioration of relations with Western countries, the isolation from Western markets through sanctions, and the abandoning of common values are not an unacceptable price for Russia. Iran has made a similar choice. China is challenging the United States in the South China Sea and is refusing to surrender in a trade war, thereby demonstrating that it is not going to yield to US demands at the expense of its sovereignty, or to fulfill American demands that might save Chinese benefits in the global market. Beijing is not ready to exchange its own security for something that resembles a carrot, according to deterrence theory. There is no doubt that the concessions granted are irreversible. However, compromising security for the carrot has negative consequences as the experience of other countries where the policy of the carrot and stick was implemented indicates. States that exchange their own security for a carrot cannot retrieve the security lost. Moreover, there are other states that wield a stick and can take the carrot away. Turkey, for one, being an American ally, is not ready to exchange its own security and ambition for the benefits of cooperation with the United States just to be recognized as a local superpower.
Having committed to defensive realism, Russia has so far not changed US offensive behavior. Offensive and defensive realism may be seen as different sides of the same coin. US policy has proven this. America’s NATO allies, such as the Baltic States, are used in the strategy of countering Russia. The key problem for Russia is the conflict with Ukraine that is applied by the United States in order to deter Russian power pursuing the strategy of buck-passing. The United States uses Ukraine against Russia. Both strategies—offensive or defensive realism—pursue power through different ways. It is useful to recall that the former Soviet Union pursued a policy of defensive realism and managed to obtain some concessions from the United States. Hence, the discussion about which theory is more reliable will bear out only if the costs and outcomes of both strategies are assessed. These costs should be considered in relation to countries’ resources. The great powers have far more resources than smaller states. Defensive realism may be the optimal strategy for smaller states because a policy of offensive realism will lead to unacceptable costs.

**INDIRECT DEFENSIVE REALISM APPROACH**

Usually, the confrontation between two states is considered in terms of defensive and offensive realism. Russia uses the defensive approach against the United States, but prefers not to use a primitive direct support of American adversarials. The direct support of adversarials is a classic deterrence tool, but may trigger the “security dilemma spiral” (Jervis 1978a, 1978b, 58–113). Russia is willing to create (or to find) the sensitive point of US interests and to demonstrate to the United States that there are two options: Russia may or may not engage in the dispute and may or may not harm US interests or may (as happened in early 2000) or may not help the United States in Afghanistan. It depends on American actions in other fields. The defensive realism approach of Russia is to offer the United States the choice: either to increase its own vulnerability by using the on/off switch of wielding further threats, or to avoid exposing itself to risky consequences. Moscow also has the option of using the on/off switch. However, it is in Russia’s interest to do this indirectly through an intermediate state. The best example is Russia’s current cooperation with Pakistan in the Afghan conflict that irritates the United States. Russia is countering the United States in Syria by using Turkey as the intermediate state. Russia supplies Turkey with an S-400 air defense system. This makes the United States angry. And the latter, in turn, refuses to supply Turkey with F-35 fighters (Hurriyet 2018).
This illustrates the mechanism of indirect defensive realism. The strategy of the simultaneous game on several chessboards means the interdependence of moves. The opponent feels like being stuck in glue. If the United States does not honor Russia’s interests on some boards, Russia will look for a new point of American weakness, and new trouble for the United States will be created.

There are two conflicts in which Moscow has not yet interfered and its threats have been switched “off.” The first is the Iran–US standoff; the second is the US standoff with North Korea. It is more reasonable to hold the position before turning the switch “on.” If Russia is the first to wield a threat by pressing the “on” switch, defensive realism will not be smooth. Nonetheless, all options remain on the table. The most valuable engagement of Russia may be in the US–China conflict over the islands in the South China Sea. Here, Moscow is trying to avoid directly opposing the United States.

