

## Comparative Perspective: War and the Interests of Major Powers in the Regions

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**Abstract** *Great power is a sovereign state that is recognized as having the ability and expertise to exert its influence on a global scale. Great powers characteristically possess military and economic strength, which inspires states to enhance influence in strategically important regions. The Middle East region has always remained the centre of attraction for major powers due to its geostrategic importance and huge energy resources. The civil war in Syria is a prolonged armed conflict that began in 2011. U.S and Russia, being involved from the beginning in the conflict, have different interests and campaigns. Over the last four decades, another most important region has become a source of turmoil and unease, Afghan crises in the region that has always persisted as the source of concern for the global powers and a cornerstone for regional powers. Moscow's mistake to intervene in Afghanistan revealed its unassailable vulnerability. After the Soviet Union disintegration, Kabul has again become the focal point of US policy in the region post 9/11 terror attacks.*

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### Introduction

Every state act in the context of national interest. USA and USSR were both states that were rivals during the cold war. They were engaged in different wars but not apparently face to face. Both the states felt threats from each other conduct. During the cold war, Afghanistan became a matter of interest for both states which led to the direct intervention of the Red Army into Afghanistan. The Afghan war and the involvement of the major powers were not freed from intentions to have fulfilled their respective interests. Similarly, the Syrian war was a civil war, but both states had their respective interests to be fulfilled in the middle east. Both countries acted in the context of their respective interests (Zacharay,2021)

### Afghan war

Afghanistan, a landlocked country, once remained a neighbouring state to the mighty USSR. The story of the Afghan war began with the civil uprising in the province of Heart against the liberal initiatives of the Communist regime of the

country, which angered the conservative people. A huge uprising arose in Heart against the regime in March 1979. Initial, the regime tried to suppress the uprising through force. But with the passage of time, when it got accelerated, then the regime called for the help of the USSR, which was initially ignored and later on when the situation seemed out of control, then ultimately invaded by the USSR (Barnes, 2012).

### Syrian War

The Syrian civil war, a huge catastrophic conflict, raged between Assad forces and opposition that began as a result of civilian protests called Arab uprisings. The west is actively involved by supporting or against the regime. The level of violence enlarged each passing day and resulted in more proxies to the war. The use of chemical gases and weapons against civilians prompted the intervention of the U.S. and west to coup regime and settled democratic revolution. The brutality of war provided safe grounds for an alarming terrorist organization like ISIS, a direct

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threat to peace and the whole world. Russia is an ally of Assad, has continuously supported the regime against oppositions and other rival groups. Russian military intervention and airstrikes altered the grounds for the balance of power and helped Assad to retake hold of lost territories ([Robert, 2016](#)).

The turmoil in Syria, involvement of the west and Russia demands an interest for research involving the role of Russia and the United States. The study is concerned about the latent policies and presence of the U.S. and Russia with an objective to achieve their interest and decide the fate of Syria in their direction. The research is also intended to highlight the foreign policies of Russia and the U.S. to help in finding a possible solution to Syrian violence ([Charles, 2016](#)). Since the Syrian conflict is an ongoing geopolitical and strategic war among major and regional powers, the study of research will contribute in literature to the continuing complex war of Syria.

The objectives of this study are very clear and decisive: To develop insights into the war, not only by making opinion and objective reality but also contributes in explaining the interests of the U.S. and Russia. The Russian military intervention in Syria is aimed to support the Assad regime against armed rebels and other oppositions to reclaim territories taken by anti-Assad rebels. The U.S. is also militarily involved covertly supporting anti-Assad forces, demanding the toppling of the regime, and introducing the democratic system to Syria ([Robert, 2016](#)). Both states U.S. and Russia carried out airstrikes that resulted in thousands and hundreds of dead. The study will also analyze the level of violence created by the U.S and Russia.

### Research Methodology

The research is quite qualitative empirical based on observation and description. The empirical qualitative analysis provides rich and profound circumstantial data on what is happening, what is the new features and the current status of the existing issue or problem. And an in-depth analysis of the literature will be carried out. For this purpose, both primary and secondary sources will be referred to gather information. These include case reports, research studies. Secondary sources will be comprised of books, journals, magazines, newspapers, reports, documents, and internet sources.

