

**A CLASH OF GRAND STRATEGIES BETWEEN RUSSIA,
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND TURKEY FOR
GREATER POWER AND INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

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No portion of this work has been submitted in support for an application of another degree or qualification of this or another university or institution of learning.

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Abstract

The thesis explores the changing dynamics in the Middle East where the region is witnessing a metamorphosis in its power structure as major regional powers actively pursue their grand strategies to unseat U.S. hegemony. The analysis focuses in particular on the foreign policies of the revisionist powers of Russia and Turkey collaborating in all spheres of statecraft against the resoluteness of the U.S. to maintain the status quo. It recognises that the Syrian civil war has disrupted the equilibrium of the prevailing power structure which, by extension, provided the enabling environment for the major players in the region to pursue their own strategic interests and objectives in the Middle East. The thesis concludes that Turkey's unique geopolitical profile positions it at the fulcrum of the power struggle between Russia and the U.S., elevating its status as the key player in determining the future of the region. Turkey's unique attributes include, *inter alia*, its strategic geography nestled between Europe, Russia, Asia and the Middle East, coupled with its significance as a NATO ally of the U.S., hosting the latter's military assets on its Incirlik air base. As the U.S. and Russia vie for Turkey's support in a typical zero-sum fashion, Turkey asserts its own authority to maximise its gains by throwing its own grand strategy into the geopolitical calculus. As it stands, Russia's calculated strategies to build up its rapport with Turkey through, *inter alia*, a major gas pipeline project, TurkStream, and other important economic, military and diplomatic forms of cooperation, are leveraging Turkey to become a major regional power in the Middle East. Turkey's close collaboration with Russia has put the U.S. on notice with the recognition that a major shift in Turkey's allegiance towards Russia poses a real threat to U.S. hegemony in the Middle East.

To my husband Sailosi and our children, Denzyl, Clifford and Elijah

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List of Abbreviations

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BSF	Black Sea Force
CNN	Cable News Network
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FRA	Free Syrian Army
GAP	Southeastern Anatolia Project (<i>Guneydogu Anadolu Projesi</i> : Turkey)
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GWOT	Global War on Terror
INSTC	International North South Transport Corridor
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NDS	National Defense Strategy
NMS	National Military Strategy
NSS	National Security Strategy
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
OPEC	Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
P5 (+1)	5 Permanent Members of the UNSC (+ Germany)
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party (<i>Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê</i> : Turkey)
POTUS	President of the United States
PYD	Democratic Union Party (<i>Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat</i> : Syria)
QDR	Quadrennial Defense Review
QME	Qualitative Military Edge

UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
U.S.A/U.S	United States of America
VEOs	Violent Extremist Organisations
WWI	World War I
WWII	World War II
YPG	People's Defense Unit (<i>Yekineyen Parastina Gel</i> : Syria)

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Build your opponent a golden bridge to retreat across.

— *Sun Tzu, The Art of War*

1.0 Overview

The Syrian civil war which evolved as part of the Arab spring movement triggered on 18 December 2010 in Tunisia, later gained a foothold in Syria from July 2011 and has since escalated to become the battleground for a proxy war for the major players in the Middle East. Amid the civil unrest and protests led by opposing factions against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government, the geopolitical interests of major regional players, such as the United States of America (hereinafter, the U.S.), Russia and Turkey in the region came under threat. The Syrian civil war left them with limited options but to capitalise on the rare opportunity to defend as well as advance their grand strategies for greater power and influence in the Middle East.

As Russia and Turkey strengthened their bilateral relations in all spheres of statecraft including military, economic and diplomatic cooperation from August 2016, U.S.'s hegemony in the region faces an uphill battle for survival. Its key NATO ally of Turkey has pivoted to Russia after allegations of U.S. involvement in the failed military coup d'état against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan a month earlier on 15 July 2016 (Schoon, 2017, pp. 746-8). Russian President Vladimir Putin recognised the opportunity to destabilise one of the U.S.'s core pillars of its regional hegemony in the Middle East – Turkish support – and swooped in for the kill. Putin progressively lifted its economic sanctions against Turkey after

the fighter jet incident of 2015 and the two countries have been signing deals on major energy projects, arms sales and deeper economic, military and diplomatic cooperation ever since. Against this backdrop, what are Russia, the U.S. and Turkey's grand strategies to shape the future power structure of the Middle East?

Russia, under President Vladimir Putin, constantly strives to project a public image of popular support at home and common security interests with its near-abroad. An extension of this strategy involves flexing its military muscles to combat terrorism in the Middle East in September 2015 when it first launched direct military offensives in the Syrian war. This marked a significant turn in events towards challenging the U.S. hegemony in the region under the prevailing world order. Putin is well aware that, as a resurging great power, Russia needs to secure strong domestic support as a fundamental precondition to the successful implementation of its foreign policies (Friedman, 2012). As such, the health of its economy, and by extension, the social welfare of the nation, are of paramount importance to quell the possibility of social uprising and rebellion on the domestic front. As a price taker but with a comparative advantage in the trade of natural gas (among other energy sources), one of the important lessons Russia learned from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 is the strategic importance of securing its gas markets, particularly so in the European Union (EU) which is its largest energy trading partner. China comes in as a close second.

The EU imports close to 69% of its natural gas from the rest of the world, 40% of which is supplied by Russia. The United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and Spain are its top importers (European Commission, 2017). In the Middle East, alternative natural gas suppliers to the EU, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, offer considerable competition to Russia but are constrained by the current Syrian

government whose sovereign territory provides the most feasible option through which alternative gas pipelines can be routed through to Europe (Guner and Koc, 2017). Under President Bashar al-Assad's leadership, Syria remains steadfast as Russia's key ally in the region and thus effectively stalling the routing of gas pipelines by alternative suppliers, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in the Middle East. It acts as a gatekeeper into Europe in this context, a role that is crucial in Russia's strategy to maintain Europe's dependence on its gas supply. But there are grander ambitions at play for Putin's Russia and Syria is not alone in what could be its grand strategy yet to significantly undermine the U.S.'s hegemonic role in the Middle East.

Turkey is the other gatekeeper to Europe from the Middle East. It is also part of a politico-military alliance with the U.S. through its shared membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) which has successfully managed to contain Russia's geopolitical influence since the end of World War II (WWII). Turkey also hosts and shares its Incirlik airbase with U.S. troops, including other military assets. From Turkey's perspective, maintaining cordial bilateral relations with its NATO partners and Russia is crucial to its strategic security and economic interests given its geopolitical significance as a bridge between the Middle East and Europe to the West, and Asia to the East.

In late September 2015, with President Assad's armed forces close to the brink of defeat, Russia finally stepped out of its proxy's shadow to engage in direct military actions on the ground in defence of the Assad government. While Russia joined the U.S.-led alliance against the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS), there were allegations by Turkey, which were reiterated by NATO, that Russia was in fact selectively targeting anti-Assad rebel groups such as the Free Syrian Army (FRA) which harmed more civilians in Hama, Homs and Idlib in its military offensives than

their ISIS adversaries. On October 3, Russia violated Turkish airspace twice and was warned by NATO after it held an emergency meeting on October 5. A day after NATO held the meeting, Russia blatantly ignored the warning and violated Turkish airspace for the third time. On October 16, amid all the diplomatic tensions, Russia persisted with its violation of Turkish airspace through a surveillance drone which was shot down by Turkey. Retaliatory moves against Russia by Turkey followed when it banned Russian access into Turkish airspace. This move impeded Russia's shipment of weapons to its proxies in Syria (NATO, 2015).

After eight months of counter-sanctions by Russia, an opportunity for reconciliation presented itself on the 15th of July 2016 when a failed military coup d'état was staged against President Erdogan and his government. Turkey was quick to allege U.S. involvement through the former close ally of the Turkish President and moderate Muslim cleric, Fethullah Gülen who has been in self-imposed exile in the United States. The U.S. of course denied any involvement. Amid the diplomatic turmoil, Russo-Turkish relations were refreshed almost immediately in August, culminating in reciprocal high-level visits between President Putin and President Erdogan. A new gas pipeline deal was signed. Closer bilateral cooperation commitments in military, economic and political spheres were pledged (BBC, 2016).

In 2017, the momentum took a surge when an alternative power alliance consisting of Russia, Turkey and Iran was formed as a parallel negotiation track on Syria. They appeared to be making better headway compared to the UN-led Geneva talks, effectively overshadowing the key role of the U.S. in these negotiations. This strategic alliance has the potential to be a formidable force with shared interests against U.S. hegemony in the region.

However, the troika weakened when parties could not effectively manage the overlapping and sometimes conflicting geopolitical interests in the region. For Turkey, securing its territorial integrity by diluting Kurdish domination and control along its borders is a higher priority than the defeat of ISIS. Another area of conflict lies in the different perspectives between Russia and Turkey on whether President Assad should remain in a post-war Syrian government. Iran's political ambition to have a larger influence over the governance of Syria after the war as a means of expanding its reach closer to its traditional rival of the state of Israel may be tantamount to a zero-sum game with Russia and Turkey, as they each compete for a strategic stake in a new Syria.

Some political analysts such as George Friedman postulate that Russia's grand emergence into the Middle East war theater in September 2015, almost a decade after the war in Georgia, is a superficial show of military might which serves two broad purposes (Friedman, 2017a). One is to rouse patriotic sentiments at home in the face of a struggling Russian economy since the fall of oil prices in 2014 which Russia has not fully recovered from. The other is to showcase its military prowess to other regional powers, such as those in NATO and others in the region, that it remains a great regional power to be reckoned with. For Turkey, and in particular President Erdogan, the failed military coup d'état provided a rude awakening on the possibilities of losing his leadership in Turkey, and by extension, the power and influence to steer Turkey towards its own geopolitical ambitions in the region. It highlighted the imperative for Turkey to diversify its strategic alliances beyond NATO, pivoting towards countries with existing or emerging regional power status in the Middle East.

Since the time Russia involved itself militarily in the Syrian war, a series of key events have unfolded in its bilateral relations with Turkey. It has overcome a serious diplomatic stand-off after the shooting down of one of its fighter jets alleged to have violated Turkish airspace. It has also engineered the coming together of the troika consisting of the three regional powers of Russia, Iran and Turkey which share a common interest of weakening U.S. hegemony in the Middle East. Schisms are appearing out of their conflicting interests and it is the country which will be most adept at managing these challenges that will come out victorious in expanding its strategic depth from which all other opportunities for political, military, diplomatic and economic gains are anticipated to flow.

The U.S. has however invested vast military, economic and diplomatic capital in the Middle East to simply hand over the reins of leadership to the emerging power structure of Russia, Turkey and Iran in this strategic region. While the withdrawal of its troops from the region may have been on its radar after the defeat of ISIS in 2017, the existential threat of escalated military aggression by Iran against Israel from the territory of its Syrian ally has never been so pronounced (Sukhov, 2018). A new power structure in the Middle East which is not friendly to U.S. interests contradicts its foreign policy objectives in the region, particularly when it places the security of its militarily dominant ally, Israel, under grave threat.

This thesis will explore the grand strategies of Russia, the U.S. and Turkey in the Middle East. It analyses the existence of a Russian grand strategy to position Turkey in playing a pivotal role sometime in the future to undermine U.S. hegemony in the Middle East, as it pursues consolidating its regional power status in this important region. Pitted against the challenges posed against U.S. interests by the Russo-Turkish alliance with Iran, the thesis will also examine U.S.'s strategy to

safeguard its security interests as it re-calibrates its strategic objectives in the Middle East. Finally, it explores Turkey's own grand strategy to become a powerful and influential major power in the region and how the Syrian war presents a rare window of opportunity to advance its national interests in mitigating the Kurdish threat along its southern border with Syria. The analysis of these three grand strategies will be prefaced by a brief insight into the scholarly debate on what constitutes a grand strategy to determine whether the chain of events which are unfolding in the Middle East are simply transactional events or whether they are part of a well-orchestrated set of grand strategies by Russia, the U.S. and Turkey for greater power and influence in the region.

1.1 Definition of 'Grand Strategy'

In analysing Russia, the U.S. and Turkey's grand strategies to shape the future power structure of the Middle East, it is important to understand the broadly accepted parameters which frame the definition of a 'grand strategy' in the field of international relations. In spite of the voluminous literature written on the subject of what really constitutes a grand strategy, it remains a grey area for scholars to agree on. According to Nina Silove (2018, pp. 31-32) the concept of 'grand strategy' should satisfy three conditions: (i) it must constitute the highest priorities of the state; (ii) it must be comprehensive in terms of the use of all the spheres of statecraft, namely military, diplomatic, political and economic; and (iii) its scope must be long-term. A grand strategy should also be composed by three theoretical frameworks: grand plan, grand principles and grand behaviour. These are not mutually exclusive

but provide the crucial constructs within which scholarly works on the subject can be critically analysed (Silove, 2018, p. 27).

According to Paul Kennedy (1991, p. 4) the scope of a grand strategy should extend over decades, even centuries, enveloping both times of peace and war. Andrei.P. Tsygankov (2011, p. 28), postulates that a Russian grand strategy was already in place when Putin rose to national leadership in 1999 – 2000. He adds that there are two distinct priority areas in this grand strategy which include Russia's resurgence as an independent power wielding global influence and its ability to exercise this influence over its former Soviet spaces. This is indeed logical as any grand strategy in the field of international relations must be state-centric and should possess some substantive level of perpetuity to supersede the transition of power between its leaders, varied leadership profiles and divergent partisan interests. This is based on the premise that a nation-state's core geopolitical agenda remains virtually constant over time. The definition of geopolitics in this context subscribes to that of George Friedman's clarification where (2017, p. 2):

Geopolitics explains and predicts how humans interact. The nation-state is the basis upon which human communities are organized today. Nation-states have imperatives – things that must be done to survive. They have capabilities – resources which help ensure survival. They have constraints – realities that cannot be overcome that set limits on what is possible. Without those limits, prediction would be impossible – without constraints, there would be no horizon.

1.2 Methodology

From Friedman's definition of geopolitics, the utility of conducting qualitative research and analysis of a country's grand strategy in light of its imperatives, capabilities and constraints becomes clearer.

This thesis thus analyses Russia, the U.S. and Turkey's grand strategies to shape the future power structure in the Middle East from this perspective. It seeks to understand how each country implements a grand strategy in the Middle East that integrates its military, diplomatic, political and economic capabilities in expanding its geopolitical interests and influence in the region – shaped as they are by its geopolitical imperatives – while seeking to overcome its constraints.

In Russia's grand strategy to constructively engage Turkey through a permutation of win-win bilateral cooperation initiatives in the military, economic and diplomatic spheres, it must be borne in mind that Turkey is a regional power of its own and has progressively built up its sphere of influence in the region, primarily as a power broker for peace in the Middle East. As such, its military strength cannot be underestimated nor its versatility in all spheres of statecraft to deflect or circumvent challenging geopolitical situations within NATO and in the region when these situations present themselves. Turkey has consolidated its strategic depth from a weaker nation-state bearing the scars of World War II (WWII) in pursuit of NATO security protection from Russia to a country which now stands toe-to-toe with this former superpower.

The U.S., on the other hand, has had an uncontested hegemony as the only superpower since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This has been gradually weakened as it faces a direct challenge by Russia on its hegemony in the most strategic of all war theaters – the Middle East. How will the U.S. adapt its foreign policy against the shifting goal posts in the region as its key NATO ally, Turkey, boldly tests the waters of its weakening dependence on the U.S. as a guarantor of its security by forging closer relations with Russia since August 2016? As Russia proactively seeks to entrench greater interdependence with Turkey through long-term investments in the areas of energy, military cooperation and a shared vision for greater political and military power in the Middle East, relative to the status quo of U.S. hegemony, the analysis of whether or not the U.S. faces an uphill battle to regain the support of Turkey to derail Russia's grand strategy in the region becomes all the more critical.

A similar qualitative analysis will be applied to Turkey to assess the existence of its own grand strategy of emulating the successes of the Ottoman Empire. President Erdogan has successfully won the referendum to amend certain parts of Turkey's constitution, most significant of which is the change from a parliamentary democracy to a presidential republic. This provides Erdogan sweeping new powers under its amended constitution to entrench his leadership position (BBC, 2017). Will this grand ambition of Turkey's President Erdogan find critical mass with Putin's own grand strategy where they can jointly agree to pull off their best military strategy yet in weakening U.S. hegemony in the Middle East? Or will Turkey and Russia's respective grand strategies clash with each other and undermine the capacity to diminish U.S.'s influence in the region? In mapping out the three countries of U.S., Russia and Turkey's geopolitical profiles (physical geography, imperatives, capabilities, constraints) against the

backdrop of the major geopolitical developments unfolding in the region, it would be useful to analyse and postulate on the best possible conditions (political, military, diplomatic, economic) that need to be present within and across the three countries in order for Putin's grand strategy to achieve its desired outcome.