If the defensive realism approach does not work, Russia is ready to face a scenario such as the Caribbean crisis between the USSR and the United States. This wild card worked once before. Another possible scenario is the revival of the US–Russia standoff in Europe that prevailed before the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty was signed in 1987. Trump has confirmed that the United States will leave the arms control treaty with Russia dating back to the Cold War that has kept nuclear missiles out of Europe (Borger 2018). Considering the possibility of nuclear war and insisting that retaliation is inevitable, Putin cracked a symbolic joke, stating: “We would be victims of an aggression and would go to heaven as martyrs, while those who initiated the aggression would just die and not even have time to repent” (Daily Mail 2018). However, the time when the world’s stability was based on a bipolar system during the Cold War is over. Now there are two semi-superpowers—Russia and China—and only one superpower. Therefore, the probability of clashes between the United States and Russia will depend on the activity of the offensive and defensive policies of each state. This is illustrated in equation (1) below.

The ratio of losses and benefits also affects the probability of clashes (see equation 2 below). The “positive” aspect of nuclear weapons is the high cost of winning. The cost of one superpower defeating another in a clash is unacceptable. As Jervis (1978a) established, there are four types of security dilemmas that are different combinations of the ability to gauge the use of offensive and defensive weapons against the level of benefit gained from the application of an offensive or defensive strategy. The Russian–American type of security dilemma is one of the toughest. Russia considers all American weapons as
offensive, but the United States does not agree. In line with Jervis’s approach, the United States seems to believe the offensive strategy is better than the defensive one, but Russia believes the opposite.

OFFENSIVE OR DEFENSIVE REALISM: WHAT MIGHT CHANGE THE BEHAVIOR OF COUNTRIES?

It is undisputable that the approach of offensive or defensive realism is effective. However, a major shortcoming is that it does not offer any guarantee of winning. Thus, international experts raise the question of which American policy, if any, could alter the behavior of Russia in the direction desired by the United States.

There were attempts to determine the structural characteristics that lead to offense or defense dominating. The rate of technological advances, geography, diplomatic and military factors, social and political order were considered among the other factors that affect the choice between adopting a defensive or an offensive strategy (Van Evera 1998). However, an important issue needs to be addressed regarding the consequences the choice of either an offensive or a defensive approach would have on the military, economic, and social spheres, and what would be the costs and benefits of competitive behavior.

Changing the behavior of a country on the international stage may have consequences not only on foreign policy \((F)\). All steps in the offensive or defensive strategy would have results that could be evaluated also on domestic policy \((I)\), defense and security \((D)\), and the economy \((E)\) (Grafov 2018, 35). The consequences for Russia \((Q)\) defending the position taken in a scenario of confrontation with the United States by the defensive realism approach may be expressed by the following equation:

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QRu = F(+) + I(+) + D(+) + E(-)
\]

It is likely that the stakes would increase in a confrontation through third countries but would not guarantee a better position and could lead to both negative and positive consequences for foreign policy; therefore, \(F(+)\). The effects of competitive behavior would undoubtedly be positive for domestic policy. The large majority of Russian society is shaped by patriotic beliefs and dreams of increased power; therefore, the evaluation is \(I(+)\). The impact on defense and security does not guarantee a shift to the better position; therefore, \(D(+)\). However, major negative consequences would occur in the economy. Sanctions would be strengthened; therefore, \(E(-)\) would be undisputable.
What would be the consequences Russia would have to face in the case of a policy of acquiescence? Lowering confrontation would definitely not improve Russia’s position abroad. This would only encourage the United States to demand new concessions; therefore, $F(\neg \neg)$. Any concessions would impact on the domestic situation negatively. It would be a reminder of Russia’s weakness in the 1990s; therefore $I(\neg \neg)$. There is no doubt that a reduction in the confrontation with the United States would not strengthen Russia’s security, except perhaps initially. Washington would demand new concessions, for example, in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, as is happening currently. The return of Crimea back to the Ukraine would also weaken Russia’s security; therefore, $D(\neg \neg)$. The economic consequences of reducing tensions in a confrontation with the United States would be positive in the short term, but in the long term, the United States would try to limit Russia’s revenues from oil and gas, as well as access to the technologies and investments on which the Russian defense potential is based. Therefore, there would be mixed consequences as in $E(+\neg\neg)$.