No comprehensive and complete research has been conducted on this topic so far. The available data found in different papers, newspapers articles, journals on the topic only deals with one or another aspect of this paper. Therefore, complete research is required to be conducted to may access the phenomena from every aspect. The Syrian battle is an ongoing conflict that has regional and global implications for politics. This study will analyze the role of the U.S. and Russia in the Syrian conflict and will develop possible recommendations for the dispute.

### Comparative Approach

Comparative approach is used to conduct this research. The aim of comparative analysis is to define certainty by using rational reasoning, which cannot be possible to examine without comparison. It is one of the best ways to probe out the relationship comparatively between two case studies. Comparison in social sciences is to compare common patterns between case studies which are studied rather than as a whole.

### Major Actors Involved in both Wars

It is essential to have discussed the major actor involved in both wars. In both wars, both major power USA and Russia (formally USSR), along with the other regional actors. As eminent from the records of the history that in Afghan war Pakistan, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia and Qatar were on the same page with USA's perspective while India was the supporter of USSR and communist regime of Afghanistan. On the other hand, in the Syrian war, in Russian campaign included Iran and Assad's regime, while in the American campaign, the support of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey were oblivious ([Karren, 2013](#)).

### Literature Discussed

Book Reese Erlich (2014) based on personal reporting from Syria and the Middle East. The author examines the multifaceted nature of the Syrian conflict. The book is founded on interviews conducted by the author with different related persons, rebels and president Assad which presents better understandings of the ongoing war. Through personal connections in Syria, Reese Erlich deeply explains the support behind the Assad regime and the agendas of different rebel groups. The book also reveals the

interests of American leaders in the Middle East and deep insights into the role of Kurds and Iran.

Raymond Hinnabusch (2015) gives a summary of the rules and structures of the Middle Eastern regional system. The arena in which different local actors function includes Turkey, Egypt, Israel, Iran and Arab states of Syrian, Jordan and Iraq. He observes the resultant state policies by examining major disputes counting Arab Israeli conflict and the Gulf wars. The book evaluates the international intervention in the region and the significant reasons behind the creation of the regional structure. It also investigates the constant role of major powers such as the US and the former USSR. It further reiterates the process lead region assimilated into global capitalist market.

The Study of [Charles Glass \(2016\)](#) provides the best and comprehensive history of Syria. The author of the book personally knows Syria and has eye-witnessed the catastrophes since the 1970s. He has personal experience of visiting different parts of Syria since the ongoing uprising stirred in 2011. The author withdraws strong opinions that the west has remained unsuccessful to deliver its command over the consequences of the disputes. Moreover, the book deeply explains the foreign intervention in Syria that escalated the conflict into a proxy war for their game of interest. The book offers an intensive overview of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and explains the role of ISIS in reshaping the region of the Middle East.

Steve Coll, in his famous book "Ghost Wars", noted that the top-secret history about the role of the CIA in Afghanistan ranging from the hidden program against the Soviet Red Army during the Afghan war, the growth of the Taliban as well as the rise of Osama bin Laden, the undisclosed efforts by CIA officers along with their agents to search about the bin Laden in Afghanistan from 1998 onward. The book is mostly based on primary data.

[Robert F. Worth \(2016\)](#) work is one of the fascinating and suggestive studies on Middle East crises. The book captures the history of Arab spring with regard to the lives of humans breathed in it. In the book, based on varieties of interviews conducted, the author discussed turmoil and crises in the Middle East. Furthermore, the book illustrates the social damages caused by sectarian violence and how it led to the fragmentation of societies in the region.