In the qualitative analysis of the grand strategies of Russia, the U.S. and Turkey, the main sources included academic articles and books as well as official high-level government documents including those from international institutions which provided geopolitical insights regarding imperatives, constraints and capabilities. Given that the subject included major geopolitical events that were unfolding in real time at the time of writing, newspaper articles from reputable sources also featured prominently to provide greater currency in the qualitative analysis. The information obtained from the varied sources highlighting, *inter alia*, key significant events for Russia, the U.S. and Turkey were not analysed in isolation. These were chronologically integrated to throw up the key cross-cutting issues for a more comprehensive analysis and understanding of the complex nature of these events and ultimately, how the three grand strategies, may directly or indirectly, affect and influence each other.

The thesis is divided into six chapters and will include three core chapters on the grand strategies of Russia, the U.S. and Turkey in the Middle East. Chapter One has covered an overview of the geopolitical interplay among the key players of Russia, the U.S. and Turkey in the Middle East during the Syrian war and how the shift in the foreign policy priorities of Turkey from its NATO ally of the U.S. in the Middle East to Russia since 2016 has the enormous potential to alter the balance of power against U.S. hegemony in the region.

Chapter Two will provide a review of the literature focusing on the foreign policy perspectives of the three countries in the Middle East as well as their views of the world. It highlights the gaps which remain to be explored and analysed as shifts in the foreign policies of the three countries manifest into newer frontiers in the analysis of international relations in the conduct of contemporary diplomacy.

In the ensuing three core chapters, Chapter Three focuses on Russia's grand strategy in the Middle East. It sets the tone for the comparative analysis against the U.S.'s grand strategy in Chapter Four to maintain its hegemony in the region until the emergence of a new indigenous power structure which is not hostile to its interests. Chapter Five explores Turkey's own grand strategy in the Middle East and how its closer relations with Russia in the economic, military and diplomatic spheres are reshaping its geopolitical imperatives as more aligned to Russia compared to its traditional ally of the U.S. Finally, Chapter Six explores the way forward for each country as the three grand strategies are analysed against the key cross-cutting issues which would have wider implications on the maintenance (or otherwise) of U.S. hegemony in the Middle East. It highlights the pivotal role which Turkey plays in the successful achievement of both Russia and the U.S.'s grand strategies in the region and how Turkey is strategically leveraging itself in its kingmaker role to promote its own grand ambitions to become a major power in the Middle East.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Who controls the food supply controls the people; who controls the energy can control whole continents; who controls money can control the world.

— *Henry. A. Kissinger*

Since the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991, several analysts have postulated on the domestic and foreign policies which the Russian Federation will adopt to try to reel itself back to its former glory as a global superpower. Russia was the only country after WWII which posed any significant challenge against the U.S. and the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 paved the way for the U.S. to achieve and maintain its strategic objective of global hegemony. The U.S.'s hegemony in the Middle East has come under threat since 2001 as revisionist countries aspire, as individual nation States or in collaboration with like-minded countries, to unseat U.S. hegemony and reform the security architecture of this most significant war theater. When Russia launched direct military actions allegedly against the ISIS militia during the Syria war in September 2015, it marked a significant shift in its foreign policy in the Middle East where Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad is his staunchest ally. Syria also hosts Russia's military assets on its air base in Latakia as well as its naval base in Tartus. Turkey, as a traditional ally of both the U.S. and Russia, and an influential regional power in the Middle East, is uniquely positioned as a fulcrum point for these two powers as they wrestle for regional hegemony in the Middle East and greater global influence. Turkey is, however, not a passive actor, but rather has its own strategy to pursue its regional power ambitions to skew the rivalry between Russia and the U.S. in its favour.

Realists authors such as Luca Ratti (2009, p. 399) observe that Russia's foreign and military policies in the post-Cold War period reflect its offensive strategies to seek material gains in both the economic and military spheres to progressively recover its superpower status. These strategies are pursued either on its own or with the support of countries who similarly contest the current unipolar global system led by the U.S.

As observed by Spyridon Plakoudas (2015), Putin's geostrategic advances since September 2015 primarily constitute an attempt to restore Russia's superpower status in the 21st century. In fact, the degree of political and economic investment towards this goal has been such that it has abolished the feasibility of the option of standing down.

Steven Covington's (2015, p. 4) posits that Putin has modified Russia's strategy from entering into the European security system to instead divide, conquer and wield influence, seeking to establish new interaction rules with its European neighbours. He further states that Russia believes NATO and other western alliances are working in tandem to permanently undermine Russia's superpower ambitions, blocking it from ever again rising to its former glory.

However, despite this containment strategy on the part of NATO and EU actors, it is unlikely that Russia will abandon the strengthening of its conventional military power as a key tool of statecraft in a post-Cold War Russia (Renz, 2016, p.4). Especially since Russia is aware that U.S. hegemonic exceptionalism is only historically relative and cannot be sustained indefinitely (Layne, 2006). There is, however, an important aspect to U.S's global power: the length of time its hegemony endures depends on U.S.'s practices of self-restraint in the wielding

of its powers abroad. Self-restraint is essential in the extent to which the U.S. might make second-tier countries feel insecure and threatened by an overpowering unipole, whose actions are driven mainly by selfish rather than global interests. Such actions are likely to propel these countries to mobilize their collective resources to change the status quo (Layne, 2006).

As argued by Sener Arturk (2014, p. 20), second-tier regional powers forge alliances, not only to explore win-win situations in the economic, political and military spheres, but also to weaken U.S. hegemonic power in their respective regions and pave the way for their further advancement in the global hierarchy. Robert Keohane provides a deeper perspective where he argues that nation states can thrive much better under a non-hegemonic world system. He supports his theory by making a distinction between harmony and cooperation. A state of harmony can be likened to Adam Smith's invisible hand in the free market economic theory translated into the field of international relations, where each actor maximises its own selfish interests, which will lead to win-win situations for all. This is of course unrealistic and idealistic. He further argues that the world system thrives not on idealistic harmony but on cooperation in an imperfect world where countries, cognizant of their different strengths and limitations, come together to voluntarily adapt to an acceptable compromise. This leads to cooperation. In its absence, there is discord in the system (Keohane, 1984, pp. 49-64).

Jo Jakobsen's (2013) provides a critical perspective on Kenneth Waltz's neo-realist theory vis-à-vis the current state of play between Russia and U.S. geopolitics. He asserts that in a bipolar system, the two superpowers act as a check-and-balance system against each other. However, the anarchic system abhors a vacuum. Hence,

in the absence of the constant safeguarding and maintenance of one's arsenal of military and economic prowess, the weaker power would ultimately fall to allow the other to rise in the global hierarchy of power.

Where does the U.S. stand in this context? Former U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice summed up the concept of American realism quite succinctly when she said that,

We believe that our principles are the greatest source of our power. And we are led into the world as much by our moral ideas as by our material interests. It is for these reasons, and for many others, that America has always been, and will always be, not a status quo power, but a revolutionary power - a nation with New World eyes, that looks at change not as a threat to be feared, but as an opportunity to be seized. (U.S. State Department, 2007).

American unipolarity has defied many political strategists who predicted its non-sustainability and near demise (Wohlforth, 1999, pp. 37-41). U.S. unipolarity has been able to reproduce itself and so far avoid being challenged directly by the rise of second-tier nations in the global hierarchy of power. Wohlforth asserts that it is not so much the anarchic system that better explains the status quo of U.S. hegemony but the distribution and balancing of power (or lack thereof) from the next-in-line contenders such as Russia, China, Germany and Iran.

For example, some scholars defend the view that Russia's military aggression in Georgia, Ukraine and other countries in the Caucasus region over the last decade has been meted out in its defensive rather than offensive interests. These pursuits stem from defensive strategic intent to protect its interests against NATO, and by extension, the U.S.' expansionist policies in these spaces. The ongoing conflict and

hostility between the U.S. and Russia in the post-Cold War period has thus been characterized as a war of ideologies and values that is being fought on three fronts:

(i) selling democracy to post-Soviet states, namely via the EU, as a way to undermine Russian influence in the region; (ii) the EU's search for energy independence from Russian gas; and (iii) Euro-Atlantic institutional integration where NATO expansion towards Russia's near-abroad is seen to be maneuvered by the U.S. to maintain its hegemony in the geopolitical space surrounding Russia and as a way to contain its return to greater power status (Jackson, 2006). In this context, Jackson argues that an essential part of this strategy is that direct military competition between the two countries should be avoided at all costs.

Joseph. S. Nye (2014) has further contributed to this interpretation of the power competition between the U.S. and Russia by portraying Putin as a leader who flirts with both hard and soft power in advancing the enlargement of Russia's spheres of influence. Confronted with condemnation from across the globe on its annexation of Crimea, Putin made the normative argument that NATO's concerns about Ukraine ignore how the western allies used a similar course of action on Kosovo in the context of its secession from Serbia in 1999. Nye also asserts that Putin's military aggression stems from his insecurity with NATO mobilization of military troops and assets along Russia's borders, rather than being an unprovoked attack on its neighbours.

Dmitri Trenin (2009), offers an interesting perspective on this discourse. He advocates that Russia would be better off allowing the integration of its former Soviet states into Europe. The resources spent on promoting the shared history and ideologies which anchor what former President Medvedev referred to as "privileged

interests” in these sovereign states, would be better spent consolidating Russia’s influence and alliances towards Asia and the Pacific Rim countries. He further asserts that by relieving itself of its post-imperial burden, Russia will have the chance to morph from its former identity of being European-but-not-Western country to one that is Western-but-not-a-European country.

So where does Turkey fit into this jigsaw puzzle? Fiona Hill and Omer Tasopian (2006) provide a valuable clue on the nature of Turkey’s relations with Russia and the U.S. when they argue that Turkey, along with Russia, is marked by the West’s ‘politics of exclusion’. In other words, there is a common thread that seals Russia and Turkey’s growing proximity more than their mutual economic and political interests, which is their exclusion by the West, in the case of Russia by NATO, and Turkey by the EU. Turkey is a member of NATO but has yet to be admitted to the EU, although former members of the Soviet bloc, such as the Baltic States, are members of both. In this respect, Turkey can empathise with Russia’s isolation from both NATO (by default) and the EU. As the first Secretary General of NATO, Lord Hastings Ismay once stated on the three pillars of the founding of the alliance, these are “to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.” (Duffield et al., 2012, p. 300).

Neo-realist perspectives argue that powerful global players are naturally inclined to amass military, economic, technological and political capital to advance or defend their positions in the international hierarchy. However, realist approaches which focus on the study of hegemony cycles observe that the maintenance of hegemony, such as that which the U.S. has led for more than two decades, tend towards disequilibrium as second-tier states strategise and scramble for a rise in the power status in the global hierarchy (Wohlforth, 1999, pp. 35-37). Putin’s Russia has

pursued a strategy to increase Russia's power in the global hierarchy which combines the use of hard power – as in the case of Crimea – and soft power, via the projection of the image of a strong contemporary Russia on the rebound, which fuels nationalistic sentiments and strengthens his domestic base support. This is a personal agenda for Putin in ensuring that he remains in direct command of the ship to complete its chartered course to its final destination – reclaim Russia's seat at the superpowers' table. Under the argument of protecting its privileged interests in face of NATO expansionism in its near-abroad, Russia has tested international resistance to the expansion of its regional power in Ukraine when it annexed Crimea. No NATO member to date has provided an official military response that sends a strong message to Putin to stand down.

In enhancing bilateral relations with Turkey in 2016, Turkey stands out in the diverse membership of NATO as possessing the greatest strategic depth and sphere of influence within and outside of NATO, relative to Russian geopolitical interests. Its strategic geographical location bridging the Middle East and Europe provides Turkey with sovereign control over the Bosphorus choke point, a strategic maritime passage for Russia from the Black Sea through to the Sea of Marmara into the Aegean and the Mediterranean Sea (Friedman, 2017). Around the coastal areas of the Black Sea, Turkey is best strategically positioned to guarantee Russian naval fleet's unimpeded access to the Mediterranean Sea to its Tartus military base in Syria.

In 2016, Turkey blocked airspace access to Russia after repeated violations of its airspace by Russian jet fighters which affected Russian shipment of weapons to Syria. Turkey, cognizant of its strategic depth in the region, was not coy to use it

when pressured by the Russians. It will be in Russia's best interest to have an ally such as Turkey in the Middle East. As recent events have proven, both countries lost when they imposed escalated sanctions against each other after the event of October 2015. This is due to the high level of interdependence or complementarities in terms of, *inter alia*, tourism, energy, other trade in goods and services, military cooperation and diplomacy. For both countries, the best way forward is to work together on their shared interests, but the questions remain: how long can this collaboration last and what would be the likely outcomes?

Turkey is, however, at a very crucial and interesting crossroads in its history. As a NATO ally of the U.S. and host of the latter's military assets on its Incirlik air base, Turkey's geopolitical significance in the Middle East has reached unprecedented heights. Removing the vital Turkish component from U.S.'s hegemony equation in the Middle East will no doubt create a disequilibrium against the latter in favour of Russia in a zero-sum fashion. Caught in the crossfire between strained U.S.-Turkish relations after allegations of U.S. involvement in Turkey's failed military coup d'état in July 2016 amid targeted economic sanctions by Russia from December 2015, Turkey's reemergence from its ashes to kingmaker status in the Middle East is a rare opportunity which it can ill-afford to squander.

CHAPTER 3: RUSSIA'S GRAND STRATEGY TO UNSEAT U.S. HEGEMONY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century.

— *Vladimir Putin*

3.0 Introduction

In his annual address to the Russian Federal Assembly in 2005, President Vladimir Putin lamented the collapse of the Soviet Union as “a major geopolitical disaster of the century” (Putin, 2005). It also paved the way to his rise to lead the country as the Russian Federation’s second and fourth President in 2000 and 2008 respectively. Putin’s presidential election victory in March 2018 has ensured his rule until, at least, 2024. Over the years, Putin’s public statements, particularly those targeting his domestic audience, have predominantly focused on the urgency to resurrect Russia’s status as a key player in global affairs – to regain Russia’s seat at the great powers table. To better understand Russia’s view of the world under Putin, we can refer to the two core areas of Russia’s foreign policy: (i) protecting the integrity and further erosion of Russian borders; and (ii) creating enabling external environments to mitigate its domestic problems (Putin, 2005). These foreign policy goals have been expressed, namely, in Russia’s military actions in its near-abroad, notably in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, as well as in the forging of strategic alliances with as many countries as possible across the global divide for better market access conditions, in particular for its oil and arms exports. Framing Russia’s recent international behaviour in these two foreign policy goals provides a deeper insight into how Russia is striving to overcome the geopolitical constraints that hinder its recovery from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It also helps to

understand its defensive and offensive strategies in the Middle East and the Caucasus regions (Friedman, 2018).

To Putin's advantage, there is more room for manoeuvre in Russia's 'managed' democracy vis-a-vis its Western adversaries to implement Russia's long-term grand strategy towards restructuring the existing regional power architecture in the Middle East. However, the redrawing of Russia's borders after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, followed by the extensive loss of sovereign territory, have imposed more pressing geopolitical constraints. Some of the former Soviet republics have not only become independent states but have also joined the membership of NATO. Prominent among these are Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to the northwest which, by virtue of their membership in NATO, have effectively re-positioned NATO between Russia and the maritime access it once enjoyed to the Baltic Sea. To the south west, Georgia's aspirations to join NATO began in 2005 and created havoc in Europe during the Five Day War in 2008 when Russia militarily supported Abkhazia and South Ossetia - breakaway provinces seeking independence from Georgia (CNN 2018). When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, Ukraine was on the verge of joining the EU and a likely candidate for NATO membership thereafter (Jusufaj, 2015).

Against this backdrop, Syria's geographical position in the Middle East provides Russia with strategic maritime access to its only external naval base situated along the Mediterranean coastline in Tartus, northwest of Syria, and to the Hmeimim air base in Latakia to its north, both of which represent invaluable Russian military assets in the Middle East (Blank, 2016). With President Assad's heavy dependence on Russia's military, economic and political support, Syria is a necessary geopolitical risk for Putin's Russia.

In parallel with Syria, Turkey presents a high geopolitical opportunity in the Middle East for Russia. However, its condition as a U.S. ally inside NATO has meant that Turkey has been outside Russia's sphere of influence. Turkey hosts U.S. military assets, together with those of other NATO members, on its Incirlik military base. Moreover, standing between Russia's Tartus naval base and its Sevastopol naval base in Crimea, which is home to the Russian Black Sea Fleet, is Turkey's Bosphorus Strait. Under the Montreux Agreement, Turkey may impede access across the Bosphorus Strait in times of war which presents Turkey with strategic geopolitical capital (Morrison, 2008). However, as this thesis will show, recent developments have changed Turkey's positioning in the Middle East from its vulnerable status where Turkey sought NATO protection from Russia post-WWII, to a situation where it can now stand toe-to-toe with Russia and the U.S. in influencing a new regional power architecture in the Middle East.

