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About the Author

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Abstract

The Syrian conflict, a civil war with sectarian patterns driven by endogenous and exogenous dynamics, has turned into a proxy war catalysing the major geopolitical tensions of today's contested world order. The conflict represents a major challenge for the Euro-Atlantic community as it reflects Russia's reassertion as a counter-power to the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) in the Middle East. Taking a structural realist approach, the Syrian conflict can be interpreted as a confrontation for regional hegemony. This paper explores the implications of Russia's reassertion for the Euro-Atlantic community's approaches to Syria and the Middle East as well as for transatlantic relations. It argues that in the power vacuum created by the Arab Spring, Russia's engagement in Syria has highlighted the limits of American and European approaches to the region. Moreover, Russia's reassertion as a regional hegemon challenges the Euro-Atlantic cohesion and is likely to lead to a 'forced emancipation' of the EU from the US as a strategic foreign policy actor.

Introduction: 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'

Stimulated by both endogenous and exogenous dynamics, the Syrian conflict has rapidly become not only a humanitarian disaster but also "one of the most complex ideological, socio-political and economic situations today".¹ Strengthened through an intertwining of regional and international alliances, it turned into a proxy war between great powers, an entanglement that has hampered the conflict resolution process launched in late 2015 by Washington and Moscow. The Syrian conflict echoes a sense of Cold War resurgence between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community, comprising the United States (US), the European Union (EU) and its member states. The relations of the Euro-Atlantic community embody a "powerful constellation of interests, norms and identities, alongside a deeply intertwined history, inform[ing] a shared vision of the West as bearing special responsibility for maintaining global peace, stability and prosperity".²

In March 2011, when the uprising was still a non-violent revolutionary process, the Assad regime triggered a shift to violence through "a combination of repressive measures and counter-mobilization" which led to a civil war.³ Considering the very nature of the Syrian society and political regime, Balanche argues that the communitarian and religious dimensions of the conflict has since the beginning been emphasised by the fact that protests took place among the Sunni communities – the predominant majority of the population – and against a regime dominated by Alawites and other religious minorities.⁴ In the Middle East, such a 'confessionalisation' of the conflict was echoed at the regional level, leading to "a regionalized civil war"⁵ with a complex internationalisation. Hence, schematically, the Syrian conflict has to be analysed through the lens of a three-level intertwining: at the domestic, regional and extra-regional levels.

¹ Khashanah, Khaldoun, "The Syrian Crisis: A Systemic Framework", *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2014, p. 18.

² Tocci, Nathalie & Riccardo Alcaro, "Rethinking transatlantic relations in a multipolar era", *International Politics*, vol. 51, no. 3, pp. 366-367.

³ Dostal, Jörg Michael, "Analyzing the domestic and international conflict in Syria: Are there lessons from political science?", *Syria Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2014, pp. 47-48.

⁴ Balanche, Fabrice, « Syrie : Guerre civile et internationalisation du conflit », *EurOrient*, no. 41, 2013, p. 14.

⁵ Tabler, Andrew, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, quoted in Gilsinan, Kathy, "The Confused Person's Guide to Syrian Civil War", *The Atlantic*, 29 October 2015, retrieved 10 October 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/syrian-civil-war-guide-isis/410746>

On the ground, the Assad regime is confronted by politically disparate rebel forces. The Kurds, scattered over four neighbouring countries, fight for the creation of a state of their own: Kurdistan. The so-called 'Islamic State of Iraq and Sham' (ISIS or *Daesh*), a fundamentalist Salafi terrorist group, has expanded its territorial basis over the Syrian-Iraqi border in order to establish a Caliphate, which has, however, been considerably reduced again over the past two years.

These lines of division are transposed at the regional level. On the one side, the Assad regime counts on the support of the Shia axis composed of Bagdad (dominated by the Shias since the American invasion), the Hezbollah and Tehran. On the other side, the rebels are mainly sponsored – that is, armed and funded – by the Sunni axis dominated by Saudi Arabia and Qatar which, together with Turkey, are antagonistic to Assad and the Shia axis with the objective of weakening Tehran.⁶ As for the Kurds of Syria, they find their main support in Kurdish groups from Turkey and Iraq.

Both domestic parties and their regional partners have grown more and more dependent on extra-regional sponsors. Russia's support of Assad since the outbreak of the crisis is its first military engagement outside the post-Soviet space since the end of the Cold War. Russia seeks to help Assad to stay in power and regain territories taken by the rebels, in order to avoid regime change and prevent the Russian ISIS foreign fighters from coming back to their native country. This helps explain why Moscow draws 'no line' between the rebels and ISIS. Moreover, in a region under US influence, Damascus is of strategic importance for Russia, not only in the framework of the 'partnership of reason' built with Tehran, but most importantly for political influence and military projection, primarily through the Tartus naval base.⁷ When it comes to the Syrian opposition, American and European sponsorship is, however, not as important. Despite the aim of facilitating a political transition and annihilate ISIS, the transatlantic community has not managed to reach a consensus on a military intervention in Syria, apart from bombing ISIS. Additionally, the West's support of the Kurds puts the international coalition against ISIS at risk for two reasons: first, because it includes Turkey, which fears the creation of an independent Kurdistan and thus also bombs the

⁶ See Asseburg, Muriel & Heiko Wimmen, "Civil War in Syria. External Actors and Interests as Drivers of Conflict", *SWP Comments*, no. 43, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin, December 2012, p. 3.

⁷ Facon, Isabelle, quoted in Didier, Brice, « 'Faire Grand avec peu' : la crise syrienne, catalyseur du retour de la Russie sur la scène internationale », *Institut Open Diplomacy*, Paris, 16 May 2016, retrieved 19 April 2017, <http://www.open-diplomacy.eu/blog/faire-grand-avec-peu-la-crise-syrienne-catalyseur-du-reto>

Kurds; second, because the Kurds can draw benefits from a Russian intervention which limits the expansion of the Syrian rebels under Turkish protection.