[\(Lewis, 2005\)](#) After the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 their communist regime in the Soviet Union was encouraged by Karl Marx's 1848 Communist Manifesto. The Soviet Union communism was characterized by the nationalization of almost all means of production, the disintegration of individual liberties, and an spreading communism across the globe. On the other hand, United States identified as capitalist and democratic, strongly Soviet Union communist ideology and expansionist goals. US leadership felt it as a threat to its economic and strategic interests. Resultantly both the powers entered into a long lasting competition. It was a struggle for expansion of influence and securing world hegemony. The hostility and struggle continued till the disintegration of Soviet Union in December 1991.

Many works has been conducted on both Syrian and Afghan wars in different angles but there is lack of study on the comparison of the major powers in the context of game theory in both cases in comparative perspectives.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the study is GAME THEORY which includes both aspects, namely zero-sum game and non-zero-sum game. Zero-sum is a condition in game theory in which one actor's gain is equal to another's loss, so the total outcome is zero. It might have fewer participants as two actors or many more as many as millions of contributors. While on the other hand, in a non-zero-sum game, every actor who participated gains some benefit. Its most eminent First one is the chicken game. It is the kind of game that is used to create a situation in which the parties involved enter into a crisis in such a way as to cause massive harm to each other. Each player tries to sneer at the opponent to multiply the menace of shame in yielding. Another one is the prisoner's dilemma, and it is a game in which two actors or two individuals cannot implement policies jointly due to trust issues between them ([Tasci 2020](#)).

### Role and Interests of U.S. and Russia in Syrian Violence Syrian Crises

"The Syrian civil war is the deadliest conflict the 21st century has witnessed thus far". The "Arab Spring" protests tumbled Egyptian and Tunisian President Hosni Mubarak and Zine El Abidine

Ben Ali, respectively. That month, the demonstrations in Syria escalated, and one protest was carried out in the southern city of Derra. A schoolboy was detained for writing anti-government mottos on the wall. The protest soon spread over other cities of Syria, with more anti-Assad oppositions and adopted an organized structure (Robert, 2016). The Syrian army officers and soldiers refused to take orders to fire on civilians. At the end of July 2011, they announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Hence, this free Syrian army and other rebel groups started fighting against the Assad regime (Charles, 2016).

In 2012, the conflict exaggerated into all-out armed conflict, external support to both sides fueled the violence, and added “proxy wars” to the internal war (Charles, 2016). The “Syrian National Council” (SNC) was formed by the opposition with the support of Britain, France, Saudi Arabia, the United States and Turkey, and declares “SNC” a “legitimate representative” of Syria. “As fighting intensified, the UN declared a state of civil war in Syria, with rising new jihadist groups including “ Nusra Front”, Al Qaeda’s branch in Syria” (Robert, 2016: 237). The most dangerous and serious enemies of the Syrian regime are Da’esh (ISIS) and Al Nusra Front, which has been acknowledged as terrorist groups by the UN and barred in several countries. Iran adherent of President Assad has been backing and supporting “Hezbollah Lebanese Shia Militia” since the beginning of the conflict and helped the regime to gain many territories back. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, rival to Iran, is supporting rebels against Syrian regime to topple Assad. Iran and Saudi Arabia, both regional powers are involved from the beginning to enhance its regional strength and influence. One of the utmost vigorous and local forces fighting in the war is the Kurds. They have complicate situations, because they are fighting on various frontages. First, they are countering Turkey actions declared by them as terrorist groups, secondly fighting Islamic State and also combating Free Syrian Army (Sputnik, 2016).

### **U.S. Russian Role and Interests**

Since the initial months of Syrian violence, the United States administration under Obama has been actively involved in the war. The US imposed sanctions against the Assad government for killing civilians. Obama said in

writing statement, “The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside” (Scott & Joby, 2011). The United States resented President Assad and pressed moderating rebels to fight against the government. In June 2013, the U.S. government officials established the “supreme military council” consisting of representatives from rebel groups in order to terminate radical elements. The decision was taken after the Syrian regime used chemical weapons, leaving hundreds of civilians dead and injured, crossing the “red line” affirmed by Obama in 2012. The same year Obama administration doubled up the “non-lethal aid” to rebels to precisely

\$520 million (Karren, 2013). It has also been reported that U.S. officials provided arms and small anti-tanks to some moderate rebels groups. In end of 2013, the U.S postponed “non-lethal military aid” because of the confiscation of equipment depository by ISIS (Mark, 2014). However, the Obama administration did not find any peaceful solution to the conflict.