Turkey has morphed into the role of a peace broker in the Middle East, mediating between actors such as Iran and the West, Israel and Syria, Hamas and Al-Fateh, including brokering a number of hostage crises. Its position of neutrality has been compromised in recent times with anti-Semitic comments against Israel and this shift in its position is an indicator that it believes that it has mustered sufficient political capital with countries in the Middle East to support Muslim countries in the region with anti-Israel positions in controversial situations such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Tokyay, 2017).

In April 2018, Turkey persisted with its military offensives against the Kurds alongside its borders in Manbij in Syria and in Sinjar in Iraq, which some analysts qualify as going beyond the original mandate of its Operation Olive Branch to neutralise the threats posed by the YPG along its border with Syria (Antonenko, 2018). This was a position that clashed with the U.S. which supports the YPG as

its proxies in the region. There are even signs that Turkey's military offensives in the Turkish-Iraqi borders against the Kurds may be supported by Russia and Iran in a mutually agreed position, derived from the April 2018 summit in Ankara, with the objective of disrupting U.S. arms supplies to its YPG proxies in Syria and undermine U.S. military presence in the area (Teoman, 2018).

Weighing Turkey's geopolitical assets and capabilities against Russia's imperatives and constraints in the region, it is clear how crucial it is for Russia to publicly test the boundaries of Turkey's limitations in the military, political and economic spheres. This was clearly manifested in how Russia hit Turkey with targeted economic sanctions after the airstrike incident in 2015. Russia is Turkey's key bilateral trade partner particularly in the areas of energy and tourism (Şimşek et al., 2017). The negative impacts on the Turkish economy prompted Turkey to seek rapprochement with Russia in an urgent bid to restore favourable bilateral relations when President Putin reached out to President Erdogan for high-level talks after the failed military coup d'état in July 2016.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. Firstly, it will provide a selective overview on Russia's engagements in the Middle East covering, *inter alia*, NATO's expansionist strategies alongside Russia's borders since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Secondly, it will cover Russia's interests and objectives in the Middle East focusing predominantly on the geopolitical constraints imposed by the limitations of its revised borders post-1991 and the imperatives which these create in Russia's foreign policy in the region in both its defensive and offensive interests. Thirdly, the section will analyse the strategies that have already been implemented,

and those that are still likely to be implemented towards the core thesis of the chapter which is that Russia is seeking an alignment of its geopolitical interests with Turkey's (in concert with other regional powers such as Iran and Syria) with the objective of undermining U.S. hegemony in the region. In the final analysis, the chapter will explore those specific conditions which need to be present to create an enabling environment that will provide Russia with the geopolitical toolkit to herald its ultimate rise as the most influential regional power in the Middle East.

3.1 Russia in the Middle East

Russia's historical engagement in the Middle East goes back centuries to the rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire and beyond. This section will, however, only cover Russia's recent engagement in the Middle East that is most relevant to analyse its grand strategy of aligning its geopolitical interests with Turkey, with the view to unseating U.S. hegemony in the region.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation was placed in a vulnerable position as former Soviet republics, without coercion and under their own volition, formally expressed their interests to join NATO (Joseph, 2014). Many sought NATO membership to seek protection under the principle of collective defence as per Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, whereby an attack on any of its members is deemed an attack on the whole NATO membership, soliciting an appropriate collective response (NATO, 2017). From Russia's perspective, the Middle East used to be its near-abroad, when it shared borders with Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The colossal erosion of its geopolitical assets due to the massive loss of territory,

population, natural resources and maritime borders in the Baltic, Caspian and Black Seas is indeed what Putin referred to as “a major geopolitical disaster of the century” (Putin, 2005). This triggered a major tectonic shift in Russia’s view of the world which, directly or otherwise, created geopolitical imperatives for its military offensives in its near-abroad and recently, in the Middle East. Figure 1 illustrates the redrawing of Russia’s borders post-Soviet Union collapse in 1991 (Wines, 2017).

Figure 1: Redrawing Russia’s borders post-Soviet Union collapse in 1991



Source: Jim McMahon in www.upfront.scholastic.com, 24 April, 2017.

From Russia’s perspective, its military intervention in the Five Day War in Georgia in 2008 and its annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 were direct responses to perceived threats against its territorial integrity through NATO expansionism along its borders. When Putin cited the Kosovo precedent to justify the cessation of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine, it was decried by international observers as illegal and endangering the existing international order (Jusufaj, 2015). The cessation of Kosovo from Serbia on February 17, 2008 whereby the people of

Kosovo exercised, through a democratic process and supported by the international community, their right to self-determination set an important legal precedent for Putin. This precedent would frame Russia's future defensive strategies around the Black Sea region, if and when NATO expansionism within Russia's near-abroad, such as Georgia and Ukraine, severely threaten its territorial integrity and its geopolitical interests.

For Russia, Ukraine is strategically located as a transit point of approximately 80% of Russian gas pipelines to Europe. In 2009 and again in 2014, Russian gas exports to Europe were used as a political tool when Russia disrupted supply to Europe over bilateral debt repayment issues with Ukraine (Kirby, 2014). Russia has been proactively exploring alternative gas pipeline routes away from Ukraine, via the Nord Route through Belarus as well as across the Black Sea through Bulgaria into Europe. For the latter, the EC has, however, cited that the Third Energy Package rule does not permit Russia to own both the infrastructure and the oil and gas that transit through an EU member state, Bulgaria, thereby disrupting Russia's alternative gas pipeline project across the Black Sea (EC, 2017).

Turkey, on the other hand, is not an EU member state and it presents the most viable alternative route for Russia, given its strategic gateway location, to reroute its gas pipelines away from the compromised Ukrainian pipelines to Europe. As a buy-in for Turkey, there is also great potential to become the Middle East's energy hub sourcing from other oil suppliers such as Israel, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Egypt to the European continent. As part of this project, the €11bn TurkStream project is well underway and around 15.75 billion cubic meters of gas are expected to be available via Turkey to southern European countries every year from late 2019. The TurkStream pipelines, which lie only about 100km away from Kiev, will permit

Russia's intended diversion of gas pipelines from Ukraine, and in the process consolidate the Russo-Turkish axis of power in the region. The interdependence of the two countries on the basis these major investments will be reinforced (Starr, 2017).

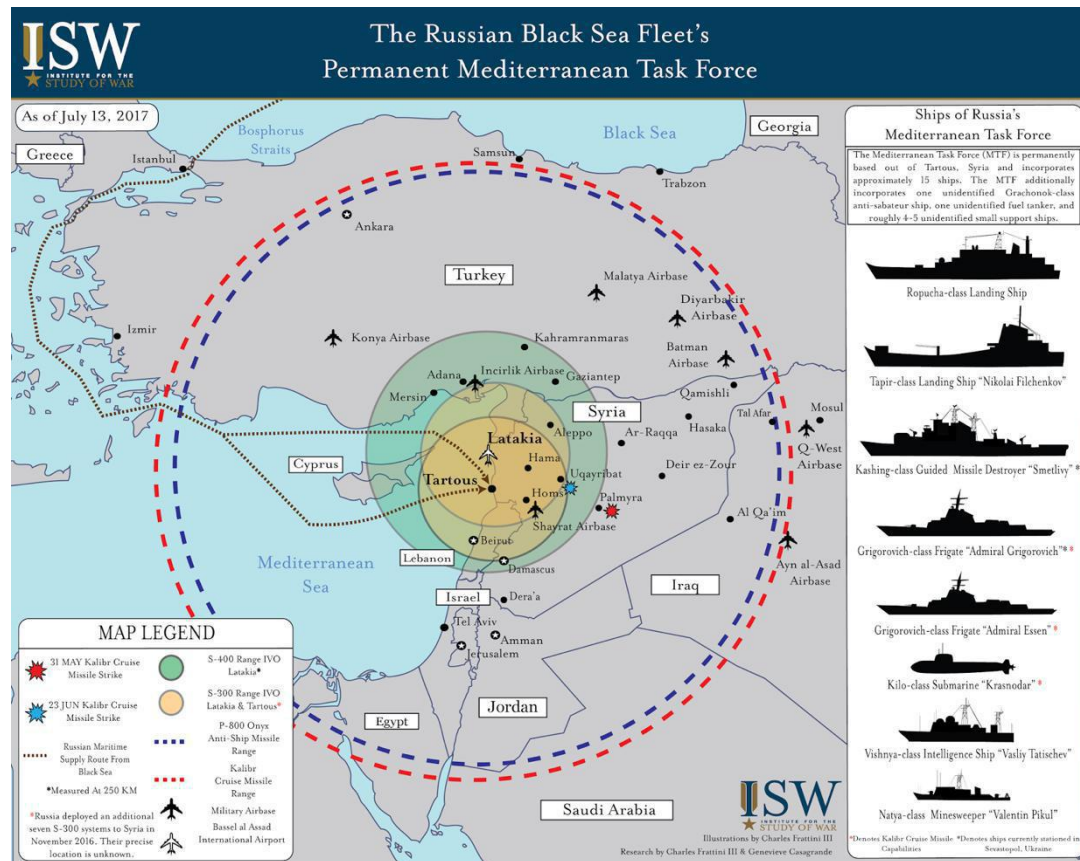
3.2 Russia's geopolitical interests and objectives in the Middle East

Russia's geopolitical interests and objectives in the Middle East have undergone a metamorphosis since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. From President Boris Yeltsin's arm's length approach with the region during his tenure, Putin has put the Middle East at the centre of his foreign policy interventions when he rose to power in 2000. From 2005 to 2007, Putin visited Turkey, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Russia also gained Observer status in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (Sladden et al., 2017). It is important to correlate the statement Putin delivered during his Federal Assembly address in 2005, where he lamented the fall of the Soviet Union as a geopolitical disaster of the century, with his extensive bilateral engagements in the Middle East immediately afterwards. Russia's geopolitical interests have military, economic and political dimensions which dovetail in a concomitant manner to achieve Russia's higher objectives in this region.

One of Russia's greatest priorities with its engagement in the Middle East, particularly under Putin's leadership, is to safeguard its military investments and assets. Namely, its only naval base outside of Russia and in the Mediterranean Sea, which is located in Tartus; as well as its Hmeimim air base in Latakia, Syria. The maintenance of President Assad's leadership, as a close ally of Russia, in a post-

Syria war government, proves essential to ensure continued Russian access to these assets.

Figure 2: Russia's Naval Base in Tartus and Air Base in Latakia, Syria



Source: Institute for the Study of War, 13 July, 2017.

Russia's bold annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 provides an insight into the *modus operandi* of a Russia under Putin when its geopolitical interests, assets and capabilities come under threat. In the same vein, one could say that Russia's interest in the Middle East includes, as a high priority, the protection of these two military assets in Syria. A change in Syria's leadership to one which is not friendly to Russian interests will surely put access to these assets under grave risk – a situation which Putin would not allow under his watch. As NATO pursues with its expansionist strategies around Russia's already contracted borders, these two

Russian military assets in Syria serve an important military objective to circumvent NATO's military objective to contain Russia and prevent it from increasing its sphere of influence and interests in its near-abroad and in the Middle East. In addition, if Russia is to consolidate its traditional ties with its allies in the Balkans, having unimpeded naval access to the Mediterranean Sea from its Tartus base in Syria, as well as closer proximity of its air base in Latakia, is necessary to provide these allies with ample confidence of Russian military support in times of need.

Russia's Tartus naval base and Hmeimim air base in Latakia are also integral to Turkey's role in its grand strategy in the Middle East, as Turkey is the host country of the critical Bosphorus Strait bridging the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. It is therefore crucial for Putin that Turkey's buy-in to Russia's grand strategy is mutually beneficial and sustainable over the long-term. The only way such a situation can be realised is to design this strategy in such a way that Turkey gains more from its alliance with Russia than from its NATO membership. There are many Turkish-NATO relationship gaps for Putin to explore to achieve this desirable Russo-Turkish equilibrium. Judging from the positive outcome of the latest trilateral meeting held in Ankara on April 4, 2018 between Russia, Turkey and Iran, Russia's strategy appears to be gaining momentum. Russia's military interventions in Syria from September 2015 onwards must therefore not be understood as an end in itself but a part of Russia's grander military strategy in the Middle East.

In 2009, President Assad refused to cooperate with Qatar on its initiative, unveiled in 2000, to allow its 1500km multi-billion dollar gas pipelines to run from Qatar's territory through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and under the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. This project would have loosened the noose around the EU's neck from its high dependence on Russian oil and gas exports (Guner and Koc, 2017).

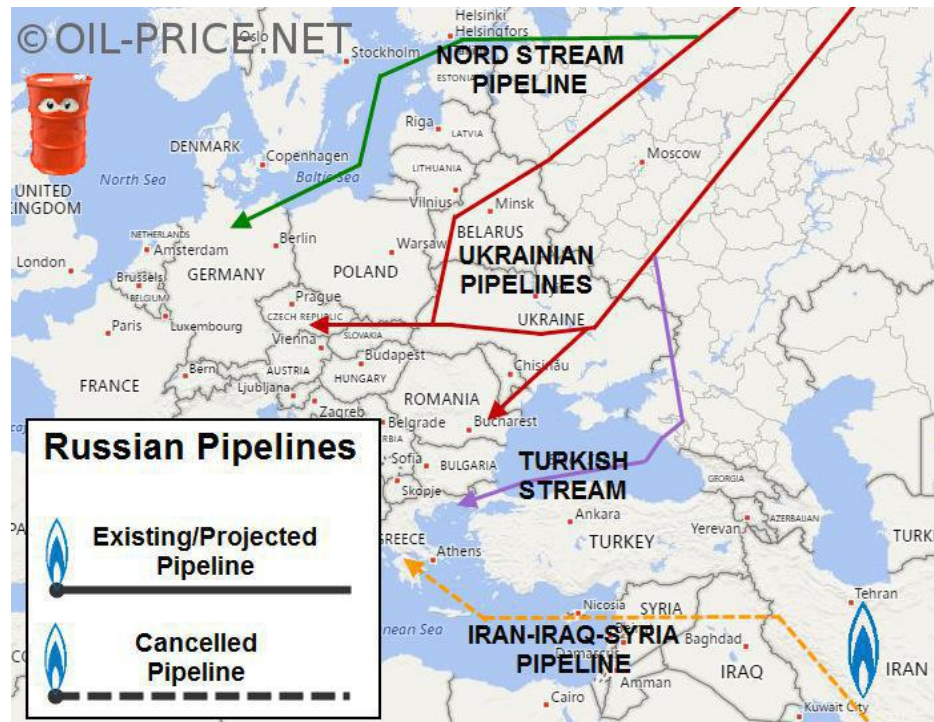
President Assad instead indicated that he will support Iranian oil gas pipelines going through Iraq, Syria and under the Mediterranean Sea through to Europe. Given Syria's close bilateral ties with Russia, this conveniently serves Russia's grand strategy in the Middle East and its strategic interest in maintaining Europe's dependence on Russian oil, or at least on Russia-influenced pipelines (Clark, 2016).

Putin's diplomatic offensive in the Middle East has also been focused on providing regional players with attractive alternatives to the U.S.-driven status quo. Russia also appears to be capitalising from the internal rifts within the alliances such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), NATO and the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in the Middle East (Sladden et al., 2017, pp. 5-8). In Turkey, Russia's close collaboration with the country's first nuclear plant was launched on 3 April 2018 at the Akkuyu station. Part of Turkey's long-term plan is to install three nuclear plants by 2030 that will supply 15% of its electricity needs (Dyck, 2018). Having close collaboration with Russia for Turkey's own indigenous nuclear industry is a major win-win for both countries. Russia's technical and hardware contributions into the project through public-private partnerships consolidate their interdependence; while the development of these nuclear capabilities for peaceful uses provides Turkey with the pathways towards its own indigenous nuclear industry. This is particularly significant given its grievances in areas such as its long-standing application for membership in the EU and the power asymmetry in its bilateral relationship with its most strategic NATO ally, the U.S.

In the international trade of natural gas to the European continent, which imports 69% of its gas needs from Russia, the EC, in support of Ukraine post-2014,

has been placing legal obstacles for Russia in its plan to re-route gas pipelines away from Kiev as a transit point into Europe.