Although the Syrian conflict has become “the largest battlefield and generator of Sunni-Shia sectarianism the world has ever seen, with deep implications for the future boundaries of the Middle East and the spread of terrorism”,⁸ what is first and foremost at stake is the new regional and international power showdown that this conflict brings to light. Russian Prime Minister Medvedev even concluded that “we have slid into a time of a new Cold War”.⁹ A characteristic phenomenon of the Cold War period, proxy wars are not a new trend, but have become even more relevant in contemporary conflicts, particularly in the Middle East.¹⁰ As argued by Asseburg and Wimmen, “[e]xternal supporters of both sides treat the conflict as a zero-sum game with far-reaching and, for some actors existential, consequences for their own strategic positions”.¹¹ Hence, Russia’s intervention in Syria has to be analysed not as a simple strategic digression but as a long-term challenge for the Euro-Atlantic community. Having lost its global power status with the fall of the Soviet Union, the Syrian crisis presented an opportunity for Russia to recover its past standing in international affairs. The Kremlin has challenged Western exit initiatives from the Syrian conflict, revealing “deep flaws in post-Cold War Western doctrine on international intervention”, particularly in the Middle East, a strategic area of influence for the US.¹²

Admittedly, Russia’s engagement in Syria can be analysed in the context of the fight against terrorism and the ‘security continuum’ existing between its domestic territory and the Middle East, or as a reaction to what Moscow views as Western-influenced regime changes in Iraq and Libya.¹³ However, Syria has been “a centre of

⁸ Tabler, *op. cit.*

⁹ Medvedev, Dmitri, Intervention at the 52nd Munich Security Conference, quoted in Meyer, Henry, Ian Wishart & Andrey Biryukov, “Russia’s Medvedev: We Are in ‘a New Cold War’”, *Bloomberg*, 13 February 2016, retrieved 27 March 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-02-13/russia-sees-new-cold-war-as-nato-chief-criticizes-nuclear-threat>

¹⁰ Brown, Seyom, “Purposes and Pitfalls of War by Proxy: A Systemic Analysis”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2016, p. 245; Marshall, Alex, “From Civil War to Proxy War: Past History and Current Dilemmas”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2016, p. 183; Hughes, Geraint Alun, “Syria and the Perils of Proxy Warfare”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2014, p. 527.

¹¹ Asseburg & Wimmen, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹² Charap, Samuel, “Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention”, *Survival*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2013, p. 35.

¹³ Interview with Isabelle Facon, Senior Research Fellow at the Fondation pour la Recherche stratégique (FRS), by phone, 7 April 2017.

Russian Middle East foreign policy" ever since the implosion of the Soviet Union.¹⁴ Thus, the Russian engagement is more than a simple reaction to the terrorist threat and Western interferences: since the Cold War period, Syria has allowed Russia to unlock its own geographical isolation from the 'South', to strategically expand its 'defence perimeter' and to project its influence in the region and beyond.¹⁵ The military intervention in Syria combined with an extensive diplomatic 'offensive' has served as a catalyst for Russia's reassertion in the great power game.¹⁶ Blocking a transatlantic-led military operation in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) helped implement Russia's "multipolar foreign policy"¹⁷ and made the Euro-Atlantic community dependent on Moscow to solve the crisis.

Adopting a structural realist approach, this paper analyses to what extent Russia's reassertion through this conflict impacts the Euro-Atlantic relations and approaches to Syria and the Middle East. It argues that in the regional power vacuum created by the Arab Spring, Russia's engagement has highlighted the limits of US and EU approaches to the region and their failure as security actors. Moreover, Russia's reassertion as a regional hegemon in the Middle East challenges the Euro-Atlantic cohesion, and is likely to lead to a 'forced emancipation' of the EU from the US as a strategic foreign policy actor.

Following the introduction of the concept of regional hegemony to explain Russia's reassertion, this paper first addresses the dynamics and shortfalls of Euro-Atlantic approaches to Syria. It then discusses to what extent Euro-Atlantic relations are questioned by Russia's new assertiveness. Finally, the conclusion gathers the lessons drawn from this analysis.

The search for regional hegemony: explaining Russia's reassertion

The Syrian crisis was given a unique shape because of its internationalisation and the divergences between external actors. In spite of the length of the conflict and the rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation, the international community has not intervened, unlike in Libya. Despite the realists' "skepticism regarding the relevance of

¹⁴ Varol Sevim, Tuğçe & Merve Suna Özel, "Rethinking Russian Mission to Syria", *European Scientific Journal*, vol. 9, no. 19, July 2013, p. 445.

¹⁵ See Delanoë, Igor, « Le retour de la Russie en Méditerranée », *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, no. 89, 2014, uploaded 1 June 2015, retrieved 30 September 2016, p. 3, <http://cdlm.revues.org/7652>

¹⁶ Didier, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Varol Sevim & Özel, *op. cit.*, p. 448.

ethical norms to relations among states",¹⁸ the theory remains useful to analyse the proxy war in Syria and its implications for the external powers involved.

According to Morgenthau, the will for power is a fundamental element of all social relations. Thus, international politics is "a struggle for power",¹⁹ a search for power either to shape or preserve the balance of power, which explains – at least partly – the temperance of states when engaging on the international stage.²⁰ Going a step further, Waltz's neo-realism defines a bipolar system as the optimum balance of power in world politics.²¹ By contrast, Gilpin argues that international stability depends on the existence of a superpower becoming a hegemon, in comparison to which all other powers will situate themselves.²²

Finally, Mearsheimer, in a structural realist perspective, establishes that "it is the structure or the architecture of the international system that forces states to pursue power".²³ In such an environment, states look for more power as it is a "key for survival".²⁴ Mearsheimer follows Gilpin in acknowledging that states look for domination over others, but taking into account the geopolitical dimension of power and the difficulty for a state to project itself globally, great powers ultimately seek 'regional hegemony' over the system within which they operate.²⁵ A great power is then expected to be guided by the priority of ensuring the stability and sustainability of this system and its sustainability. These dynamics can lead a 'regional hegemon'²⁶ to become a 'predator'²⁷ when faced with a decrease of its power. When challenged by competing powers, a regional hegemon may become a 'system challenger'²⁸ or

¹⁸ "Political Realism in International Relations", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 26 July 2010, edited 2 April 2013, retrieved 11 October 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism-intl-relations>

¹⁹ Morgenthau, Hans J., *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Boston, McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2006, 7th edition.

²⁰ Battistella, Dario, *Théorie des relations internationales*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2009, 3rd edition, p. 130.

²¹ Waltz, Kenneth, *Theory of International Politics*, Boston, McGraw-Hill, 1979.

²² Gilpin, Robert, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

²³ Mearsheimer, John J., "Structural Realism", in Dunne, Tim, Milja Kurki & Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, 2nd edition, p. 78.

²⁴ Mearsheimer, John J., *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, WW Norton, 2001, p. 21.

²⁵ Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism", *op. cit.*, p. 89.

²⁶ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

²⁷ Battistella, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

²⁸ Destradi, Sandra, "Regional Powers and their Strategies: Empire, Hegemony, Leadership", *Review of International Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2010, pp. 903-930.