After Russian military intervention in late September, Barack Obama approved the resupply of weapons to Kurds and armed oppositions against ISIS, and reiterated U.S. support as Russia intervened militarily in the conflict (Scott, 2015). After Barack Obama, the new elected Donald Trump During the presidential campaign suggested “that Assad’s rule was better for Syria than the alternatives”. He said in his presidential debate that “We don’t know who the rebels are, If they ever did overthrow Assad, you may very well end up with worse than Assad”. He proposed further, the U.S. can cooperate with Russia and Syria to eliminate Islamic state. Trump has so far concentrated his policy fighting Islamic state in “northern Syria”, where Kurdish and Arab armed group are operational with U.S. special forces. Recent chemical gas attacks directed Donald Trump to strike missiles on Syria worsening U.S. Russian ties. President Donald Trump’s decision to strike Syrian military airfield marks a considerable escalation of U.S. involvement in the now six year Syrian civil war” (collin, 2017). “U.S ambassador to UN, Nikki Halay has said in an interview with CNN, that U.S. president Donald Trump is considering implementing new sanctions against Russia and Iran” (collin, 2017).

Assad declared the gas attack was contrived

by the west (BBC, 2017). The west and media blamed Assad for the attack. However, other journalists and independent media claimed that attack was coordinated by west to intervene militarily for hidden aims. Russian President Putin declared the chemical attack a “false flag”. Moscow said there is no evidence that chemical gas used by the Syrian regime and called the U.S. attack a clear violation of international law (Maria 2017). After U.S. Strikes, Donald trump has affirmed the relations between both states “may be at an all-time low”. As the strains over Syria increased, the U.S. president appeared to abandon his promises during the campaign to develop its relationship with Russia (Borger, 2017). Furthermore, both countries have different goals in Syria. The U.S. wants the downfall of ISIS and the formation of a political government that would lead to the end of civil war, and return of migrants. Russia pursues to protect the Syrian regime by maintaining its naval base and eradication threat from radical Muslims coming back to its home town (William, 2017).

“In early September 2015, rumours circulated of Russian airstrikes along with reports that Russian forces are conducting training drills inside regime territory” (Charles, 2016). The existence of Russian military presence in Syria, in spite of its withdrawal, defines the role of Russia in the Syrian crisis. Russia is still committed to supplying weapons, military equipment, military specialist to the Syrian regime, who are still functional at Hmeymim airbase and logistic centre in Tartous. Though Moscow claimed its air strikes would primarily target the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, analysts said it more often targeted other rebel groups, some backed by the United States and many intermingled with al-Qaeda’s affiliate near the front lines with the regime. Although Russian airstrikes demanded to mainly target ISIS and al-Qaeda, but it is merely battered Islamic state and mostly targeted other rebel groups funded by U.S (karren, 2016). Russian intervention helped the government to take back control over its population and lost territories. Moscow has been frequently vetoed “UN Security Council resolution” for removal of Bashar al Assad and provided political cover against crimes in united nation.

### Level of Violence

As the violence in Syria intensified and moved in sixth year, resulted in more than 465000 dead,

over million wounded, and more than twelve million Syrians left their homes, according to “United Nation” (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Use of Chemical and other weapons ensued hundreds and thousands of Syrians dead. People lacking food, health facilities are fading from hunger, and infectious diseases. The death toll increasing day by day, and responsible institutions remained silent to approach the problems of civilians. According to “SOHR” U.S led coalition attacks have been killed 7,371 people, of which 5,874 were ISIS combatants, 3,06 rebels and al Nusra Front, 90 regime people, and 1,101 (SOHR, 2017). These air attacks conducted from “22 September 2014 to 23 March 2017”. Russian air attacks according to “SOHR”, massacred 11,612 people, of which 3,284 Islamic state combatants, 5,013 civilians, and 3,315 al Nusra front and other opposition forces (SOHR, 2017).