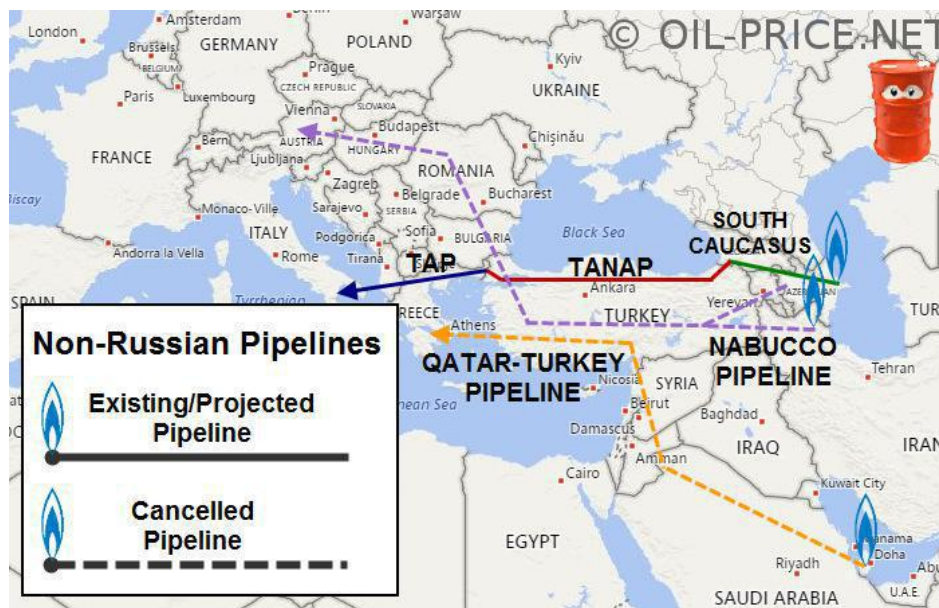
Figure 3: Russian gas pipelines through Ukraine to Europe



Source: <http://www.oil-price.net>, 1 March, 2017.

In so doing, the EC has cited Russia's contravention of its Third Energy Package by virtue of owning the infrastructure as well as the gas to be supplied across the Black Sea through Bulgaria into Europe. This has prompted Russia to look elsewhere other than Bulgaria to pursue its circumvention of Ukraine as a transit country for its gas into Europe. Turkey, as a non-EU member, appears particularly attractive in this context. Furthermore, Turkey itself stands to gain from the re-routing of Russian pipelines into Europe, by becoming an energy hub supplying gas from Russia and other countries in the Middle East to the EU (EC, 2017).

Figure 4: Non-Russian gas pipelines through Ukraine to Europe



Source: <http://www.oil-price.net>, 1 March, 2017.

Russia's political interests and objectives in the Middle East are basically two-fold: to weaken U.S. hegemony and emerge as the most influential major power in the region. Russia is aware that going at it alone in the Middle East will not be welcome in various quarters, such as Turkey and Iran, both of which wield substantial influence in its regional politics. Qatar, a traditional US ally which has been isolated from the GCC since June 2017 will likely be a target of the Russia-Turkey-Iran alliance. This might signal a realignment of regional powers through a coming together of these three countries which may have differing policies on Syria and ISIS but share a common high-level objective in the Middle East. That is, unseating U.S. hegemony through, *inter alia*, disrupting U.S.'s bilateral ties with allies in the region and in the process bolstering their own geopolitical standing in the Middle East (Semenov, 2018). With the U.S. preoccupation with domestic problems such as alleged Russian interference in its national elections, its lackadaisical approach towards strengthening its presence and influence in the Middle East is fueling Russia's grand strategy to unseat U.S. hegemony in the region.

3.3 Russia's strategies in the Middle East

Russia's strategies in the Middle East to supplant U.S. hegemony and strategically position itself as an influential major power in the region have so far been successful, judging from the positive outcomes of the recent trilateral meeting between President Putin, President Erdogan and President Rouhani in Ankara in April 2018. It appears that Russia's smart strategies in the region seek to selectively engage in closer relations with those countries and in strategic areas where the U.S. has become complacent.

3.3.1 Laying the foundation: 'Friend to all and foe to none' policy in the Middle East

A decade before Russia launched direct air strikes in Syria in support of President Assad in 2015, President Putin engaged in high-level bilateral visits in the Middle East spanning two years, laying the necessary groundwork to forge renewed strategic alliances in the region. His target countries included mutual adversaries, such as Iran and Israel, Turkey and Syria, as well as mutually allied countries in the GCC and OPEC. One can postulate that when Putin appealed, in his annual address to the Russian Federal Assembly in 2005, that they "consider last year's and this year's address to the Federal Assembly as a unified program of action, as our joint program for the next decade", he was referring to Russia's growing military, economic and political engagement in the Middle East to unseat U.S. hegemony in the region (Putin, 2005). Some political analysts, however, argued that there is no Russian grand strategy in place and that key geopolitical events in Russia's near-abroad and in the Middle East are merely transactional, random and focused on the short-term (Sladden et al., 2017, p.2). But this is probably an inadequate assumption

to hold, given the series of political and military gains in Russia's bag since its annexation of Crimea, the launching of its military actions in Syria beginning on 30 November 2015, and the emerging regional security architecture with Turkey and Iran since 2016, which do not appear so *ad hoc* and random.

3.3.2 Defending Assad's leadership in Syria

For Putin, having President Assad at the helm of Syrian leadership is crucial in Russia's grand strategy to protect its military assets in the Middle East and to continue the execution of the other parts of its strategy, at least with the other key players in the region of Turkey, Iran, Egypt and Israel. In 2016, the State Duma ratified the extension of its lease of the Syrian Tartus naval base for another 49 years, renewable thereafter, which signals Russia's continued heavy investment into protecting Assad's leadership during the Syrian civil war as core to its grand strategy (Blank, 2016). Iran's missile attacks against Israel soon after the U.S.'s withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran puts Russia under the spotlight as an influential power over Iran, given their shared interests as Syria's ally in the Middle East. In May 2018, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu held high-level meetings with President Putin during the Victory Day celebrations in Moscow in what looks like an emerging role for Russia as a peace broker in the Middle East (Sukhov, 2018).

3.3.3 Fortifying Turkey and Iran's strategic depth in the Middle East vis-à-vis U.S.-Israeli alliance

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's role as a major power that needed to be consulted on issues of global implications diminished – bar its veto power at the UN Security Council. It is therefore no secret that Putin strives hard for Russia to regain

its great power status that demands the respect of the international community and is not overlooked during consultation over matters that have global impact and are of global significance. In asserting this position in the Middle East, Putin is cognizant of the fact that he cannot do it alone as an outsider. His only staunch ally, President Assad, is under siege from both ISIS and Syria's adversaries, both state-sponsored and via their proxies in the region. As such, Putin will need strong key powers in the region that are not close allies of the U.S. to give his ambitions in the Middle East validity and a justifiable mandate. Turkey and Iran have been identified as sharing mutually beneficial geopolitical interests and objectives in the region with Russia and that axis of power has been identified as a potential emerging power-sharing arrangement in the Middle East to fill the vacuum being gradually vacated by the U.S (Sukhov, 2018). Will the U.S. bounce back to reclaim its crucible of power in the Middle East or will it prefer NATO powers to take the reins in this theater in their backyard?

Even if the U.S. will indeed bounce back to consolidating its power as a regional hegemon in the Middle East, Russia has been tirelessly devoting its negotiating capital to consolidate its sphere of influence through its own axis of power with Turkey, Iran and Syria, if all goes according to its grand plan. Turkey's €11 billion TurkStream is set to become operational in late 2019 (Starr, 2017). This investment alone puts Turkey and Russia at the pinnacle of the global energy market and increasing their dominance in the strategic markets of Europe and the Middle East.

With respect to Iran, Russia is also collaborating with Iran and India on the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The INSTC provides a cheaper alternative trade route to the maritime trade route from South Asia to the Mediterranean Sea through the Suez canal to the Atlantic ocean. Including Iran in

the INSTC elevates Iran's geopolitical standing from its current isolation by the Western powers, which puts the U.S. in a weaker position to impose economic sanctions which are targeted and effective, as is the situation with Iran's prevailing limited options (Altstadt, 2017).

Figure 5: The International North South Transport Corridor



Source: <http://www.indiawrites.org>, 19 August, 2015.

By empowering Turkey and Iran, which have similarly suffered, one way or other, from the arm's length relations by Western powers, Putin has gained the support of these two countries to wage their diplomatic war against the U.S. in weakening its hegemony in the Middle East.

3.3.4 Weaker NATO means a subdued NATO expansionist strategy in Russia's near-abroad

One cannot talk about Russia's strategies in the Middle East without dealing with NATO expansionism in its near-abroad. Protecting Russia's territorial integrity is one of the two core areas of Putin's foreign policy and NATO's encroaching expansionism towards Russia's already shrunk borders has, many a time, proven disastrous to the maintenance of peace and security in what are Russia's spheres of

influence. In 2008, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev claimed that NATO expansionism in Russia's near-abroad would have continued unabated "if Russia had not invaded Georgia to defend a rebel region." (Dyomkin, 2011). In retrospect, had the Five Day War been successful for Georgia, it would have facilitated more former Soviet republics joining NATO and could mean an even worse geopolitical disaster than 1991 for Russia. In 2018, in another move to weaken NATO expansionism in Ukraine, President Putin opened a new bridge in Crimea which strengthens Russia's military presence and trade infrastructure in Sevastopol (Taman, 2018).

3.3.5 An agitated Israel and weak U.S. support in the Middle East

With an emerging regional power architecture in the Middle East led by Russia, Turkey and Iran, one can safely assume that the Palestinian question is at the forefront of at least the two countries of Iran and Turkey. Turkey's recent comments against Israel relating to the recognition of Jerusalem by the U.S. as its capital compromises Turkey's previous role as a neutral mediator in the peace talks. Iran, of course, already holds extremist views against Israel which leaves Russia as the only power broker, one that is without any substantial geopolitical baggage with Israel – at least for now. On May 4, 2018, President Putin held high-level meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu in Moscow during Victory Day parade celebrations. With Putin's power alliance with Turkey and Iran in the Middle East, is Putin leveraging himself as the emerging peace broker? (Sukhov, 2018). Or at least a key power to be consulted on this issue in the region? President Erdogan has already been calling for the U.S. to be removed from being a power broker given its official recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the moving of its

embassy to its new location (Landler, 2017). But this is unlikely given the history of U.S. involvement in these talks over the past decades and the fact that it is the only country which is able to influence Israel towards a mutually acceptable solution for both the Israelis and Palestinians – something that Russia does not have the geopolitical capital to muster.

3.4 Way Forward: The Russian perspective

In order for Russia's grand strategy in the Middle East to work, namely in what concerns positioning Turkey as the pivotal force in weakening U.S. hegemony in the region and ensuring the rise of Russia as the most influential regional power, a set of specific conditions needs to be present.

These include establishing rejuvenated Russo-Turkish relations that are founded on the five principles of peaceful co-existence. These are mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; equality and cooperation for mutual benefit; and peaceful co-existence (Panda, 2014). Turkey's relations with the U.S. have, for a long time, been on an unequal footing, with the U.S. taking the higher ground. An alternative power relationship with Russia, based on these five principles of co-existence, could appear as more appealing to Turkey and ensure its loyalty and support to Russia and Iran as they charter a new regional power architecture in the Middle East.

In summary, there are four factors that can facilitate the fulfillment of Russia's grand strategy to unseat U.S. hegemony in the Middle East.

First, winning the trust and confidence of the major regional powers, such as Iran, Turkey and Egypt on the one hand, Israel on the other, and all the other countries in between. It is important for Russia to be seen as superior to the U.S at least in its broader engagement with the state actors in the region. Particularly, compared with less flexible power alliances that shape the U.S.'s regional foreign policy, Russia is adopting the friend to all and foe to none policy in the Middle East which provides it with an added advantage.

Second, Russia needs stability in global oil prices. The lessons of the Soviet Union collapse show that low international oil prices not only deprive the Russian economy of the revenues necessary to keep its economy afloat and functional in other military and diplomatic spheres of statecraft, but also contribute to domestic instability.

Third, Russia needs to keep Syrian President Assad in the leadership of Syria. Any potential change in Syria's leadership, to one which is not friendly to Russian interests, is a major threat to Russia's grand strategy in the Middle East.

Fourth, maintaining the nexus of its power alliance with Turkey and Iran provides Russia with the regional legitimacy to pursue a wider regional strategy, rather than acting alone with Syria. In addition, signing legally binding pacts on economic and military cooperation with Turkey and Iran provides stability based on their mutual interdependence. Focusing this interdependence on critical areas such as energy, arms and gas trade consolidates Russia's position further, including its desired role as peace broker in the Middle East.

Russia's most contentious red line position is retaining President Assad as Syria's leader. A change in leadership which is not tenable to Russia's geopolitical

interests and objectives in the region would be calamitous for its grand strategy to ascend as a great power in the Middle East. Russia has already achieved some of its key objectives and the challenge is in maintaining the momentum while working on the remaining conditions to become compliant with its grand strategy. In addition, it is important to keep a lid on selfish, nationalistic ambitions of either Russia, Turkey and Iran that might hinder their collective goal to become the new key regional players in the Middle East.

CHAPTER 4: U.S. HEGEMONY AND ITS GRAND STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

As long as I am President, the servicemen and women who defend our Nation will have the equipment, the resources, and the funding they need to secure our homeland, to respond to our enemies quickly and decisively, and, when necessary, to fight, to overpower, and to always, always, always win.

— *Donald. J. Trump*

4.0 Introduction

U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East post-WWII, from the Roosevelt period to the current Trump administration, has varied in response to the prevailing geopolitical events and circumstances across this timeline, but the ultimate objective has always remained the same: U.S. hegemony in global affairs, especially in the most significant of all war theaters around the globe – the Middle East. Indeed, the U.S. has been the most powerful country in the world when it rose to sole superpower status after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. A decade later, the events of 9/11 shook its foundation to the core as remnants of its foreign policy positions in the Middle East culminated in the 9/11 attacks on home soil (Shapiro 2016). In the ensuing Global War on Terror (GWOT) in countries including Afghanistan, Iraq and parts of northern Africa, Russia was no longer the largest bleep on the U.S.'s geopolitical radar.

But when Russia joined the fray in 2015 during the Syrian war, aligning itself with the U.S.-led coalition in the fight against ISIS and its networks, the U.S. saw itself being drawn into a complex web of clashing strategic interests with its allies and adversaries alike (Karlin, 2017, pp. 1-5). An alternative and more indigenous security architecture in the form of the Russia-Turkey-Iran led peace talks on Syria

has emerged. Their shared strategic interest for a stake in the spoils of war lurks underneath the well-crafted regional diplomacy efforts, making the already desolated Syria a battleground for proxy wars in the Middle East. Israel is drawn into the mix as U.S. ditched the Iran nuclear deal in 2018. This fueled Iran's retaliatory attacks against Israel from Syria and paved the path for Putin to wedge himself in between Israel and Iran for a possible compromise solution which has yet to unfold (Sukhov, 2018).

The reinforced Russia-Turkey alliance appears to be propping up obstacles to the U.S.'s defence strategies in the Middle East and they simply cannot be written off as random, transactional events. Turkey, a key U.S. ally and NATO member, has been proactively aligning its interests in the Middle East alongside Russia and Iran's which makes it an imperative for the U.S. to salvage its soured bilateral relations with Turkey before they regressed deeper into a geopolitical quagmire. This is quickly manifesting itself as Operation Olive Branch spills over into the Manbij province and the clash between U.S. and Turkey interests have become magnified with large concentrations of U.S. troops and their YPG allies based along the Syria-Turkey border (Spyer, 2018).

Figure 6: U.S. Forces in Syria



Source: Debka. www.debka.co.il, 11 January, 2018.

In May 2018, the U.S. Senate has passed a Defence Bill which would bar Turkey from purchasing F-35 jets from the U.S. for security reasons. Turkey signed a deal with Russia five months earlier in December 2017 to purchase Russian S-400 missiles which have been scheduled to be delivered in 2019. Ironically, these Russian missiles purchased by Turkey have been designed to shoot down U.S. military assets such as the F-35 jets which Turkey seeks to also purchase from the U.S (Zengerle, 2018).