The behavior of a state may change if the sum of the benefits and costs of reducing the confrontation were greater than those of the continuing confrontation:

$$Q \text{ reduc. conf.} \setminus Q \text{ contin. conf.} > 1$$

(2)

Otherwise, the competitive behavior would continue. Even a rough estimate of the costs and benefits shows that there would be no sense for Russia to make concessions to the United States. However, Russia is not interested in military confrontation and is interested in negotiations, because it is beneficial for the national economy. At the same time, Washington’s policy would have costs and benefits, too. The Russian goal is to make the costs for the United States too great for the benefits achieved, but to keep their own costs at an acceptable level. This costs and benefits ratio could trigger a change of policy.

**EMERGING POWER DISTRIBUTION SHIFTS IN 2019**

Meanwhile, since the beginning of 2019, Russia and the United States have been on the edge of a new stage of mutual offensive deterrence. Putin openly stated that following the beginning of the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty, Russia is beginning to develop new, long-range, ground-based cruise missiles, and new ballistic (quasi-ballistic hypersonic), medium-range missiles. However, he stressed that Russia’s medium- and shorter range missiles would not be placed in Europe and other parts of the world as long as the United States does not place such weapons there (MID 2019).
The 1987 INF Treaty was a clear win for the United States in the competition with the decrepit and weakening USSR that tried to change its foreign policy to reconcile with the West and stop the arms race because of the problems in its own economy. In accordance with the treaty, the USSR destroyed 1846 missiles at 117 sites, the United States destroyed 846 missiles at 31 sites (TASS 2019). The INF Treaty only prohibited ground-based missiles. Most of the Soviet missiles were ground-based ballistic missiles, but most of the US medium-range missiles were sea- and air-based cruise missiles. As a result of the implementation of the treaty in 1991, the United States had numerous cruise missiles installed on ships, submarines, and bombers, but the Soviet Union did not have any medium- and shorter range missiles.

By 2015, however, Russia developed “Caliber”-type medium-range cruise missiles, a large number of which were deployed on ships and submarines without violating the INF Treaty. Moreover, in 2018, the quasi-ballistic missile x-47M2 “Dagger” was adapted so it could be launched from the MiG-31 heavy fighter. Their total range increased to 3500 km. It was a clear sign to the United States that in a few years Russia would be able to eliminate the advantage of the United States in medium-range cruise missiles. The United States ensued by using a formal pretext to accuse Russia of violating the INF Treaty, and indicating that there would be no point, therefore, for Washington to follow the treaty any longer.

This, apparently, marked a turning point in Russia’s countering of the United States being applied only indirectly. The US officials took note and want to forestall that development. Once the INF Treaty lapses, only one New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) will constrain US and Russian nuclear forces up to 2021. It is highly likely that the United States will not extend the New START Treaty on the same terms after it expires in 2021. Trump criticized New START as a “bad [Barack] Obama deal.” There are many politicians in Washington who opposed New START, in part because the treaty entailed equal limits for the United States and Russia. In 2002, Washington insisted on the treaty model, which limited the deployment of warheads, but not missiles and bombers. Now Moscow is not going to accept an agreement that leaves missiles and bombers unconstrained, especially when the United States has a numerical advantage (Pifer 2018).

The non-extension of New START will cause the demise of the nuclear strategic balance and may lead to a crisis similar to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. However, there is no necessity for Russia to deploy the missiles
in Cuba or Venezuela in the new era of naval technological capabilities. In order to create a new threat to the United States, it is enough to have a naval base near the United States and many small and cheap corvettes or submarines equipped with medium-range cruise missiles. Speaking about Russia’s new naval missile systems, Putin recognized that strikes could be conducted against those territories where decision centers are located, and could also include targets on American soil (Message from the President to the Federal Assembly 2019). Russia is demonstrating its ability to produce such naval weapons. The United States is very vulnerable from the sea, just as Russia is vulnerable to a hypothetical missile attack from the territory of Ukraine and other Russian neighbors. History proves that the offensive strategy of one superpower against the offensive strategy of another’s comparative power leads to the negotiating table, bearing in mind the meaningless of war.

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