'revisionist power'.²⁹ In this context, the structural realist approach of 'regional hegemony' can be combined with the concept of multipolarity or 'polyarchy'.³⁰ Nevertheless, Battistella distinguishes between 'hegemony' and 'empire' insofar as the hegemon's leadership is conducted with the consent of the other states that recognise the hegemon as such.³¹ Hence, whereas Russia has behaved as an empire regarding Ukraine, it has acted as a hegemon in Syria.

Thus, Russia's search for regional hegemony has implications for other external actors' approaches to the region. Furthermore, in the case of the Euro-Atlantic community, Simoni argues that "the fundamental premise behind neorealist explanations for the future of transatlantic relations, in particular their cooperative efforts, lies behind the perception of, and reaction to, a commonly perceived threat".³² Hence, the structural realists' regional hegemony approach is a relevant framework, not only to study external power dynamics at work in the Syrian conflict, but also to study the impact it has on the transatlantic relations *per se*. The two following sections respectively address these two dimensions.

Dynamics and shortfalls of transatlantic approaches to the Syrian crisis

The Syrian crisis is a symptom of the Euro-Atlantic community's incapacity to stabilise and secure the Middle East. As a matter of fact, the transatlantic reactions to Damascus' use of violence against civilians did not stop the crisis from escalating and contrasted with Russia's forceful support of Assad. In the context of the US 'pivot' to Asia, Obama's 'reset' policy and security considerations regarding the terrorist threat, this relatively measured response has enshrined Russia's role as a regional hegemon in the Middle East.³³ Transatlantic attitudes vis-à-vis Russia have been equivocal, condemning Russia's manoeuvres against 'moderate' rebels, while at the same time stressing the "importance to cooperate with Russia".³⁴ This attitude has facilitated Russia's reassertion as a regional hegemon.

²⁹ Melvin, Neil, "Russia: Europe's Revisionist Power", in Grevi, Giovanni & Daniel Keohane (eds.), *Challenges for European Foreign Policy in 2015: How Others Deal with Disorder*, Madrid, FRIDE, 2015, pp. 31-38.

³⁰ Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

³¹ Battistella, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

³² Simoni, Serena, *Understanding Transatlantic Relations: Whither the West?*, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 23.

³³ Delanoë, Igor, « Etats-Unis et Russie : les balbutiements de la 'Guerre froide' », *Confluences Méditerranéennes*, vol. 2, no. 89, 2014, pp. 133-143.

³⁴ Interview with Ambassador Anthony Gardner, former Ambassador of the United States to the European Union, Bruges, 27 March 2017.

Transatlantic approach(es) to the Arab Spring: dashed hopes for a united response, open door for Russia's regional reassertion

The Arab Spring reshaped the political landscape and geopolitical chessboard of the Middle East and North Africa. The EU, its member states and the US had major difficulties reaching a consensus on a joint response, apart from calling for political transition in these countries. Such vacillation finds its explanation in the discrepancies existing in the Euro-Atlantic approaches to security.

Emphasising the 'societal' dimension of security,³⁵ the EU and its member states mainly feared massive migration flows,³⁶ and took time before condemning authoritarian regimes and leaders. Regarding Syria, the EU focused on addressing the refugee crisis and the terrorist threat, as well as on "stabilisation efforts" in neighbouring countries to prevent destabilisation to spread.³⁷ On the contrary, the US analysed the Arab Spring through the "political/military security" prism of the potential regional instability that could have resulted in bringing Islamist parties to power.³⁸ Hence, the transatlantic partners' responses were not defined vis-à-vis each other, but in reaction to major disruptions in the order of the Middle East, bringing to light the absence of a common perception of threats and opportunities.

Such a transatlantic deadlock left plenty of room for Russia's manoeuvre, whose approach to the Middle East is an integral part of its 'Grand Strategy' – Russia's comprehensive effort to shape the world order to its liking through a combination of all 'hard' and 'soft' power instruments at its disposal.³⁹ Although the post-Soviet space remains Moscow's top foreign policy priority, Russia has reaped the fruits of its inflexibility in Syria – regarding the fate of Assad and the refusal to distinguish between 'moderate' rebels and terrorist groups – and asserted itself as an equal player to the US in managing the crisis. This became for the first time visible on the occasion of the agreement on the neutralisation of Syria's chemical weapons stocks.⁴⁰ Moscow's obstinacy proves that it has learnt its lessons from the West's interventions in the

³⁵ Keukeleire, Stephan & Tom Delreux, *The Foreign Policy of the European Union*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 2nd edition, p. 31.

³⁶ Simoni, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

³⁷ Barnes-Dacey, James, "The War Next Door: Syria and the Erosion of Stability in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey", *ECFR Policy Brief*, no. 182, London, July 2016, p. 1.

³⁸ Simoni, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

³⁹ See Stepanova, Ekaterina, "Russia in the Middle East: Back to a 'Grand Strategy' of Enforcing Multilateralism?", *Politique étrangère*, été, no. 2, 2016, pp. 23-35.

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of State, *Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons*, 14 September 2013, retrieved 24 April 2017, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/09/214247.htm>.

Balkans, Iraq and Libya: implementing a 'de-ideologised' strategy,⁴¹ it seeks to counteract the West's "business of regime change"⁴² and instead promotes a multipolar balance of power. This helps to understand why in Syria Moscow confronts Washington while ignoring European states as power players.

Although such a strategy has allowed Moscow to appear as a credible actor, the rebalancing of power in the region is still partly explained by transatlantic shortcomings. Considering the Syrian conflict as a 'zero-sum game', Russia has taken advantage of the Euro-Atlantic community, which underestimated the scope of Moscow's interests.

Russia's dual approach in confronting the Euro-Atlantic community in Syria

Friedman argues that Russia's diplomatic and military engagement was expected to fulfil two main objectives: "to demonstrate that – whatever the diplomacy – Russia was a military power to be taken seriously" and "to put the US in a position where publicly [...] Russians would be viewed as a partner and not a hostile force".⁴³

Because of the EU's ambitious development of the European Neighbourhood Policy as of 2004 and its Eastern and Southern regional dimensions, Russia started to perceive the EU as a menace to its influence in its own near abroad. With the 2009 Lisbon Treaty the EU clearly sought to export its values on a global level, which appeared to Moscow as intrusive. Under President Putin, Russia progressively "re-embraced notions of 'Eurasianism' and defined its geopolitical identity in opposition to the EU's proclaimed doctrine of 'soft power'".⁴⁴ Driven by its own domestic challenges and political dynamics, Russia started to identify the EU through the realist prism of survival. This led Russia to seek to scupper the influence of the EU in the Middle East through the Syrian conflict. Moscow's determination was encouraged by the timidity or inadequacy of European approaches: neither the EU nor its member states were prepared for the outbreak of such a conflict in Syria. The undermining of Europe's

⁴¹ Delanoë, « Etats-Unis et Russie : les balbutiements de la 'Guerre froide' », *op. cit.*, p. 138.