This chapter is divided into four major sections and will begin with an overview of the U.S. foreign and security policies in the Middle East, focusing predominantly on the period after WWII. This includes the formation of NATO as the depository of U.S. interests away from its capital across the Atlantic, recognising its proximity to this strategic region which intersects between North Africa, Europe and Asia – the Middle East. The second section will explore the common threads that hold together the U.S.'s geopolitical interests and objectives in the region through their overall strategy to deter, deny and defeat their state adversaries (and non-state and hybrid organisations) in that order. Have these interests changed at all or remained basically the same albeit ranked differently along its priority continuum over the years? If some priorities have changed, what factors have contributed to these developments? Against this backdrop, the third section will examine the challenges and obstacles confronted by the U.S. as it applies its grand strategy in the Middle East; and how Russia, in particular, would view the vulnerabilities or schisms in the U.S. strategy as opportunities to weaken the U.S.'s global standing and by extension, its hegemony in the Middle East. In the final section, the focus will be narrowed down to how the U.S. could calibrate its *modus operandi* in the various contentious areas of interest in the Middle East to deter and deny, and if these strategies fail, to defeat, Russia's grand strategy to unseat its hegemony in the Middle East.

4.1 U.S. policy in the Middle East

U.S. foreign and defence policies in the Middle East broadly seek to preserve its unipolar status in global affairs since it was catapulted to this position in 1991 and to weaken any alternative major power or power alliance which is hostile to its national interests. Why is the Middle East so crucial to the U.S.'s security interests? There are basically three broad objectives that shape the U.S.'s grand strategy in the region. The first goal is securing a sustainable supply of affordable oil and gas imports from this region to bolster the U.S.'s own economic development. Energy dependence is a highly prioritised national security issue of any major importing country. The EU imports close to 70% of its energy needs and has been relentlessly exploring ways to reduce its dependence on Russian imports which consists of 40% of all of its energy imports (EC, 2017). The U.S. is also energy dependent. However, since the U.S. shale oil industry has discovered globally competitive ways to produce shale oil for export, production has soared (Krane, 2016). In 2016, the U.S. even exported shale oil to OPEC countries such as Kuwait, Jordan and UAE in the Middle East (U.S. Department of Energy, 2016).

Table 1: American gas flows to the Middle East (2016)

LNG exports from Sabine Pass Terminal to the Middle East				
Date of departure	Country of destination	Tanker name	Volume (MCF)	Price at export point (\$/mmbtu)
3/28/2016	UAE	Energy Atlantic	3,391,066	\$ 3.95
5/10/2016	Kuwait	Creole Spirit	3,609,595	\$ 3.12
7/18/2016	Jordan	Gaslog Greece	3,566,496	\$ 5.60
9/1/2016	Kuwait	SCF Melampus	3,458,203	\$ 5.32
9/11/2016	Jordan	Maran Gas Delphi	3,361,693	\$ 5.53

Source: U.S. Department of Energy, 19 December, 2016.

The second key strategic objective of the U.S. in the Middle East is protecting Israel, its strategic ally, from its adversaries in the Arab states and Iran. This position has never been more vocally expressed than under the Trump presidency. On December 6, 2017, the U.S. formally recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel (Landler, 2017). In May 2018, the U.S. formally opened its new embassy in Jerusalem in a bold move to provide formal recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel (Wootliff, 2017). These positions appear to be consistent with the adage that one cannot expect to achieve different results through pursuing the same strategies.

Iran is another regional power which the U.S. has proactively contained via economic and military sanctions to keep its nuclear capabilities from achieving nuclear power status for as long as it is possible. It serves both the purposes of protecting Israel as a nuclear Iran's potential first target as well as protect the U.S. from a possible attack from across the Atlantic (Baldran and Schanzer, 2018).

4.2 U.S. strategies and challenges in the Middle East

The U.S. released its 2018 National Security Strategy (NSS) in December 2017 and the 2018 National Defence Strategy (NDS) only a month later, in January 2018 (United States, 2017, pp. 1-40; 2018, pp. 1-14; 2015, pp. 1-17). The NDS has replaced the Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR), the last of which was released in 2014. As unclassified documents, they provide a cursory view into the issues that were discussed, debated and agreed upon behind closed doors. The NSS provides the President's overall vision on U.S.'s national security priorities. Based on the NSS, the Secretary of Defence delineates this vision into more detailed strategies which include but not limited to the tactical dimensions, budgetary and personnel

requirements and specific timelines. The NMS draws its focus from the NDS and delineates the document further into the operational dimension.

Notwithstanding their different perspectives, these documents frame the U.S.'s goals around the globe in six basic thematic areas. The first three relate to state adversaries: (i) deter; (ii) deny; and (iii) defeat. The remaining three relate to non-State Violent Extremist Organisations (VEOs): (iv) disrupt; (v) degrade and (vi) defeat. These objectives are pursued with the support of U.S. allies, such as those within NATO, to increase the probability of mission success (United States, 2015, pp. 7-8). These areas will be the focus of this section which will be narrowed to U.S.'s grand strategy in the Middle East as it applies to key contentious issues that the U.S. faces with its adversaries and allies alike in the region.

4.2.1 Change Syria's leadership

Changing Syria's leadership by helping topple President Assad was the U.S.'s initial objective when it led the alliance against ISIS during the Syrian war in 2014. After Russia joined the U.S.-led alliance to defeat ISIS in 2015, and given the power alliance that has been slowly developing between Russia and Iran, this objective has increasingly become more difficult to achieve. Russia has been shoring up support for President Assad's leadership in Damascus and protecting its military assets in Tartus and Latakia. Assad's support by both Russia and Iran makes a leadership change in Syria increasingly unlikely, which negatively affects the U.S.'s other objectives in the region, namely ensuring the protection of Israel and preventing Iranian expansionist strategies in Syria.

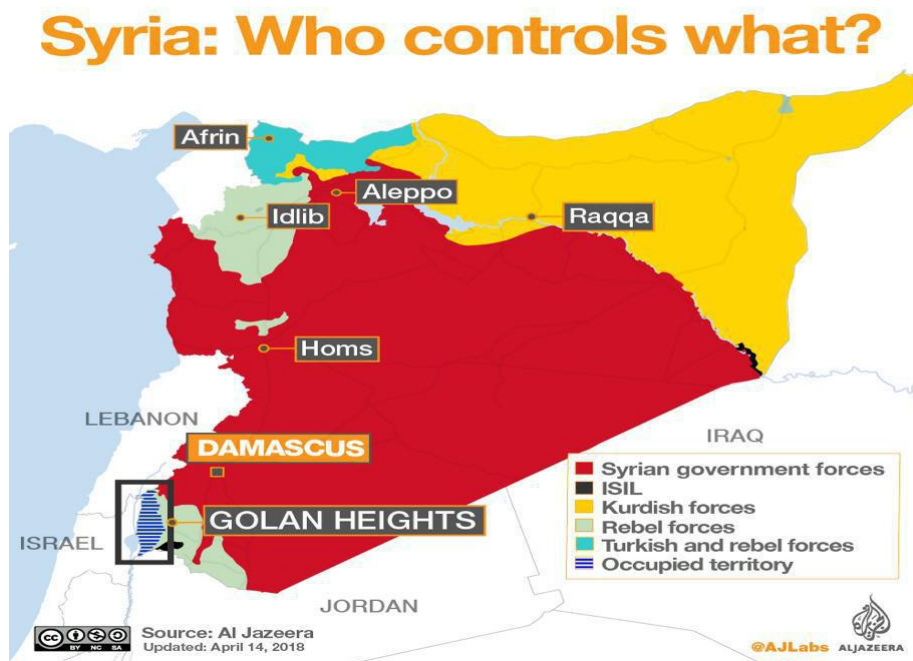
While the U.S.'s open justifications for its actions in Syria have been focused on combating the threat of ISIS and deterring the Assad regime from committing grave

human rights violations, these have also provided the moral justifications for its sporadic direct military offensives against the regime. A core feature of this strategy to unseat Assad from leadership has been arming, training and strengthening the architecture of a government-in-waiting in the event the Assad regime falls to ease the transition.

4.2.2 Protect and strengthen Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) in Manbij

Given that changing the Syrian leadership is becoming an increasingly less achievable goal given Russia and Iran's support to Assad, which has been further consolidated by Turkey joining the trilateral group leading the Syria talks, the alternative for the U.S. is to strengthen the SDF which, by extension, means the YPG and PYD in northern Syria.

Figure 7: Who controls what in Syria?



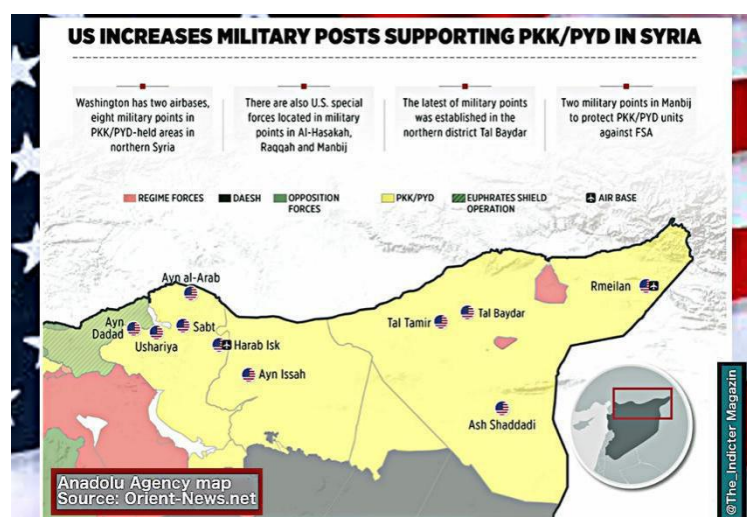
Source: Al Jazeera, 14 April 2018

A status report post-Operation Olive Branch in April 2018 on the fractions of control over Syria reveals that the Syrian Kurds (YPG) control about a third of Syria in the north eastern region currently under contest with Turkey (Anadolu Agency, 2018).

4.2.3 Extension of Turkey's Operation Olive Branch into Kurdish-controlled Manbij city

The U.S. strategy to deter a potential military aggression by Turkey against U.S.-backed proxies, the Syrian Kurdish militants based in Manbij, has been manifested in a series of diplomatic talks between the U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo and his Turkish counterpart, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, in early 2018 (Mylroie, 2018). On May 25, 2018, a bilateral Working Group agreed on a roadmap which prescribed the withdrawal of the YPG from the city of Manbij, leaving only the U.S. and Turkish military forces to oversee the security of the area (Hurriyet Daily News, 2018).

Figure 8: Increased U.S. military presence in Manbij



Source: Anadolu Agency, 20 July, 2017.

A bilateral meeting between Mike Pompeo and Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu was scheduled to take place on June 6 in Washington D.C. for endorsement. U.S. presence in northern Syria is concentrated in Manbij and there have been claims of increased military posts in the area throwing doubt on an earlier U.S. commitment to gradually withdraw from Syria after the defeat of ISIS in 2017 (Snell, 2018).

4.2.4 Maintaining Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME)

U.S.-Israeli relations have grown stronger since President Trump took up office in 2017. Maintaining Israel's QME is written into law under the United States-Israel Enhanced Security Cooperation Act of 2012 (U.S. Congress, 2012, p. 126). Israel has to date received \$134.7 billion in defence missiles and bilateral assistance and the two countries have signed a new 10-year Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on military aid which will increase it from \$30 billion to \$38 billion. The two countries exchange invaluable military and economic intelligence, bilateral military cooperation, arms trade and diplomatic and political support (Sharp, 2018, pp. 1-14). Israel's competitive edge in technological invention and innovation, in research and development, makes it an invaluable ally for the U.S. in the Middle East. It is also the only country which the U.S. has sold its superior F-35 fighter jets. The F-35 have new performance enhancing software which Israel does not want the U.S. to sell to Turkey in order to maintain its competitive edge. Turkey's deal with Russia to purchase S-400 surface-to-air missile launchers has created a security risk for the U.S. and the Senate has passed a Bill to exclude Turkey from the F-35 sales program (Zengerle, 2018).

Under the Trump presidency, the U.S. made a bold move to cement its relationship with Israel when it recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital and has

already opened its new embassy, which it moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in May 2018 (Wootliff, 2018). With so much invested into this bilateral relationship, the U.S. has a comparative advantage over any other country in the Middle East peace talks to influence Israel's position. With this in mind, Russia strategically wedged itself between Iran and Israel during a high-level meeting in Moscow after the military offensives between the two countries erupted soon after the U.S. pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal in 2018 (Sukhov, 2018). This elevates Russia's position as another power broker across the table from Israel and the U.S.

4.2.5 Denying Iran's ambitions to become a nuclear power

When President Trump pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear deal signed in 2015 between Iran, the five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) and the EU on May 8 2018, it was in the U.S.'s shared interest with Israel to contain Iran's ambitions to become a nuclear power. Only a week earlier, PM Netanyahu had publicly accused Iran of lying about complying with its commitments in the JCPOA. U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo confirmed that the files proved "beyond reasonable doubt" that Iran was not complying with its commitments under the 2015 deal and President Trump announced that the U.S. would revise the conditions to make them more stringent leaving no room for Iran to circumvent the new Agreement (BBC, 2018).

When Russia engineered the trilateral partnership with Turkey and Iran over the Syria talks, this set off alarm bells for both the U.S. and Israel on strong undercurrents indicating Iran's ambition to further expand its influence in Syria. This would have been part of Iran's strategy pursued during the closed-door negotiations between the three countries. The U.S. is cognizant that a weakened

Israel in the face of an Iran expanding its influence in the region will have direct negative repercussions on its own hegemony in the Middle East. With its crucial power broker role in the peace talks between Israel and Palestine, and the strong support for Israel during the Trump presidency, the U.S. may be paving the way to nudge Israel into a comfortable compromise with the Palestinians as it tries to reassert itself as the most influential power broker in the Middle East (and the world) by creating history in ultimately securing a peace deal during the Trump presidency. This is an important legacy that President Trump would want to leave behind as the 45th President of the United States.

4.3 Way Forward: Strengthening relations with Turkey to circumvent Russia's grand strategy in the Middle East

The earlier chapters have explored a grand strategy as being characterised by: (i) a long-term scope; (ii) the pursuit of high-level foreign policy objectives; and (iii) an all-encompassing approach using all the arsenal of statecraft – diplomatic, military and economic. They also explored the areas of Russo-Turkish relations focusing particularly from the timeline since the two countries re-calibrated their bilateral relations from August 2016 to determine whether Turkey has been strategically positioned by Russia in a series of win-win permutations of collaboration and cooperation initiatives to weaken U.S. hegemony in the Middle East. There is ample evidence to suggest the existence of a Russian grand strategy which seeks to place Turkey in a pivotal position to unseat U.S. hegemony in the Middle East.

This section will deal with the way forward for U.S. to circumvent Russia's grand strategy and maintain its position at the apex of the international system, and

in particular its hegemony in the Middle East. These positions are tabulated in summarised format in Table 2.