### Afghan war, the role of USA and USSR

After the world war two both United States and Soviet Union (both members of allied group in the world war two) feared each other dominancy and hegemonic designs. A period of severe hostility and struggle for dominancy started which is known as Cold War. After Bolshevik revolution of 1917 there communist regime in Soviet Union encouraged by Karl Marx’s 1848 Communist Manifesto. The Soviet Union communism was characterized by the nationalization of almost all means of production, the disintegration of individual liberties, and a spreading of communism across the globe. (Lewis, 2005).

On the other hand, United States identified as capitalist and democratic, strongly Soviet Union communist ideology and expansionist goals. US leadership felt it as a threat to its economic and strategic interests. Resultantly both the powers entered into a long lasting competition. It was a struggle for expansion of influence and securing world hegemony. The hostility and struggle continued till the disintegration of Soviet Union in December 1991.

It was on January 4, 1980, that US President said that Soviet Union forces had attacked Afghanistan. The brutal forces attempted to conquer the country. (Lewis, 2005) America wanted freedom and independent for all and therefore America and rest of the countries would not allow Soviet Union deprive Afghans of

their freedom . In fact it was insincerity on the part of Americans where they were supporting the values of freedom and independence. The reality was that US government policies and actions, centered on the Soviet Union, aimed differently. Afghan war which lasted from December 1979 to February 1989 was caused by Soviet invasion of the country. America with assistance of its allies continued a secret operation to support guerrilla militia that struggled and fought against the Soviet forces. America provided funding of 60 million US dollars to mujahedin annually from 1980 to 1985. It was increased to four hundred and seventy US dollars in 1986 and it rose to six hundred and thirty million US dollars in 1987, 1988 and 1989. (Coll, 2004).

Some leading historians propagated that US was upset when Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and they responded by giving aid to the mujahidin. The aid and funding was aimed to protecting sovereignty of Afghanistan religious freedom of its people and to prevent Soviet Union expansion into the neighboring regions i.e. South Asia and Middle East. But the reality was revealed in 1996 when CIA director Robert Gates in his memoirs. The reality was that American government had started the funding 6 months before the Soviet Union invasion. (Gates, 1996).

Afghanistan had undergone a long period of political instability and military struggle for power among different groups, before the start of Afghan war. This land locked country was occupied first by Soviet Union in the 1980s and after 9/11 by United States, when war on terror started in 2001. (Saikal, 2004).

It was a golden period of peace and security when king Muhaammad Zahir Shah (1933-1973 ruled Afghanistan. When in 1973, Muhammed Daoud Khan overthrew Muhaammad Zahir Shah

A period of political instability and struggle for power started. Daoud government was dependent heavily on Soviet Union but soon he became conscious that this dependency will result in the loss aid from anti-Soviet sources. Resultantly his government was supported from the countries that were anti Soviet like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran. (Saikal, 2004) After the murder of Doud by People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan in 1978, Nur Muhammad Taraki became the leader of Afghanistan. Taraki's government was not acceptable to many particularly religious groups. A deadly civil disorder started which resulted in the removal of Tarakai from power in 1979. The Soviet Union on 25<sup>th</sup> December 1979 launched a full-fledged invasion of this land locked country and soon installed a new government. After the invasion the anti-Soviet groups came together and formed a group of Mujahedin. American government spent millions of dollars and supplied weapons and military supplies against Soviet military. Which ultimately resulted in oust of Soviet forces in 1989. (Coll, 2004)

## Conclusion

In both the case studies, both players had interests that compel them to become a party in the ongoing wars. In both wars [Syrian war (2011-2019) and Afghan War (1979-1989)] the players are same is the USA and Russia (formally known as USSR). The aim of the study was to study the outcomes of the war in the context of game theory. In Afghan war it was a zero- sum game as it benefitted USA the most while USSR got the defeat while on the other hand the conclusion of the Syrian war till 2019 showed the zero-sum game in favor of Russia.

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