⁴² Russian Foreign Minister S. Lavrov's statement to Russia Today, 21 December 2012, quoted in "Russia 'not in business' to persuade Syrian president to quit: Lavrov", *Al Arabiya News*, 21 December 2012, retrieved 24 April 2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/21/256365.html>

⁴³ Friedman, George, "Why Putin went into Syria", *Geopolitical Futures*, 15 March 2016, retrieved 25 April 2017, <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/why-putin-went-into-syria>

⁴⁴ Eskelinen, Heikki, Ilkka Liikanen & James Wesley Scott, "On the Edge of Neighbourhood: Regional Dimensions of the EU-Russia Interface", in Eskelinen, Heikki, Ilkka Liikanen & James Wesley Scott (eds.), *The EU-Russia Borderland: New Contexts for Regional Cooperation*, London, Routledge, 2012, p. 1.

role in the war by Russia thus relies on Europe's hesitations, due to the EU institutions' lack of competences and the members' lack of political will and/or common ground. This made the EU a mere spectator of a crisis which generated serious implications in terms of refugee flows and internal cohesion.

When it comes to the US, Moscow tends to react and implement a strategy to counter the American political and military hegemony in the Middle East. In a context of US withdrawal and 'rhetorical reset',⁴⁵ the magnitude of the revolutionary earthquake in the Arab world obliged Washington to again focus on it. The US had suffered a significant loss of influence due to the absence of a consistent approach comparable to Russia's Grand Strategy. Despite proof for the use of chemical weapons in Syria in 2013, the US was – contrary to its invasion of Iraq a decade earlier – unwilling to engage militarily. Obama was reluctant to find the US again at the centre of a political turmoil and thus unwilling to start a new military engagement. He was afraid of losing face when confronted with crossings of 'red lines' set by him or of being accused of further deteriorating the situation like after the West's intervention in Libya. Hence, Moscow offered Washington the opportunity of a small diplomatic victory through the elimination of the Syrian chemical arsenal.⁴⁶

Confronted with Russia, the Euro-Atlantic partners lacked leverage to influence the course of events, to bargain with regional actors such as Tehran, or to pressure Damascus. Yet above all, they lacked a concrete and coherent strategy. This was illustrated by the choice of diplomatic means such as repeated cease-fire agreements negotiated by the US, Russia and the members of the International Syria Support Group, and signed by the Assad regime and opposition groups. These cease-fire agreements have been repeatedly broken by both the regime and Moscow, and mainly favoured the Assad forces, which each time gained ground over the rebels, without substantially weakening ISIS. Thus, more than its own assets, Russia built its Syrian strategy on transatlantic deficiencies in finding an appropriate answer to the conflict. Such an analysis can, at least partly, explain why a reinforcement of the transatlantic cohesion was preferred over a more confrontational attitude. The dynamics of this reinforcement, however, proved to be mainly steered by the US.

⁴⁵ Gerges, Fawaz A., "The Obama Approach to the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?", *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 2, 2013, p. 302.

⁴⁶ *UNSC Resolution 2118*, adopted by the Security Council at its 7038th meeting, 27 September 2013.

Transatlantic prospects for a American- or European-steered military intervention

Washington's Middle East policy in the last decades was characterised by its omnipresence in the region and by the 'Eisenhower Doctrine' which promised military or economic aid to any Middle Eastern country needing help in resisting communist (in particular Soviet) aggression.⁴⁷ Paradoxically, however, the Syrian crisis showcased a hegemonic 'vacuum' in the region. The origins of this vacuum can be found in the global rebalancing of US leadership after the neo-conservative policy of President Bush jr. This foreign policy shift goes along with a realist turn, according to which the great power, be it hegemonic or not, has to cooperate and co-build responses to the issue at stake rather than expecting others to bandwagon on a unilateral initiative. This explains why, with regard to Syria, Washington first chose to build on the UNSC framework and co-lead with European partners while maintaining a dialogue with Russia, in order to prevent an 'imperial overstretch'.⁴⁸ In a cautious multipolar perspective, which Russia's reassertion aimed to promote,⁴⁹ the UNSC was still the primary international discussion arena, where the US enjoys leverage. Through military interventionist intimidation, Washington convinced Moscow to move towards a more compromising approach.

On the transatlantic level, despite the reluctance towards a military intervention on both sides, the Syrian crisis highlights an exchange of roles in terms of initiative, hence a reversal of power relations, between the US and Europe. In Syria, Obama did not want to act unilaterally. France, a leading country in denouncing the US unilateralism in 2003, this time took the lead in proposing military action against the Syrian regime.⁵⁰ This attempt at seizing a steering role culminated in the French proposal of a UNSC resolution under Chapter VII, which was to a certain degree supported by Germany. Despite Moscow's warnings, France and Germany stepped up to face Russia, whereas Central and Eastern European member states of the EU hesitated to take action in Syria. In the end, this European indecision was taken short by the rejection of a military intervention by the Parliament of the United Kingdom.

⁴⁷ Eisenhower, Dwight D., former President of the United States, "The US Role in the Middle East", speech, Washington, DC, 5 January 1957.

⁴⁸ Kennedy, Paul, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, New York, Vintage, 1989.

⁴⁹ Stepanova, Ekaterina, "Russia in the Middle East: Back to a 'Grand Strategy' of Enforcing Multilateralism?", *Politique étrangère*, été, no. 2, 2016, pp. 23-35.

⁵⁰ Tannous, Manon-Nour, « 'Tenir son rang' : la politique française à l'épreuve de la crise syrienne (2011-2015) », *Critique internationale*, vol. 1, no. 74, 2017, p. 117.

Yet, despite individual leadership attempts, these member states remained mainly preoccupied with their relationship with Washington. Surely, the EU was a leading force when it came to imposing sanctions on the Assad regime,⁵¹ and it played an important part in backing the mediation efforts of the UN Secretary General Special Envoy. Nevertheless, the EU's humanitarian means have prevailed over coercive ones, which would have been hardly plausible without a sizable American involvement. Thus, the Syrian conflict is partly a missed opportunity for the EU to make a 'qualitative leap' in its military cooperation.⁵² The cause of such impediments to a common, coherent and forceful transatlantic response was not Russia and its rise in blocking negotiations but diverging positions between EU member states. Here, once again, European foreign policy turned out to be a heterogeneous set of national foreign policies whose priorities may take precedence over the Union's interest.