Table 2: U.S. strategy vis-a-vis Russia and Turkey positions in the Middle East

ISSUE	RUSSIA AND TURKEY POSITIONS	U.S. STRATEGY WAY FORWARD
1	Russia, Turkey and Iran asserting their leadership role and influence on Syria in the Middle East	
	Turkey is in a strategic position to weaken U.S. hegemony in the Middle East as NATO partner and key U.S. ally in the region. Having Turkey's support will destabilise the balance of power in Russia's favour. Offering Iran a stake in Syria's post-war regime will further destabilise the prevailing balance of power and boost Russia's power broker status with Israel in the region.	The U.S. is seeking to disrupt and weaken the trilateral partnership between Russia, Iran and Turkey. Its withdrawal from Iran's nuclear deal might be part of this strategy, as it forces Iran to return to a pre-2015 situation and to become the weakest partner out of the three. Iran's nuclear power ambitions are set back further.
2	Turkey's Operation Olive Branch extending further into Manbij where U.S. forces and other NATO allies (France and Britain) are now based. A potential clash between Turkey and its NATO allies in the strategically positioned city of Manbij	
	Russia compromised its interests to Turkey in Afrin and withdrew its troops. A military confrontation between Turkey and the U.S. will be advantageous to Russia and it adopts a wait-and-see approach.	<p>Deter and deny Turkey from a military offensive in Manbij. The presence of more NATO partners such as France and Britain supporting the SDF changes the dynamics from a bilateral clash between Turkish and U.S. interests.</p> <p>The provisionally agreed roadmap buys time for both sides until June 6 when parties will meet in Washington to endorse the plan. Manbij is critically important for U.S. interests. Currently, Kurdish control over the area accounts for almost a third of Syria. The SDF stands in line as an alternative government should Assad fall or U.S. strategy advances from deter and deny to defeat, security-related conditions permitting.</p> <p>Turkey relies on the assertion that PKK, YPG, PYD and other Kurdish offshoots are one and the same to justify its Operation Olive Branch. The U.S. could launch aggressive public information campaigns to highlight the differences between PKK and SDF to moderate or weaken Turkey's justifications for Operation Olive Branch into Manbij.</p> <p>The U.S. seeks to maintain close ties with SDF. Turkey's demands for the U.S. to sever ties with SDF should be tied to canceling its arms deals with Russia which pose serious threats to NATO security. In a deadlock situation where there is no mutually acceptable compromise between the parties, there is a</p>

		possibility of an accidental act of military aggression as Turkey proceeds with neutralising its Kurdish adversaries in this region bringing Turkish troops into direct confrontation with its NATO allies stationed in Manbij.
3	Russia is offering to be alternate peace broker with Israel and Iran, as military tension escalates between the two countries post-U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal. Iran disagrees with Russia for all foreign presence to withdraw from Syria (includes Iran, Hezbollah, U.S., France, Britain, Russia). The statement did not include Israel as occupier of the Golan Heights	
	It is important for Russia to be publicly seen and heard with other key global players such as Israel, China, India, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, EU, etc., especially after its exclusion from the G8 and isolation by the U.S. and EU via sanctions post-annexation of Crimea in 2014. The opportunity as alternate peace broker in peace talks in the Middle East is of high political value to Putin.	<p>The U.S. is seeking to undermine the trilateral partnership between Russia, Iran and Turkey by creating mistrust between the three countries. Israel can also be used to create a wedge between Russia and Iran by offering opportunity to Russia to ascend to power broker status in peace talks but drawing a compromise on Iran.</p> <p>Israel's position will closely reflect the U.S. position in its collaboration with Russia on Iran's expansionist strategies in Syria. This may have been a distant possibility during the Obama presidency – given the relations between President Obama and PM Netanyahu – but is increasingly becoming likely given the very close U.S.-Israeli relations under President Trump.</p>
4	U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear deal with the P5+1, on May 8, 2018	
	This situation fuels Russia's rise to power broker status between Israel and Iran, as the latter retaliates with military aggression against Israel from Syria. Iran, as a nuclear power in Russia's backyard, is not a comfortable position for Russia's security interests.	<p>The U.S. position to withdraw from the JCPOA had a lot to do with its core foreign policy to protect Israel. The inclusion of Iran by Russia in the trilateral partnership with Turkey made this all the more imperative and urgent. Israel provided the evidence of alleged non-compliance by Iran with the strict conditions of the JCPOA on May 1, 2018 and a week later on May 7, Trump announced U.S.'s withdrawal from the nuclear deal.</p> <p>The withdrawal is only a temporary process where the U.S. plans to revise the terms of the deal with even harsher and stricter conditions and deterrents for Iran. If the allegations by U.S. and Israel are factual, the withdrawal would further delay Iran's timeline to becoming a nuclear power.</p>
5	Soured U.S.-Turkish relations. Should the U.S. compromise on Turkey's demands to withdraw from its alliance with the SDF to arrest any further deterioration in their relations or will adopting such a weak position set a dangerous precedent on the balance of power on U.S.-Turkish future relations?	
	Russia withdrew its forces from Afrin so Turkey could launch its military offensives against the YPG. A clash between the U.S. and Turkey in Manbij would dovetail into its grand strategy to disrupt the balance of power in the region	The high-level meeting in Washington on June 6 provides the U.S. the platform to deter and deny Turkey what it probably does not want anyway – a military confrontation Turkey has little chance of winning. It also provides an opportunity to refresh its bilateral relations with Turkey. The U.S must consider a re-balancing of power with Turkey which is what

	under U.S. hegemony.	<p>Russia has offered Turkey, in principle, in all spheres of statecraft.</p> <p>The U.S. should agree to the plans in the roadmap to remove YPG from Manbij, but maintain its dominance and influence as one of the two NATO powers that will maintain the security of the city in the interim, until the civil war ends. In return, Turkey should cancel its S-400 missile deal with Russia due to security issues or accept that it cannot be part of the U.S.'s F-35 fighter jet program.</p> <p>Turkey needs to come out of this meeting with some political gains/capital to sell to its Executive and electorate back home. But the U.S. red lines should be that the U.S. remains in Manbij, with no de-escalation of troop capacity until the end of the Syrian war. Removing the YPG is a doable compromise because it can be permanent or temporary, depending on how Turkey upholds its side of the deal.</p>
6	Assad remaining as Syria's President	
	<p>This is a red line for Putin in the Syria talks led by Russia, Turkey and Iran. Military assets in Tartus and Hmeimim bases are key defensive interests in the region. Rejection by Assad of gas pipelines by alternative suppliers to Europe protects Russia's stranglehold on supply of oil and gas to Europe.</p>	<p>The U.S.'s goal is the removal of Assad from Syria's leadership. Assad is a close ally of Russia which joined the Syria war in September 2015 when Assad was on the brink of defeat. A change of leadership in Syria which is pro-Western will be a panacea to the challenges which the U.S. and, by extension its ally of Israel, face in the Middle East. Iran and Russia are Syria's closest allies where the latter has military bases. Toppling the Assad regime is the ideal option for U.S. interests but that can be compromised by the emerging alignment between Russia, Iran and Turkey in Syria talks.</p>

While there have been assertions of U.S.'s withdrawal from the Middle East after the defeat of ISIS in 2017, this is unlikely. The U.S. has invested a lot of economic, political and military resources in the region over the past decades to squander them after the defeat of ISIS, which, furthermore, is likely to re-emerge in the future. The U.S.'s position that its NATO partners should shoulder more financial responsibility in the running of the Alliance does not necessarily mean that the U.S. has de-prioritised the importance of NATO in its foreign policy. It is simply unthinkable. The U.S. position, however, underscores the fact that NATO has yet to

reach its maximum potential and if restrictions on financial commitments continue, adversaries such as Russia will manipulate these weak links to try imploding the Alliance from within. In the U.S. application of preventative diplomacy of using the initial strategies of deter and deny, if Turkey's seemingly firm position is really one of posturing, whereby Turkey lacks the military superiority to defeat its NATO allies in Manbij, there is a possibility of an accidental military confrontation which neither party wishes to be drawn into but cannot avoid once the other party initiates an act of military aggression, necessitating a proportionate military response in a lose-lose situation.

CHAPTER 5: TURKEY'S GRAND STRATEGY - MORE THAN JUST KINGMAKER IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

The world is bigger than five...It is neither rational nor conscientious or fair to confine the fate of all humanity to the political interests of five countries.

— *Recep Tayyip Erdogan*

5.1 Introduction

Against the backdrop of having, at the pinnacle of its history, regional dominance during the Ottoman period in the 15th and 16th centuries, Turkey's ambitions to, once again, become an influential major power in the Middle East are focused on leveraging its geopolitical capital to open up military, economic and diplomatic pathways to achieve this objective. From a weaker position after WWII, when it needed U.S. and NATO protection vis-à-vis the USSR, to the gradual unshackling of this dependence post-collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey has progressed militarily, economically and politically to stand as an equal with Russia in 2018, as they both advance their strategies for political clout in the region. Turkey and Russia have clashed many a time in history, particularly in the Russo-Turkish wars between the 16th and 20th centuries (Davies, 2016, pp. 243-248). These history lessons no doubt weigh heavily on both leaders' minds as they wager their country's ambitions in the Middle East through their new power alliance with Iran.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section will broadly cover Turkey in the Middle East within its intricate web of bilateral relations with other key actors in the region. This includes identifying the geopolitical assets which provide Turkey with negotiating capital in relation to Russia and the U.S., particularly over the Kurdish issue along its borders with Syria, Iran and Iraq. The

second section will build in greater detail on the issues highlighted earlier as it includes Turkey's strategic interests and objectives in the Middle East covering the political, economic and diplomatic dimensions. It will also discuss how U.S. hegemony in the region poses obstacles to the pursuit of Turkey's objectives providing the impetus for Turkey to align its interests with Russia. The third section will cover Turkey's strategies in the region with respect to how these interface with Russia's and U.S.'s strategies as already covered in the previous chapters. The fourth section will conclude with a summary of Turkey's interests and strategies in the Middle East and will reflect on their possible development. It will also focus on the potential development of Turkey's power alliance with Russia and Iran as well as that between Turkey and NATO. Furthermore, it will identify what can be Turkey's red line positions with respect to contentious issues with the U.S. and Russia that might influence its choice of predominantly aligning with one or the other.

5.2 Turkey in the Middle East

The physical geography of Turkey straddled between Russia and the Black Sea to the north; the Caucasus region and Asia to the northeast; the Mediterranean Sea and Europe to the west and north-west; and the Middle East to the south is a double-edged sword in its complex geopolitical profile. Turkey shares its borders with eight strategic players in the Middle East. These are Bulgaria and Greece in the EU to the west, the Caucasus countries of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan to the east and Syria, Iraq and Iran to the south in the Middle East. All of these eight countries also host important (existing and potential) gas pipeline routes to Europe from Russia to

the Black Sea and its competitors from other alternative routes from the Middle East and the Caucasus regions (EC, 2009, pp. 31-41).

Figure 9: Turkey's strategic geography in the Middle East



Source: Political Middle East, CIA World Factbook, 2018.

Turkey is also unique in that it is the only country which is a littoral state to both the Black Sea to the north and the Mediterranean Sea to its south. It is the host country of two strategic maritime choke points, the Bosphorus Strait, which is Russia's immediate maritime route from the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara, and the Dardanelles Strait, which completes the maritime route from the Sea of Marmara into the Aegean and the Mediterranean Sea. Notwithstanding other key geopolitical strengths, such as its strategic asset as a key U.S. ally in NATO, these factors alone position Turkey at the decisive fulcrum point of both Russia and the U.S.'s grand strategies in the Middle East.

5.3 Turkey's geopolitical interests and objectives in the Middle East

Turkey's geopolitical interests and objectives in the Middle East are as varied as its geopolitical profile. These interests include its offensive and defensive interests in its involvement in the Syrian war as they relate to key players, such as Russia, Syria, the U.S., NATO and Iran's own geopolitical agenda in the region.

5.3.1 The dynamics between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers'

Party (PKK)

The PKK was initially an insurgency movement founded in 1978 by a small group of university students led by Abdullah Öcalan. It was in protest against the Turkish government's non-recognition of its Kurdish population as a people having a distinct origin and historical links to their land, a common language and culture (Marcus, 2007, pp. 75-78). The PKK's insurgencies escalated as they pursued their socialist/nationalist ideologies for an independent state of Kurdistan. Öcalan fled to Syria after the 1980 military coup d'état where he lived until his expulsion by the Syrian government after pressure from Turkey in 1999. This political ideology has since evolved from calling for an independent state to one of democratic confederalism after the imprisonment of Abdullah Öcalan in 1998 as the PKK seeks greater recognition for greater legitimacy in the international community (Schoon, 2017, pp. 746-8).

The PKK influence in Turkey, which has seeped across its borders to Kurdish communities in both Syria and Iraq, remains one of Turkey's greatest threats. In Syria, the Kurdish main political party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military arm, the People's Defence Units (YPG) have three self-declared autonomous 'cantons' in Afrin in the west and Kobane and Hasaka in the east, close

to Syria's northern border with Turkey. Wedged across a sixty mile stretch in between are Turkish troops inside Syria, which have since August 2016 staved off any moves by the PYD/YPG to remove ISIS from this area and consolidate their presence along the Turkish-Syrian border (Clauson, 2016, pp. 2-5). In Erdogan's mind, the Turkish threat has remained high, regardless of how the PKK has transformed and re-branded its image over the years. Furthermore, the Kurdish threat to Turkey does not recognise national boundaries with its neighbours in Syria and Iraq. The PKK in Turkey and the PYD/YPG in Syria are one and the same, according to President Erdogan, and Turkey's strategy to neutralise this transnational threat has remained unchanged.

5.3.2 Turkey's relations with the Sunni and Shia majority Muslim countries in the Middle East

Like Syria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Turkey has a Sunni majority. From its secular position since President Atatürk founded the modern Republic in 1923, Turkey has become increasingly vocal, particularly in its pro-Muslim stance in the Israeli-Palestine peace talks. This position reflects its official position on this controversial matter (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

Turkey's new power alliance with Russia and Iran in the Syria talks has opened up new pathways to achieve its geopolitical ambitions as the preferred interlocutor and peace broker championing the interests of Muslim countries in the Middle East as it advances its own grand plans to expand its spheres of influence in the region (ibid.). However, Turkey's role as a broker in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been undermined by President Erdogan's public pro-Palestinian comments in 2017 and 2018. These reflect a subtle but bold shift in Turkey's foreign policy position to

choose a side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with Turkey strongly advocating for Palestinian interests. With Israel's geographical isolation from its Western allies in the Middle East, surrounded as it is by adversaries on all sides, Turkey supporting the Palestinian cause will simultaneously weaken Israel and reinforce Muslim support of Turkey as a powerful and influential great power in the region.

But Russia appears to be ahead of the game in its recent high-level talks with Netanyahu on containing Iran's military offensive from Syria (Sukhov, 2018). It will be interesting to see how Turkey and Russia attempt to balance their competing strategic approaches towards this common goal and still preserve their power alliance with Iran as they collaborate closely on delivering its main goal: unseating U.S. hegemony in the Middle East.

5.3.3 Turkey's strategic Bosphorus Strait and the Black Sea Force

Another high geopolitical interest for both Russia and the U.S. is Turkey's Bosphorus Strait which falls under the auspices of the Montreux Convention. Russia has a defensive interest to maintain its unobstructed access between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. With Turkey's NATO membership, the U.S. and NATO have offensive interests to leverage the Bosphorus Strait against Russia (Aydin, 2014, pp 383-7).

This has yet to materialise as Turkey possesses the veto power to restrict passage through the Bosphorus Strait to contain military aggression in the Black Sea basin. It used its veto power in the war in Georgia, not against Russia, but the U.S. as the latter attempted to provide humanitarian aid to Georgia by sea through the Bosphorus Strait (Morrison, 2008).

Figure 10: Turkey's strategic Bosphorus Strait



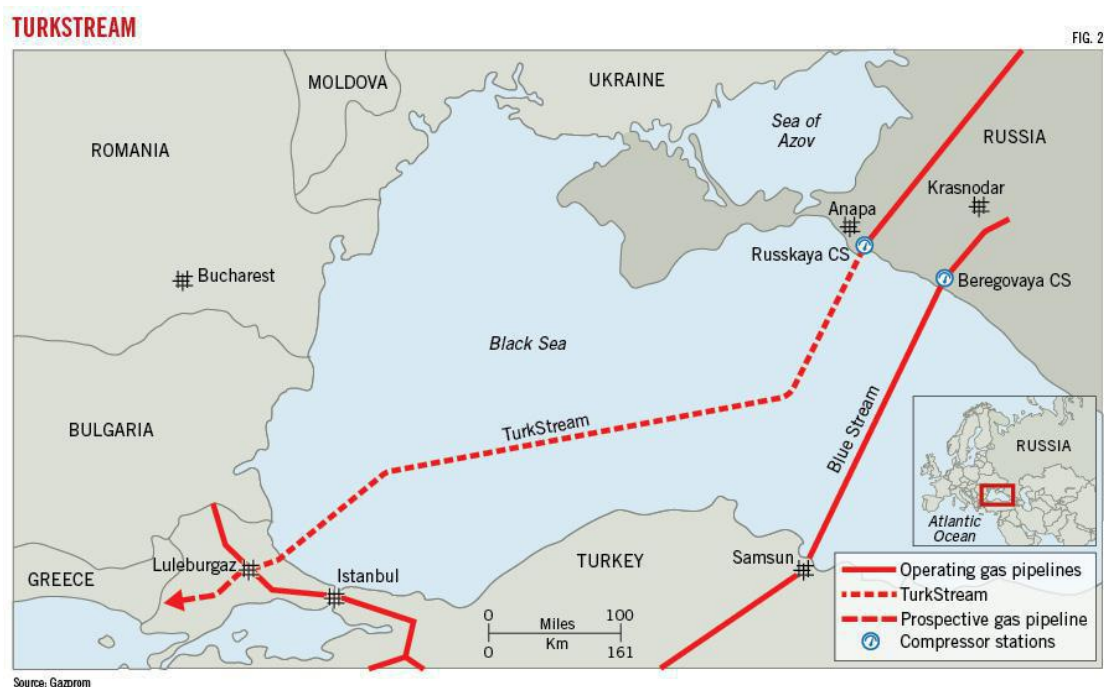
Source: AFP Graphic

5.3.4 Turkey as an energy hub in the Middle East

The dependence on Turkey's strategic location by its adversaries and allies alike might be capitalized by Turkey to become a major power in the Middle East. Oil, arms and gas are the power currencies in this region and Turkey has been busy forging new alliances with, *inter alia*, Russia, Iran, Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia to anchor itself as a major power in the region (Sladden et al., 2017). One of its greatest investments is in the energy sector with Russia, namely the TurkStream project which will allow Russia to bypass Ukraine, with its pro-western policies, as well as EU member Bulgaria, in the channelling of its gas supplies to Europe. The agreement on the TurkStream project was signed on October 10, 2016 with construction commencing on May 7, 2017 (Gazprom, 2018). Russia's gas exports have increased by almost 19% in 2017 compared to the previous year. Under this

project, Russia's gas pipelines run along more than 900km on the ocean floor of the Black Sea to submerge along 180km of Turkish terrain into Europe via the Mediterranean Sea (Austin, 2017). With the TurkStream project, Turkey also stands to gain by becoming an energy hub in the region, not just as a transit point. It is expected that Turkey will supply around 15.75 billion cubic meters of gas to southern European countries through either Bulgaria or Greece from late 2019 (Gazprom, 2018). Turkey and Russia are also working together on building Turkey's indigenous nuclear energy industry with the construction of its Akkuyu nuclear reactor in southern Turkey which bolsters the renewed Russo-Turkish alliance in the Middle East.