Between a Europeanised US Middle East policy and a supportive EU approach

US foreign policy in the 2010s seems to have rebutted Kagan's pre-Iraq presumption that "Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus",⁵³ insofar as the US proved to be more reluctant than Europe⁵⁴ to engage in Syria. The United States' less unilateral and aggressive foreign policy could be interpreted as a more 'Europeanised' approach. Despite this rapprochement, the US continued to "assume the role of the only veto power in the conduct of Arab regional politics", and to "structure the behavior of all competing powers",⁵⁵ including the EU.

The EU approach to the Middle East has evolved towards more comprehensiveness, as can be seen through the three Communications published between 2013 and 2017.⁵⁶ However, the effectiveness of such a comprehensive approach was

⁵¹ Interview with Professor Antonio Missiroli, Director of the European Union Institute for Security Studies, Bruges, 8 April 2017.

⁵² Interview with Professor Damien Helly, Deputy Head of the Strengthening European External Action Programme at the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM), by email, 12 April 2017.

⁵³ Kagan, Robert, "Power and Weakness", *Policy Review*, no. 113, June-July 2002, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Interview with Ambassador Gardner, *op. cit.*

⁵⁵ Dostal, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁵⁶ European Commission & High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, "Towards a comprehensive EU approach to the Syrian crisis"*, JOIN(2013) 22 final, Brussels, 24 June 2013; *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, "Elements for an EU regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the Da'esh threat"*, JOIN(2015) 2 final, Brussels, 6 February 2015; *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, "Elements for an EU strategy for Syria"*, JOIN(2017) 11 final, Strasbourg, 14 March 2017.

hampered by the Syrian crisis. Indeed, as predicted by Faria: “[a]s a result of political and ‘organisational’ realism, and given the EU’s capacity constraints, it is likely that the focus and efforts towards a ‘comprehensive approach’ will be hijacked by crisis and conflict situations, because member states’ attention and prioritisation tends to focus on such situations”.⁵⁷ This explains why the EU has progressively shifted from focusing on the regional level to addressing Syria itself, thus acknowledging that political problems in the neighbourhood are different. In a context of transatlantic interdependence, this downward adjustment of European ambitions highlights the fact that Europe remains mainly supportive. The EU is indeed rather constrained both by its institutions’ competencies and by limited capacities, as visible through the ‘Council decision on an EU strategy for Syria’.⁵⁸ Even if the EU can build on its importance as the major humanitarian aid provider and post-crisis reconstruction actor, or on new constructive dialogues such as the one with Tehran since the nuclear deal, it has not yet proven to be an equal interlocutor to Russia.⁵⁹

Back to realism: transatlantic strategic reconfigurations

The US’ progressive ‘comeback’ strategy in the Middle East since 2015 – forced rather than chosen – was designed through a realist foreign policy shift to avoid being overwhelmed by an escalation. This shift was embodied by the ‘leading from behind’ strategy,⁶⁰ promoted by the US Department of Defense,⁶¹ and through the White House’s idea of “strategic patience and persistence”.⁶² However, the inability of the EU and its member states to deal with the crisis in Syria made them irrelevant. Instead, Obama followed Richelieu’s principle in the transatlantic relations: “what must be supported, and the force that must support it, must be geometrically proportional”.⁶³ Admittedly, the EU is not a ‘power player’ *per se*, but more of a power ‘payer’.⁶⁴ In

⁵⁷ Faria, Fernanda, “What EU Comprehensive Approach? Challenges for the EU Action Plan and beyond”, *ECDPM Briefing Note*, no. 71, Maastricht, October 2014, p. 10.

⁵⁸ Council of the EU, “Council adopts EU strategy on Syria”, *Press release*, Brussels, 3 April 2017.

⁵⁹ See European Commission, *The EU and the Crisis in Syria*, Fact sheet, Brussels, 4 April 2017, p. 1.

⁶⁰ Lizza, Ryan, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama’s Foreign Policy”, *The New Yorker*, 2 May 2011, retrieved 1 April 2017, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist>

⁶¹ United States Department of Defense, *Quadriennial Defense Review*, 2014.

⁶² President of the United States, *National Security Strategy*, 6 February 2015, <http://nssarchive.us/national-security-strategy-2015>

⁶³ Cardinal Richelieu, quoted in Struye de Swielande, Tanguy, « Obama ou le retour de la Realpolitik », *Politique étrangère*, no. 4, 2016, p. 142 : « La chose qui doit être soutenue, et la force qui doit la soutenir, doivent être géométriquement proportionnelles. »

⁶⁴ Schulz, Steffen, *Payer or Player? The Role of the European Union in the Middle East Peace Process*, Hamburg, Diplomarbeiten Agentur, 2001.

dealing with the Syrian crisis, the main power player from the Euro-Atlantic community remains the US. However, confronted with long-term strategic threats, one could say that in sharing the burden, the EU and the US approaches converged.

The 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS)⁶⁵ aims to address the shortcomings of the pre-Lisbon EU Security Strategy.⁶⁶ The EUGS should allow the Union to achieve “considerable convergence”⁶⁷ among member states and institutions in order to gain more credibility as a security actor. Through this strategic document the EU seeks to operate a geopolitical ‘recalibration’ of its foreign policy based on ‘principled pragmatism’.⁶⁸ Thus, the EU has drawn realist lessons from its Arab Spring mistakes: it has shifted its approach away from issues dealing with democracy promotion towards security and an emphasis on ‘hard’ power.⁶⁹

The ongoing regional turmoil in Syria and Iraq represents a pivotal moment for the Union and a litmus test for the EUGS. The proxy war in Syria is a challenge not only for the transatlantic approach(es) to this region, but also for the relations between the Euro-Atlantic partners.

The following section addresses discusses the necessities and opportunities for the Euro-Atlantic community to adapt.

Transatlantic relations at a crossroads: the Syrian conflict as an incubator of a leadership transfer

Russia’s hegemonic reassertion is for the transatlantic partners both a familiar and an uncharted challenge. Familiar, because it seems to follow the patterns of the Cold War, characterised by proxy dynamics and escalations. Uncharted, because contrary to the Cold War, the West today experiences difficulties in identifying the threat represented by Russia and in uniting. The confrontation with Russia in Syria poses both external and internal challenges to transatlantic relations and further questions their reconfiguration. The following subsection first addresses the external challenges.