Figure 11: The TurkStream Project signed between Russia and Turkey in December 2017



Source: Smith, Christopher in Oil & Gas Journal, 2 April, 2018

5.4 Obstacles to Turkey's interests and objectives under U.S. hegemony in the Middle East

Russia's grand strategy to unseat U.S. hegemony in the Middle East accentuates Turkey's pivotal role as U.S.'s NATO ally to advance its own grand strategy in the region. Refocusing the lenses on Turkey, what obstacles does it confront in the Middle East where the prevailing U.S. hegemony obstructs its own grand strategy to become a key player in this region? These are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Obstacles faced by Turkey under U.S. hegemony in the Middle East

ISSUES	OBSTACLES POSED BY U.S. HEGEMONY	IMPETUS TO REALIGN FROM THE U.S. TO RUSSIA
1	The dynamics between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)	
	The defeat of ISIS in 2017 in Syria lowered its threat and the justification of U.S. presence in Syria. U.S.'s continued partnership with the YPG/PYD in the north east region of Syria close to Manbij, has raised suspicion and doubt by Turkey on whether the real intention of U.S. presence in Syria is to contain the expansion of Turkey's influence in the region, now that it has allied itself with Russia and Iran on the Syrian talks.	When Turkey launched its Operation Olive Branch into Afrin, Russia reluctantly provided its tacit support by withdrawing its troops from the area to avoid a confrontation. This provided Turkey with the flexibility to successfully launch its military offensives in Afrin and undermine any attempts by the YPG/PYD to consolidate its influence along the stretch of Turkey's border with Syria from the west to the east.
2	Turkey's relations with the Sunni and Shia majority Muslim countries in the Middle East and its ambitions to become a peace broker in the Middle East	
	Unlike Russia which has established diplomatic relations with all countries in the Middle East, the U.S. excludes Iran in its foreign policy and has suspended relations with Syria since the Syrian war. With the U.S.'s reinforced bilateral relations with Israel under the Trump presidency since 2017, Turkey's ambitions as peace broker in the Middle East position it on a different side of the table from the U.S. compared to the days when it espoused a more neutral position with regard to Israel and Palestine.	Russia's meeting with Israeli PM Netanyahu during Russia's V-Day celebrations in May 2018, after Iran's attacks against Israel, indicates that Russia is better placed than Turkey as peace broker. While this puts both Russia and the U.S. as front runners in brokering a peace agreement in the Israeli-Palestine peace talks, Russia's more neutral position in dealing with all countries in the region puts it in a better position for Turkey compared to the U.S.

3	Turkey, the Bosphorus Strait and the Black Sea Force	
	<p>The U.S. is a member of NATO with Turkey. Turkey is also a member of the Black Sea Force with Russia, together with the other riparian states of Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania and Ukraine. Turkey's national interests align more in maintaining the peace in the Black Sea region which may at times be compelled to do otherwise by the U.S. in NATO's offensive interests against Russia.</p>	<p>Russia has consolidated its alliance with Turkey in the Bosphorus Strait with its TurkStream project running through the Black Sea through Turkey and into southern Europe via the Mediterranean Sea. These investments consolidate the interdependence of the two countries providing greater stability in their bilateral relations as Turkey is incentivised to be resistant to U.S./NATO attempts to act against Russia's strategic interests in the Bosphorus basin.</p>
4	Turkey as an energy hub in the Middle East	
	<p>The EU is attempting to rival Turkey's potential energy hub status by investing in Bulgaria as a potential candidate which, if successful, will dilute Turkey's potential to assume that role via the TurkStream project. Turkey would regard the U.S. position as aligned with the EU, compared to Russia.</p>	<p>Turkey's potential to become an energy hub in the Middle East is becoming a reality with its partnership with Russia on the TurkStream project.</p> <p>Russia's massive investment will provide Turkey with first mover advantages as the energy hub of the Middle East, maximising its strategic geography bordering the Caucasus, Asia, Middle East and Europe.</p>
5	Syria war and the opportunity to re-stake its lost claims in Syria	
	<p>In 2018, the U.S. and Turkey remain the key states wielding great influence in northern Syria. As such, the U.S. continues to have military presence in these areas, supporting the PYD/YPG in the north eastern part of Syria, even after the defeat of ISIS in 2017. This poses tactical challenges to Turkey to pursue its objectives of expanding its sphere of influence into Syrian territory in a post-war Syria.</p>	<p>Turkey's alliance with Russia (and Iran) on the Syria talks provides some leverage to expand its sphere of influence along its borders with northern Syria as Russia provided tacit support for its Operation Olive Branch in Afrin. Turkey is willing to compromise on its initial position against Assad remaining as Syria's leader in anticipation of gains in other possible win-win areas with Russia and Iran.</p>

5.5 Turkey's grand strategy in the Middle East

Turkey's grand strategy to bolster its geopolitical clout in the Middle East is becoming increasingly aligned with Russia's own grand strategy focused on unseating U.S. hegemony in the region. Turkey is cognizant of the fact that the opportunities that have been opened up during the Syrian civil war have set the wheels in motion for revisionist powers to advance their interests and objectives.

President Erdogan, faced with a tidal wave of immigrants from Syria, struck a deal of €6 billion with the EC to minimise the spill-over across the EU border (Antypas and Yildiz, 2018). Turkey joined the U.S.-led alliance to defeat ISIS and while it held a firm position on ousting President Assad from Syria's leadership in the beginning, this has mellowed after the striking of its new power alliance with Russia and Iran.

5.5.1 Maintaining a balancing act between Russia and NATO interests

The Father of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, once said that, “[t]hose who are inclined to compromise never make a revolution” (Atatürk, n.d.). When the U.S. released a public statement that they would militarily and logistically support the establishment of a 30,000 strong border force consisting mostly of the Kurdish-led FSA along the Turkish-Syrian border, President Erdogan's responded with targeted military offensives in the Afrin, Idlib and Manbij provinces in Syria. Erdogan attacked the U.S. administration for supporting what it denominates as Kurdish terrorists along Turkey's borders, whose only common objective was to violate Turkey's territorial integrity and harm Turkish interests in the area (Daily Sabah, 2008). Operation Olive Branch was launched in January 2018 with the objective of removing Turkey's adversaries in ISIS and the PKK/PYD/YPD; the latter, according to Erdogan, are one and the same under different labels. Turkey later launched military offensives in Idlib and Manbij. Afrin was liberated from the Syrian YPG/PYD on March 2018. If Erdogan wanted to prove a point to the Kurdish forces on the strength and hardness of the Turkish army, he did it successfully with Operation Olive Branch.

But is the YPG assault by Turkey a red line for the U.S? The answer would be no. The ISIS threat has waned, at least for now, and the U.S. would not want to risk further damage to its relations with Turkey over the YPG. At the same time, the U.S. cannot risk losing face against the Turks, but there will be a flurry of activities through the diplomatic back channels to avoid a military confrontation close to U.S. military bases in Manbij towards the west of the Euphrates River (Spyer, 2018).

With regard to the trade deal with Russia on the purchase of S-400 missiles by Turkey, the U.S. have raised their serious concerns over the security risks that come with their incompatibility with NATO facilities and systems as well as with the access of Russian personnel to the Incirlik air base which Turkey shares with some of its NATO partners, including the U.S. (Sisk, 2016). There is no doubt that Turkey and Russia are both aware of these contentious issues and the question remains as to the logic behind Turkey's pressing ahead with the deal, well aware that the security and integrity of NATO assets on its military base will be exposed to possible Russian covert acts.

With the U.S. national election hacking allegations still fresh in their minds, is Turkey provocatively nudging NATO to voluntarily leave the Incirlik base? Turkey was earlier reported as having invited Russia to have military access to its Incirlik base after high-level talks between Erdogan and Putin in 2016 (Sisk, 2016). These were later toned down by both sides with Russia asserting that they do not need the Incirlik base, including the incompatibility of its facility with Russian military assets. Yet, the S-400 deal was signed in December 2017 and Erdogan was adamant that the purchase will go ahead as agreed with Russia. There have also been reports that U.S.

forces have scaled down their military assets at the Incirlik base and this in itself would be a quiet victory for Putin (Rempfer, 2018). It is likely that the U.S. will resort to other areas of statecraft, such as trade disincentives with Turkey in targeted areas, to manage Turkey's thriving relations with Russia. For Turkey, it would be important to maintain a lifeline to the U.S. and not cross the line to invite an isolationist approach by the U.S. The Russian threat, post-Soviet Union collapse, may have dissipated after 1991, but with Russia's increased military activity in the Middle East and the Caucasus regions at least since 2014, burning bridges with the U.S would not be recommended. Turkey should refrain from inciting further tensions on its relations with the U.S. in the short-term, as they work their way out of their worsening diplomatic relations.

5.5.2 Keep Russian and Iranian national ambitions checked in the Russia/Turkey/Iran power alliance on Syria

The Russia/Turkey/Iran alliance on Syria was borne out of the emerging power vacuum gradually left behind by the U.S. in the Middle East. There can be many political, military and economic benefits which Turkey can harness from such a power coalition. The existing arms, gas and energy trade pacts among the three countries put them in a position of strategic interdependence which, if maintained or strengthened further, provides them with the needed stability to position themselves at the apex of the Middle East's crucible of power, with possibly only Israel as the other notable major power. Putin has already positioned himself as the interlocutor between Israel and Iran during the recent alleged military attacks by the latter from Syrian territory (Sukhov, 2018).

Is it possible for both Russia and Turkey to be peace brokers in the Middle East between Israel and the Palestinians on the one hand; and Israel and Iran on the other?

Maybe not. Unless the two countries can agree to a mutual compromise to advance their collective political ambitions in the region as equals, according the other mutual respect, non-interference in each other's national affairs, non-violation of each other's territorial integrity and the other principles of peaceful co-existence that apply.

All three countries engage in arms, oil and gas deals with each other and are closely collaborating on opening up alternative trade routes which not only weaken the status quo powers' influence but make their interdependence a guarantee for more stability in their relations (Altstadt, 2017). This does not mean that they will not encounter challenges in their bilateral relations, but even when they do, these economic and political ties compel them to find a common ground to reset the equilibrium for better relations. A good example was the diplomatic stand-off between Russia and Turkey in 2015 which set them on different paths for a while but eventually their geopolitical interdependence in the economic, military and political spheres drew them back together in 2016.

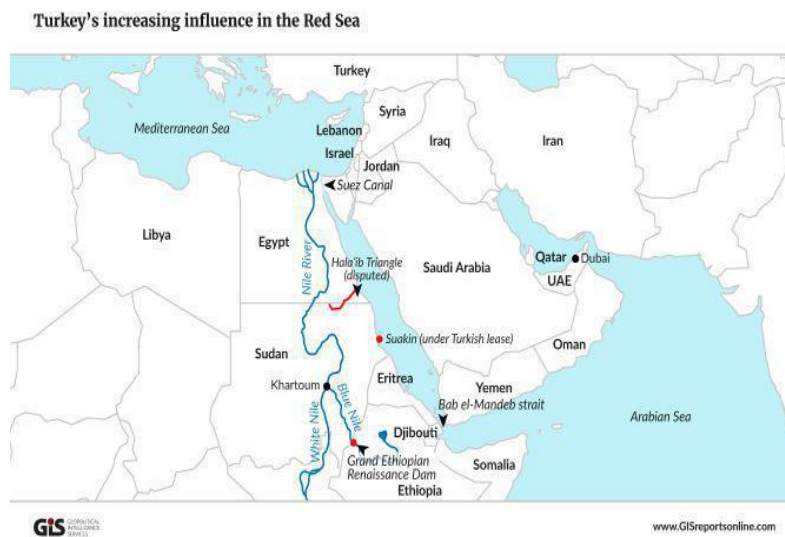
5.5.3 Securing strategic maritime choke points in the Middle East

In February 2018, Turkey signed a deal with Sudan to establish maritime logistics and tourism facilities on the former Ottoman-era Suakin port on the Red Sea. The island lies opposite from Mecca in Saudi Arabia which has significant cultural significance for the Turkish people.

It is possible that a naval base is also in the works in the signed pact with Sudan. This is also testament to Turkey's political ambitions to also secure this critical chokepoint in the Horn of Africa and expand its sphere of influence on two

of the eight key maritime choke points – the Bosphorus Strait and the Strait of Bab el-Mande between the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal (Brewster, 2018).

Figure 12: Former Ottoman-era Suakin port in Sudan leased to Turkey in 2017



Source: Geopolitical Intelligence Services, 2 March, 2018.

5.6 Way Forward: The Turkish perspective

The military aggression between Israel and Iran in May 2018 puts Russia in a very good position to act as interlocutor and power broker between Israel and Iran. Putin has wasted little time to assert this desired role by holding high-level meetings with Netanyahu during the Victory Day parade in Moscow (Sukhov, 2018). So where does Turkey stand in all this? What are its options if the conflict between Iran and Israel passes from being fought between their respective proxies in Syria to becoming a direct military confrontation? According to Friedman (quoted in Shapiro, 2018), the military aggression exchanged between Israel and Iran was a direct outcome of the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal which pushed Iran to wage a military strike unnecessarily risking a war of greater proportions erupting in the Middle East. In the context of a zero-sum game environment, Russia's asserted

ole as interlocutor between Israel and Iran overshadows Turkey's own ambitions in this area, especially when Erdogan has had more experience in the region compared to Putin.

It is likely that Erdogan is going to let this one slide for Putin as his higher priority lies with eliminating the Kurdish threats along the Syrian and Iraqi borders and the likelihood of squaring the circle with Russia when it stakes its claims in any of the Afrin, Idlib and Manbij provinces, singularly or even collectively as Syrian talks conclude. This should be a crowning moment for Erdogan if he can leave behind a lasting legacy for Turkish influence in Syria. In a way, Erdogan's strategy can be interpreted as an extension of Atatürk's own of going against the Allied powers post-WWI, regrouping his military strategies to reclaim the territories subjected to Greek control under the failed Treaty of Sevres signed on August 10, 1920 and that eventually led to Turkey's current borders, redrawn in the Treaty of Lausanne which was signed and ratified three years later on July 24, 1923 (Kaloudis, 2014).

From Erdogan's perspective, Turkey's strategic depth in the wake of the Syrian war is a once in a lifetime opportunity that must be prioritised above everything else. This objective is a red line position for Turkey. It is a must-have in its basket of gains during its negotiations with Russia and Iran as the other major powers in the alliance. Turkey's recent defiance of the U.S.'s opposition to the Turkish expansion of its military offensives beyond Afrin to now encompass also the Manbij province in Syria, together with its arms deal with Russia on S-400 missiles that pose a security threat to NATO interests, clearly show that Turkey is not backing off from its red line position now or in the future.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION – SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In the end, peace can be achieved only by hegemony or by balance of power.

— Henry A. Kissinger

6.0 Introduction

Russia has made great strides in the implementation of its foreign policy in the Middle East since President Putin announced in 2005 that Russia was ready to roll out its 10-year grand plan to make Russia a globally competitive power (Putin, 2005). A decade later, Russia launched its first military offensive in the Middle East as it joined the U.S.-led alliance to rid the region of ISIS. The question, however, is more than just whether or not Russia has a grand strategy to unseat U.S. hegemony in the Middle East; but whether Turkey, U.S. ally and NATO member, will play a pivotal role in this long-term objective. This thesis explored Russia, the U.S. and Turkey's grand strategies in the Middle East to achieve their objectives in the region. In this final chapter, these interests and objectives are summarised in tabulated format in Table 4.

6.1 A clash of grand strategies in the Middle East

Table 4: A clash of grand strategies in the Middle East

RUSSIA'S GRAND STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST		U.S.'s GRAND STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST	TURKEY'S GRAND STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST
1	Weaken U.S. hegemony in the Middle East by offering an alternative	Fully aware of Russia's strategies in the Middle East, the U.S. will strive to repair its relations with Turkey via diplomatic channels.	Turkey's support for Russia's Strategy would be guaranteed only if consistent with its own strategy to consolidate its

	regional power structure indigenous to the region through its Russia/Turkey/Iran power alliance on Syria.	Failing that, the option of weakening Turkey's relations with Russia via its NATO allies is also available. The EC, for instance, is strategising to weaken the energy hub initiative for Turkey via the TurkStream project by providing Bulgaria with the same opportunity as an energy hub for Europe on a parallel track. Nullifying the Iran nuclear deal and imposing even more stringent conditions will incapacitate Iran's future strategies for trade in arms deals and its energy/gas/trade route ambitions via the INSTC. Targeted strong economic sanctions by the U.S. announced by its Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in May 2018 will likely create devastating effects on the Iranian economy, to the U.S.'s advantage.	political clout in the region. If investing in closer economic and military cooperation leads to achieving one of its objectives of eliminating the Kurdish threat in the form of PKK/YPG/PYD along its border with Syria, then Turkey has shown that it is willing to compromise its alliance with the U.S. to achieve it.
2	Circumvent the EC's Third Party Package by providing Turkey with first mover advantages via the TurkStream project.	As mentioned above, the U.S. and the EU are traditional allies. Currently the EC is mooted another gas pipeline project which will favour Bulgaria as an energy hub, diluting Turkey's expected gains in this area. The EC Third Party Package did not allow Bulgaria, as an EU member, to host Russian gas pipelines via the now defunct South Stream project to supply gas to southern Europe. With the prevailing rifts in U.S.-Turkey relations, having Turkey as an energy hub which opens it up to gas inflows from Israel, Qatar, Greece and other Middle East countries will be a high risk for NATO, even with Turkey within its membership.	This is a win-win deal for Turkey and Russia which provides Turkey the rare opportunity to become an energy hub in the region, maximising its strategic geographical location for economic and political gains. First mover advantages provide a premium advantage for Turkey and will cement its bilateral trade interdependence with Russia even further. It will provide the necessary checks and balances to inject greater stability in their power alliance.
3	Maintain Black Sea Force superiority in the region over any proposed NATO equivalent through Turkey's membership.	U.S. position mirrors the NATO influence in the area via Turkey's NATO membership as critical to Containing Russia's military assets' mobility from its base in Sevastopol to the Mediterranean Sea through Turkey's Bosphorus Strait. A closer military, economic and political alliance between Turkey and Russia weakens its position in the Black Sea.	Turkey is not coy to support Russia's position, as evidenced in its denial of U.S. war ship transporting humanitarian supplies to Georgia in 2008. The Black Sea Force and its Security architecture in the Black Sea region serves Turkey's national interests more than NATO's proposed security architecture in the area.

4	<p>Create havoc with U.S.-Turkey relations to pave way to influence Turkey against U.S. and NATO interests in the Middle East.</p>	<p>The U.S. seeks to rebuild relations with Turkey as its key ally in the Middle East and NATO. Turkey's arms deal with Russia for the latter's S-400 missiles has put them on the defensive as it opens up areas for security breaches by Russia against NATO forces. It has withheld sale of other military assets to Turkey given the erosion of trust and confidence between the two countries which, ironically, augurs well for Russia.</p>	<p>Turkey is fully cognizant of Russia's strategy and will play along so long as its own national interests are secured through its renewed bilateral relations with Russia. Turkey's military offensives in Manbij have extended towards the east of the Euphrates river where U.S. troops are concentrated with their YPG-led rebel militia. Turkey regards all Kurdish rebel groups (including PKK/YPG/PYD) as terrorists who pose grave threats to Turkey's territorial integrity and must be eliminated. Turkey is playing the U.S. and Russia against each other for its own benefit.</p>
5	<p>Empower Iran by providing options to amass greater political clout and influence in the region via the INSTC trade route from the region through Asia to India.</p> <p>A stronger Iran will not buckle under U.S. sanctions. As a power alliance, both Turkey and Iran need to be insulated from U.S. defensive strategies to preserve their collective interests in the region.</p>	<p>The U.S. has announced new tougher sanctions in May 2018 against Iran to replace the Iran nuclear deal. U.S. Secretary of State, Mr Pompeo stated that the new sanctions are likely to have a devastating effect on the Iranian economy. With a weak Iran, the emerging alliance between Russia, Iran and Turkey will also be weakened.</p> <p>Will they stand together amid these sanctions or will either Turkey or Russia (or both) use this opportunity as an elimination round in this power struggle in the Middle East?</p>	<p>Both Turkey and Iran are working closely with Russia as they lead the negotiations on Syria in Astana, Sochi and Ankara. They are on different sides of the Sunni-Shiite spectrum in the Middle East. Iran has a Shia Muslim majority and supports President Assad in Syria. However, their quest for greater power in the Middle East has led them to form an alliance against U.S. hegemony in the region.</p>
6	<p>Consolidate emerging power broker status in Middle East peace talks via influence over Iran in Syria.</p>	<p>The U.S. position as the power broker in Middle East peace talks has been slowly hijacked by Russia during Putin's high-level meeting with Netanyahu within the margins of the Victory Day celebrations in Moscow in May 2018. Putin has more leverage than Trump over Iran's military aggression from Syria given that Iran is part of Putin's newly formed power alliance on Syria with Turkey. From the U.S. perspective, Russia is only called into the negotiations if Iran consolidates its power base in the region. If the U.S. weakens Iran's position through the withdrawal of its signed nuclear pact and implements even tougher and</p>	<p>Turkey's official position on its Ministry of Foreign Affairs website asserts its foreign policy to champion the interests of Muslim countries in the region as a peace broker in the Middle East peace talks. Its position has therefore moved from the middle, neutral position to one of advocacy against Israel and pro-Palestine, seeking UN support in highlighting the plight of displaced Palestinians in Israeli-occupied territories under contention in the region.</p>

		more stringent economic sanctions on Iran, the need for Russia to be interlocutor between Israel and Iran becomes less relevant.	
7	A closer relationship with OPEC, particularly Saudi Arabia, another U.S. ally, to stabilise global oil prices.	U.S. is a close ally of Saudi Arabia in the Middle East. But Saudi Arabia's position as a price maker is slowly weakening as the U.S. itself asserts its increasing influence as a shale oil producer which can affect global prices. It has reduced its dependence on Middle Eastern oil and gas sources, yet the latter are still necessary to power the high demands of its highly industrialised economy.	Turkey is an importer of Russian oil and gas, hence lower prices are good for the Turkish economy. However, as an energy hub under the new TurkStream gas route where it is positioned to also re-export gas from other Middle East countries, Greece and Russia into Europe, stability in oil prices is also an interest for Turkey.
8	Economic diplomacy: Increase interdependence of Middle Eastern countries on Russia arms, Energy and gas/oil trade. According to Putin, Interdependence with Europe stabilises relations between countries and promotes peace.	For the U.S., the more interlinked the trade and trade-related infrastructure between Russia, Turkey and Iran, particularly in the most contentious area of energy and, more specifically, oil and gas, the weaker its position to use its 'divide and conquer' strategy to weaken the alliance. The U.S. is an outsider in the region which places it at a disadvantage due to its physical coin, this is Russia's edge over the U.S. and Russia will maximise these opportunities to its advantage by making economic interdependence a more permanent feature of its relations with countries in the Middle East and its near-abroad.	Between Turkey and Russia, closer ties forged between Putin and Erdogan since 2016 have resulted in massive investments, including but not limited to: (i) establishing Turkey as an energy hub in the Middle East region; (ii) an indigenous nuclear industry for peaceful uses of atomic energy; (iii) arms trade including the S-400 missiles; and (iv) its power alliance with Iran. Economic interdependence creates an axis of stability between the parties.
9	Maintain status quo as supplier of 70% of Europe's gas and strengthen arms trade in the region.	The U.S. is seeking to weaken Russia's stranglehold on its ally, Europe's gas supply and, by extension, protect NATO interests from Russia. Outside of Europe, the U.S. is flooding the market with its own shale oil production to depress global oil prices and ultimately weaken OPEC's global monopoly as a price-maker.	With the TurkStream project signed in December 2017 and TurkStream Line One catering to Turkey completed in April 2018, this gas pact with Russia will establish Turkey as the energy hub in the Middle East. Turkey and Russia's interests are complementary and not competitive in this area. Turkey effectively assisted Russia in circumventing the abandoned South Stream project which was blocked by the EC, the latter citing violation of its Third Energy Package regulation through Bulgaria.

6.2 Conclusion

The three grand strategies are summarised below as Turkey finds itself wedged between a power struggle between the U.S. and Russia as well as its own grand ambitions for greater power and influence in the Middle East.

6.2.1 Russia's Grand Strategy in the Middle East

In the final analysis, it is evident that Russia's actions in the Middle East and its near-abroad constitute a grand strategy to reassert itself as a major power in the region; not just transactional events occurring in a random pattern. Putin's annual Presidential address to the Federal Assembly in 2005 revealed a "unified program of action, as our joint program for the next decade" which, in fact, culminated in its foray into the Syrian war as it launched its military offensives in September 2015 (Putin, 2005). From 2005 to 2007, Putin visited Turkey, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and gained Observer status in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (Sladden et al., 2017). Establishing refreshed bilateral relations with key players in the Middle East, Putin successfully kept the Russian economy afloat when oil prices hit a record low in 2014 as he strategised to avoid a repetition of 1991. This strategy has so far been successful and the Russian economy did not buckle under the pressure of low oil prices. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and its military offensive in Georgia six years earlier to counter what it qualified as NATO's expansionist strategies in its near-abroad, Putin has amassed a number of 'victories' which propelled the Russian grand strategy to the next phase.

In 2015, as Turkey was reeling from the economic sanctions imposed by Russia after it shot down Russia's fighter jet in Turkish air space, Putin message to

President Erdogan was clear – that they would be both better off as allies than adversaries. There were simply too many inter linkages invested heavily in all their bilateral spheres of statecraft (economic, military and political) to continue along that path. The diplomatic spat between Turkey and the U.S. post-coup d'état against President Erdogan in July 2016 presented a window of opportunity for Putin to pivot Turkey's support away from the U.S. in a zero-sum fashion towards a new political alliance. He invited President Erdogan for high-level talks which were held in St. Petersburg a month later. Russia's key role in concocting the alliance with Turkey and Iran, at a time when both countries are undergoing immense political tensions in their relations with the U.S., speaks volumes of the common ambition to dominate the new regional power architecture in the Middle East. Even though Iran was included in their power alliance on Syria later in the year, its purpose, while complementary, is of lesser significance than Turkey. Turkey's unique geopolitical profile as a NATO member, a key U.S. ally in the region which hosts U.S. military assets at its Incirlik military base, and Russia and Turkey's shared interests for maintaining the peace in the Black Sea region, among others, catapults Turkey to a strategic and pivotal position for Russia to successfully achieve its grand strategy to unseat U.S. hegemony in the Middle East.

6.2.2 U.S.'s grand strategy in the Middle East

Under President Donald Trump, the Middle East remains the U.S.'s most strategic war theater which provides a platform to achieve its foreign and defense policy priorities. U.S.'s support for Israel has never been so manifested as it is under the Trump presidency and this is significant because policy analysts are able to make stronger predictions based on this major shift from the Obama era. Trump's

campaign promise to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, in recognition as the capital of Israel, has manifested itself into reality in May 2018 (Landler, 2017). The U.S. withdrew from the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on allegations of a skewed abomination of Israel from the UNHRC membership, some of whom, the U.S. alleged, have worse human rights violation records (Al Jazeera, 2018a). Based on these trends, it would be fair to assert that the U.S. will not be withdrawing from its northern military bases in Manbij, Syria, anytime soon.

The U.S. has committed, under the United States-Israel Enhanced Security Cooperation Act of 2012, to protect Israel from its adversaries (U.S. Congress 2012, p. 126). Under any presidency, how these commitments manifest themselves into actual policy actions will vary, in accordance with the priorities of the ruling administration. However, under the Trump presidency, one can safely predict that the U.S. will do all in its power to maintain, if not consolidate further, its hegemony in the Middle East. The increase of US\$8 billion of its military aid to Israel alone from \$30 billion to US\$38 billion over a 10-year period reveals a lot about U.S.'s foreign and defense policy in this region as there are no concrete indications of a dilution of U.S. commitment in all spheres of statecraft after the defeat of ISIS in 2017 (U.S. Congress 2012, p. 126).

On June 4, 2018, U.S. diplomatic efforts to resolve the ongoing diplomatic spat with Turkey over its support for YPG in Syria appeared to have found traction through the Road Map seeking to ensure security and stability (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). This would not be a positive development for Russia, but the Russians are aware that it is still early days to determine the real progress on this front. The significance of this development is that it has averted a possible military confrontation in Manbij for now at least, if the Road Map is followed through to the

letter. Diplomacy has served its noble purpose in maintaining the peace in what could have been an unnecessary military confrontation between the two NATO allies. The U.S. will continue to ensure that their strategy of deter, deny and defeat the adversary remain within the initial two phases when it comes to dealing with Turkey – with its unique geopolitical attributes of, *inter alia*, an important NATO ally geographically juxtaposed between an important adversary of Russia to the north and an important region in the Middle East to its south.

In Manbij, the U.S. is likely to maintain its presence there, so long as the threat of a nuclear Iran seeking to advance its cause against Israel from a weakened Syrian state exists. In terms of Iran's strategic depth, the location of Manbij is a strategic one for this objective, with its proximity to Iraq and Iran east of the Euphrates River in Syria. Under normal circumstances, U.S. military presence in Manbij, including Turkey's military actions from Afrin, Idlib across to Manbij and probably further across to Sinjar in Iraq would be non-existent (Antonenko, 2018). But the Syrian war is ongoing and opportunities to defend and promote its security interests must be seized, with both hands. It is most imperative for the U.S. to mend its deteriorating relations with Turkey. While one may not be privy to the high-level conversations behind closed doors in Moscow, one can deduce from the cultivation of closer relations with Turkey that Russia has made a comprehensive assessment and Turkey has been identified as the weak link in U.S. hegemony in the Middle East. This is not necessarily a negative thing for Turkey – quite the contrary. Flipping the coin to the other side, the Road Map on Manbij can be advanced by the U.S. to become a platform for advocating its interests through Turkey within the Russia-Turkey-Iran alliance.

6.2.3 Turkey's grand strategy in the Middle East

Turkey is at an important crossroads in its history since President Atatürk established in 1923, what is now modern Turkey. There is a very low likelihood that the permutation of geopolitical events involving the major global players of the U.S., Russia, Turkey, Syria, Iran, Iraq and Israel in the Middle East aligning together to Turkey's advantage since the Syrian war began in 2011 will be witnessed again in the near future. It is therefore imperative that Turkey's grand strategy is reviewed for currency on the state-of-play in global affairs, especially in the Middle East. The current state-of-play, while it cannot be sustained forever, is actually good for Turkey. It has been elevated to the role of kingmaker between the U.S. and its closest adversarial candidate to covet or share the crown – Russia.

While both countries are geographically located outside of the Middle East, Turkey is indigenous to the region. Playing its cards right with both the U.S. and Russia can pave the pathways to eliminate its most contentious issue with its neighbours – the Kurdish militia elements which threaten Turkey's sovereignty. A gain in this important area propels Turkey to greater heights as a major regional power in the Middle East towards its aspirations as a respectable and trusted power broker, even as it has moved on to choose a side as a champion of the interests of Muslim-dominated countries in the region (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

This is a strategic niche that President Erdogan has carefully carved out for its preventative diplomacy in the Middle East. Russia and Israel have been engaged in talks on mitigating the Iran threat from Syrian territory, through Russia's influence as an ally of Syria in the Middle East, after Iran and Israel exchanged missile fire

post-withdrawal of the nuclear deal by the U.S. These are not necessarily overlapping areas of negotiations and both Turkey and Russia can co-exist side by side as influential power brokers in the Middle East. One cannot rule out the U.S. either, as it is the only country which has some influence over Israel and there cannot be any deal without the mutual agreement of both sides in the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

So, there is still the question that is begging to be asked. Should Turkey choose Russia or the U.S.? Fortunately, it must not necessarily be a zero-sum game for Turkey. Both countries are important; and ironically, it is its controversial relations with the U.S. post-coup d'état which prompted Russia to make its move on bridging and then strengthening its relations with Turkey to pave the way in achieving its other foreign interests in the Middle East. The most ideal situation for Turkey is to maintain the status quo for as long as practicable where Russia remains on the cusp of unseating U.S. hegemony in the region and the U.S. remains on the verge of losing it with Turkey's help.

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