⁶⁵ Council of the EU, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy*, Brussels, June 2016.

⁶⁶ Council of the EU, *A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy*, Brussels, 12 December 2003.

⁶⁷ Tocci, Nathalie, “The Making of the EU Global Strategy”, *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2016, pp. 470-471.

⁶⁸ Soler i Lecha, Eduard & Nathalie Tocci, “Implications of the EU Global Strategy for the Middle East and North Africa”, *Futures Notes*, no. 1, July 2016, p. 2.

⁶⁹ See Biscop, Sven, “The EU Global Strategy: Realpolitik with European Characteristics”, *Egmont Security Policy Brief*, no. 75, Brussels, June 2016, p. 2.

The Russian threat at the height of a reciprocal defiance with the Euro-Atlantic community

Syria is a 'symptom'⁷⁰ of a renewed confrontation between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community. Visible since the 2008 war in Georgia, it is one piece of a complex puzzle composed of long-standing, conflicting foreign policy priorities and opposing views regarding the use of force, which bodes a long-term trend to "continued conflict and confrontation".⁷¹ In such a context, Syria has been the occasion for Moscow to prove that neutralising the US and Europe is feasible.

With respect to Putin's 'revisionist power' through Crimea and Syria, Charap and Shapiro argue that Obama followed the 'middle way', which is "based on a calculus that a new Cold War can be avoided without having to negotiate with Russia about the regional order".⁷² The failure of this 'middle way' was highlighted by the escalation following the shootdown of a Russian military aircraft by Turkey – a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and across the updates of Moscow's main strategic documents. In Russia's 'Military Doctrine' (December 2014), 'Security Strategy' (December 2015) and 'Foreign Policy Concept' (November 2016) "it is clear that 'the West' is the focus of Russia's threat and risk assessment".⁷³ Nevertheless, Russia has actually to a certain extent responded to the transatlantic community's own wariness, as acknowledged in the NATO 2010 Strategic Concept.⁷⁴ Also, in a situation where Europe has been growingly entrapped by a "ring of fire",⁷⁵ Russia's confrontation in Syria constitutes a risk multiplier. The Syrian conflict is thus relevant when it comes to discuss external risks for the transatlantic partners as it brings together a whole set of major common challenges: the Middle East turmoil, terrorism and its direct and indirect consequences, Russia and the changing world order. Combined,

⁷⁰ Interview with Ambassador Gardner, *op. cit.*

⁷¹ Giles, Keir, "Russia and the West: The Longer View", *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 173, Zurich, 12 October 2015, p. 5.

⁷² Charap, Samuel & Jeremy Shapiro, "US-Russian Relations: The Middle Cannot Hold", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2016, p. 150.

⁷³ Facon, Isabelle, *Russia's National Security Strategy and Military Doctrine and their Implications for the EU*, In-Depth Analysis EP/EXPO/B/SEDE/FWC/2013-08/Lot6/11, PE 578.016, Brussels, European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies, January 2017, p. 9.

⁷⁴ North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, *Active Engagement, Modern Defence: Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of The Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation*, Lisbon, 19 November 2010.

⁷⁵ Bildt, Carl, quoted in Taylor, Paul, "EU 'ring of friends' turns into ring of fire", *Reuters*, Brussels, 27 September 2015, retrieved 28 April 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-neighbourhood-analysis-idUSKCN0RR09020150927>

these external threats tend to exacerbate already existing internal divides, which are set out in the next subsection.

Europe marginalised, Europe divided: a two-level risk for transatlantic relations

The Syrian crisis is not only marked by struggles for regional hegemony between Russia and the transatlantic partners, but it is also characterised by a certain isolation of Europe. Indeed, the conflict erupted at a time when both sides no longer view Euro-Atlantic relations as crucial as they have historically been. Despite close security and defence cooperation in Afghanistan and Libya, the US conceives of the EU as a 'civilian' foreign policy actor, and not as a security actor, with regard to military aspects.⁷⁶ The US seems not to conceive of the EU as a reliable diplomatic actor either, which can explain the absence of the EU from key negotiations dealing with Syria.

Moscow also draws benefits from the EU's security architecture. The EU is indeed limited by the institutional setting of its security architecture, as well as by some large member states like France which 'punched above its weight' to show its ability to seize the initiative.⁷⁷ This internal EU competition neutralised the influence of both individual member states and the Union as a whole. This distortion was even more important given that the crisis has had major consequences for Europe, which suffered from both the refugee crisis and an offensive Russian strategy of influence.

Moscow took "a leading role in the Syrian civil war by supporting Syrian President Assad, which has driven migratory flow toward Europe".⁷⁸ Russia thus contributed to a certain extent to the political divisions within the EU which it has since then been exploiting. Indeed, the terrorist threat and the refugee crisis combined have increased tensions within the EU, but also within NATO. NATO was brought in through the anti-smuggling mission in the Aegean Sea. However, such a mission "sits firmly within the realm of what the EU's CSDP should be capable of".⁷⁹ Coincidentally, the fact that French President Hollande invoked Article 42.7 TEU rather than Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty to call for a security response after the terrorist attack in Paris in November 2015 can appear as paradoxical, if not contradictory. Yet, while it could be argued that this invocation aimed "to shame Europe into greater burden

⁷⁶ See Stavridis, Stelios, "'Militarising' the EU: The concept of civilian power Europe revisited", *The International Spectator*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2001, pp. 43-50.

⁷⁷ Tannous, *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ Lightfoot, Jeff, "US View: Atlanticism at Risk", in Oliver, Tim (ed.), LSE IDEAS, *Dahrendorf Forum Special Report*, SR022, May 2016, p. 10.

⁷⁹ Weintraub, Carrie, "NATO Redefined?", *FIIA comment*, no. 9, Helsinki, March 2016, p. 1.

sharing",⁸⁰ it can also be considered an impetus for further investment in a Europe as a security actor. And NATO's anti-smuggling mission can be seen less as "a reaction to the humanitarian catastrophe at sea" than "a response to growing Russian assertiveness".⁸¹

In its search for regional hegemony in the Middle East, Moscow also operates revisionist tactics vis-à-vis the EU and its member states. Russia's engagement in Syria appears as a quest for predation, since its "re-emergence as a world power has become the first priority of its political agenda".⁸² Recalling Waltz's neorealism,⁸³ the perception of such a polar resurrection has the potential to revive the old Cold War paradigm and lead to a re-intensification of transatlantic relations. If "a strong and balanced approach to Russia"⁸⁴ is considered necessary, the prerequisite is a 'strong and balanced' Euro-Atlantic relationship. For now, in the context of regional competition for hegemony, the transatlantic partners face the risk to divert from each other by being drawn into "the vortex of centrifugal systemic forces".⁸⁵ Russia perceives the EU as a continuation of the US threat. From a structural realist point of view, Russia's assertion on the world stage calls for an upswing in terms of rhetoric, resources and capacities on each side of the Atlantic. In other words, it calls for more strategic autonomy for the EU.

Transatlantic relations transformed: towards a leadership swap?

The Middle East turmoil is marked by the concomitance of two phenomena: reinforced intra-state and transnational ethno-sectarian tensions – not entirely independent of the rise of ISIS – and an evolving geopolitical configuration of states' relations and competition at the regional level. In this context, hegemonic competitors (re)emerge as disruptive players. Such a disruption calls for a new approach of the strategically predominant actor – namely the US. It also calls for a reconfiguration of this actor's relationship with its closest allies.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸¹ Unal, Beyza, "NATO hopes to assure allies while saving refugees", Chatham House, London, 11 March 2016, retrieved 15 February 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/nato-hopes-assure-allies-while-saving-refugees>

⁸² Nguyen, Hang Thi Thuy, "The US-EU Partnership: More Necessary than Ever", *Global Change, Peace and Security*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2016, p. 7.

⁸³ Waltz, *op. cit.*

⁸⁴ Carter, Ashton, "A Strong and Balanced Approach to Russia", *Survival*, vol. 58, no. 6, December 2016 – January 2017, p. 62.

⁸⁵ Tocci & Alcaro, *op. cit.*, p. 374.

“During the Cold War, European governments offered solidarity to their superpower patron in exchange for security and a junior role in the partnership that ran the world. This arrangement gave them at least a sense of power, without much weight of responsibility.”⁸⁶ Transatlantic relations were thus steered by a ‘transactional’ model of leadership which was ultimately based on the interests of the US.⁸⁷ However, the end of the Cold War has transformed the transatlantic partnership in a more ‘intrinsically dynamic’ relationship.⁸⁸ The US would benefit from implementing a ‘transformational leadership’⁸⁹ that increases transatlantic cohesiveness by empowering the EU and taking into account its specificities. From such a point of view, the vacuum in the Middle East resulting from the US withdrawal does not only benefit Russia, it also leaves room for the EU.

Transposing Snyder’s approach to alliance politics to EU-US relations, powers in an ‘asymmetrical alliance’ take the risk of becoming entrapped.⁹⁰ Building on Simon’s affirmation that “the US ‘rebalance’ to Asia is in Europe’s interest”,⁹¹ the Syrian crisis appears as a ‘window of opportunity’ for the EU to take the lead in formulating a transatlantic response to the turmoil in its greater neighbourhood. This requires commitment from both the EU and its member states. Instead of simply ‘externalising’ the US’ Middle East burden,⁹² the current upheavals call for a better ‘division of labour’ and for Europe to assume its responsibilities. In a ‘post-American world’,⁹³ the time for a ‘post-American Europe’⁹⁴ has come.

The transatlantic approach to crises in the Middle East and North Africa region has worked for a long time on the basis of the US providing ‘hard’ power and the EU ‘civilian’ and/or ‘normative’ power through its ‘structural foreign policy’.⁹⁵ This approach has proven to be inefficient when confronted with the Arab Spring.

⁸⁶ Shapiro, Jeremy & Nick Witney, *Towards a Post-American Europe: A Power Audit of EU-US Relations*, London, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2009, p. 7.

⁸⁷ Struye de Swielande, *op. cit.*, pp. 148-149.

⁸⁸ Tocci & Alcaro, *op. cit.*, p. 368.

⁸⁹ Struye de Swielande, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

⁹⁰ Snyder, Glenn H., “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics”, *World Politics*, vol. 36, no. 4, 1984, pp. 461-495.

⁹¹ Simon, Luis, “The United States: Holding the Fort”, in Grevi, Giovanni & Daniel Keohane (eds.), *Challenges for European Foreign Policy in 2015: How Others Deal with Disorder*, Madrid, FRIDE, 2015, p. 29.

⁹² See Krieg, Andreas, “Externalizing the Burden of War: The Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East”, *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 1, 2016, pp. 97-113.

⁹³ Zakaria, Fareed, *The Post-American World*, London, Penguin Books, 2nd edition, 2011.

⁹⁴ Shapiro & Witney, *op. cit.*

⁹⁵ Keukeleire & Delreux, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

Combining all the symptoms of both the post-Arab Spring socio-political turmoil and the regional power reconfiguration,⁹⁶ the Syrian conflict has been shaped by the new US-Russian bipolar dynamics that seem to have sidestepped the EU, at the risk of playing a rather ‘accessory’⁹⁷ part in regional crises.

From a structural realist perspective, however, such a context can be analysed as a ‘lynchpin moment’ with a long-term impact for the EU as a foreign policy actor. Despite vacillations, the EU seems at least partially “to have given up its traditional reluctance in favour of a more assertive role in global politics, seeking co-equal leadership”⁹⁸ with the US, or at least should do so. The Syrian crisis, combined with Russia’s reassertion, turned out to be an existential stake for the EU to formulate its strategic rhetoric.

The EU Global Strategy: a strategic leap?

Despite the progressive building of a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), European strategic rhetoric has remained a prerogative of states, avoiding “any EU-wide reconsideration of strategic needs and objectives”.⁹⁹ However, history has proven that the CFSP has at times been enhanced through successive crises; the war in Syria thus opens the possibility for a major leap forward.

Wallace argues that the EUGS “called for the EU to accept that it must take responsibility for its own security [...] to develop a more concerted external message to counter hostile narratives from elsewhere and to accept the need for closer defence cooperation”.¹⁰⁰ In this regard, the Syrian conflict can be enlightening for two reasons. First, being marginalised, Europeans should draw lessons from the conflict and explore new formulas of action at the EU level rather than at the member states’ level. Second, developing a coherent, firm and workable strategy is indispensable for coping with predatory hegemons. With the EUGS initiating a new strategic rhetoric, the geopolitical reconfiguration at stake may then be an opportunity for a *sui generis*

⁹⁶ See Aoun, Elena, « L’Union européenne en Méditerranée : puissance en repli, normes en déshérence ? », *Politique européenne*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2013, p. 76.

⁹⁷ Pierini, Marc, *In Search of an EU Role in the Syrian War*, Brussels, Carnegie Europe, August 2016, p. 14.

⁹⁸ Fröhlich, Stefan, “Transatlantic Leadership in a Multipolar World: The EU Perspective”, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2016, p. 418.

⁹⁹ Wallace, William, “European Foreign Policy since the Cold War: How Ambitious, how Inhibited?”, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2017, p. 77.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

EU foreign policy, which could allow the EU to assert itself as well as a regional hegemon, in the sense of Mearsheimer.

Conclusion: towards 'post-American' transatlantic relations?

Characterised by a new balance of power at the extra-regional level, the proxy war rationale in Syria echoes the Ukrainian conflict, perceived in the Middle East as its complex 'continuation'.¹⁰¹ Through a realist approach, this paper has explored the implications of Russia's reassertion for both the Euro-Atlantic approaches towards Syria and the Middle East and Euro-Atlantic relations themselves. It argues that in the regional power vacuum, Russia's engagement has highlighted the failure of the US and the EU as security actors and of their policies towards the region. Furthermore, Russia's reassertion as a regional hegemon represents a major challenge for Euro-Atlantic cohesion, and is likely to lead to a 'forced emancipation' of the EU from the US as a strategic foreign policy actor. It must not be overestimated¹⁰² in the context of the region's 'systemic crisis',¹⁰³ that Russia's reassertion is a symptom that the "rise of the rest"¹⁰⁴ proves to shape post-American world politics. And as long as the US depends on Russia's cooperation on a certain number of international issues, tensions will keep rising in what appears to be, if not a new Cold War, a 'Cold Peace'.¹⁰⁵

Showcasing new regional dynamics, marked by sectarian confrontations and unprecedented geopolitical tensions, the Syrian conflict is a key milestone for transatlantic relations in a contested post-Cold War world order. Requiring a forceful response while avoiding any direct confrontation, the crisis exposes "vexing policy challenges"¹⁰⁶ to the Euro-Atlantic community, both with regard to Russia but also for transatlantic relations *per se*. Russia's reassertion has highlighted the shortcomings of the Euro-Atlantic community when confronted to such complex multi-dimensional foreign policy issues. The EU's role has been considerably undermined, not only as a military actor, but also as a second-tier – if not absent – player in the rather

¹⁰¹ Kepel, Gilles, quoted in Rupnik, Jacques & Gilles Kepel, "Entre Est et Sud. L'Europe face aux crises dans ses voisinages", in Rupnik, Jacques (ed.), *Géopolitique de la démocratisation. L'Europe et ses voisinages*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2014, p. 287.

¹⁰² Dubien, Arnaud, « Russie : l'éternel « retour de la puissance pauvre » ? », *Revue internationale et stratégique*, vol. 3, no. 103, pp. 105-111.

¹⁰³ Stepanova, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁴ Zakaria, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Doran, Peter B., "America's New Direction in Foreign Policy", *European View*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2015, p. 253.

¹⁰⁶ Charap, Samuel & Jeremy Shapiro, "Consequences of a New Cold War", *Survival*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2015, p. 37.

unsuccessful diplomatic peace process negotiations in Syria. Brussels was barely involved in the transatlantic process, substituted with a direct channel between Washington and Paris.¹⁰⁷ Until now, the EU has focused on 'societal security' and region-wide development initiatives while ignoring the geopolitical reality. By contrast, the US seemed to be blind to societal and sectarian conflictual patterns as well as Russia's interests as a power player. The current turmoil proved this silo-based transatlantic approach to be sterile insofar as it ignored the regional dynamics and their transversal character.

Yet, beyond these shortfalls, the current situation could also be an opportunity for a pragmatic reconfiguration allowing the Euro-Atlantic community to fill the 'value gap'¹⁰⁸ between American 'exceptionalism' and European 'universalism'. The US withdrawal from the region is also an incentive for the EU to assert itself as a pragmatic security actor. The EU would have room for manoeuvre to build on its own assets in the Mediterranean. The American 'unilateral moment' in the Middle East is over, and the US no longer has the ability or the means to determine the region's (geo)political agenda. Charap and Shapiro argue that during the second term of the Obama Administration a certain "Cold War nostalgia in Washington" was recalled as "a period of comforting predictability".¹⁰⁹ However, the world order is no longer the same and, most importantly, no longer predictable: an unstable foreign policy under the Trump presidency will undoubtedly have considerable resonance and impact on the Middle East's geopolitical equilibrium.

Obama's early Middle East policy relied on three interlinked objectives: withdrawing from Iraq, restoring America's image to build confidence and 'containing' the foes while reinitiating dialogue – demonstrated by the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. By contrast, today Trump's foreign policy remains vague and unclear: between 'soft isolationism'¹¹⁰ and a return to confrontational unilateralism on the one hand and 'belligerent minimalism' on the other.¹¹¹ While decreasing the US's involvement in the

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Ambassador Gardner, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁸ Fröhlich, Stefan, *The New Geopolitics of Transatlantic Relations: Coordinated Responses to Common Dangers*, Washington, DC, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 2012, p. 68.

¹⁰⁹ Charap & Shapiro, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹¹⁰ Bouchet, Nicolas, *The 2016 Elections in the United States: Effects on the EU-US Relationship*, In-Depth Analysis EP/EXPO/B/AFET/FWC/2013-08/Lot3/04, PE 578.030, Brussels, European Parliament Directorate General for External Policies, January 2017, p. 6.

¹¹¹ Lynch, Marc, "Belligerent Minimalism: The Trump Administration and the Middle East", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2016, pp. 127-144.

Middle East and support to the Syrian rebels, Trump also wants to eradicate ISIS. If this approach will go on par with a renewed tolerance vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes, Bouchet predicts that Trump would also seek “unconditional rapprochement with Russia”,¹¹² which would have considerable consequences for Euro-Atlantic relations. However, President Trump did not hesitate to bomb a Syrian military airport in response to a chemical attack in April 2017. This bombing was launched without concertation with the partners and was accompanied by a verbal condemnation of Tehran and Moscow.¹¹³ It thus seems that, although Euro-Atlantic relations may be experiencing a period of doubt, an US-Russia rapprochement might not be on the agenda. In the end, the currently determining factor of the US policy towards the Middle East is uncertainty. In an unstable geopolitical environment, this uncertainty can be expected to push for an assertion of European security and defence capabilities.

¹¹² Bouchet, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹¹³ “US says Russia bears responsibility for Assad’s gas attack – as it happened”, *The Guardian*, 7 April 2017, retrieved 1 May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2017/apr/07/us-syria-response-donald-trump-assad-pentagon-live>

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