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Strategic partners against terrorism 2.0?

Limits and possibilities for Russia–West
security cooperation in Syria

Kristin Haugevik and Julie Wilhelmsen



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Summary

In September 2015, in a much-cited address to the UN General Assembly, Russia's President Vladimir Putin called for a broad international coalition against international terrorism in Syria. 'On the basis of international law', he declared, 'we must join efforts to address the problems that all of us are facing'. While Putin also criticized 'the West' for its past interventions in the Middle East and North Africa, and for imposing its values on other nations, many observers read his statement as an attempt to restore Russia–West dialogue and practical cooperation post-Ukraine. The Russian President's invite was cautiously welcomed by Western states. Prior to Putin's speech, US President Barack Obama had affirmed that the United States had no desire to 'isolate Russia' or 'return to a cold war'. In the year that ensued, considerable time and diplomatic effort were put into finding a common way forward. However, one year down the road, hopes of a Russia–West negotiated solution in Syria have dried up. In October 2016, US Secretary of State John Kerry announced that the diplomatic dialogue with Russia over Syria had collapsed, with each side holding the other party to blame. In the period that followed, political relations between Russia and the West have gone from bad to worse. In December 2016, Russia hosted tripartite talks on Syria involving Russia, Iran and Turkey – effectively sidelining the United States. Why was it so difficult to shift the Russia–West relationship from 'conflict' to 'strategic cooperation' mode, when the leadership on both sides in 2015 signalled readiness to cooperate to defeat international terrorism in Syria? Our core argument is that ingrained mutual and official representations of the Other as an adversary rather than a potential partner made negotiations and collaboration difficult at the outset. Moreover, adversarial representations were constantly reiterated in the domestic debates in these states, as well as at times by the political leaderships who initiated and took part in the negotiations themselves. This made collaboration difficult.

Introduction

In September 2015, in a much-cited address to the UN General Assembly, Russia's President Vladimir Putin called for a broad international coalition against international terrorism in Syria. 'On the basis of international law', he declared, 'we must join efforts to address the problems that all of us are facing' (Putin 2015). While Putin also criticized 'the West' for its past interventions in the Middle East and North Africa, and for imposing its values on other nations, many observers read his statement as an attempt to restore Russia–West dialogue and practical cooperation post-Ukraine (e.g. *Time* 2015). The historical analogy was the momentum for strategic cooperation on terrorism emerging after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001. Back then, Washington and Moscow had recognized international terrorism as their shared enemy, and had taken steps to coordinate their anti-terror efforts (Wilhelmsen 2004; 2011). The Russian President's new invite at the UNGA summit was cautiously welcomed by Western states. Prior to Putin's speech, US President Barack Obama had affirmed that the United States had no desire to 'isolate Russia' or 'return to a cold war'. 'We want a strong Russia that is invested in working with us', he said, adding that his administration would collaborate 'with any nation, including Russia' to resolve the crisis in Syria (Obama 2015).¹

These conditional signals from the Russian and US leadership that strategic cooperation on Syria might be possible – at a time when Russia–West relations in general were considerably strained due to the Ukraine crisis – were sealed with a brief Putin–Obama handshake at the summit. In the year that ensued, considerable time and diplomatic effort were put into finding a common way forward. However, one year down the road, hopes of a Russia–West negotiated solution in Syria have dried up. In October 2016, US Secretary of State John Kerry announced that the diplomatic dialogue with Russia over Syria had collapsed, with each

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¹ Briefly put: the crisis in Syria emerged after a failed democratic uprising against the Assad regime in the spring of 2011, as part of what became known as the 'Arab Spring'.

side holding the other party to blame. In December 2016, Russia hosted tripartite talks on Syria involving Russia, Iran and Turkey – effectively sidelining the United States. Meanwhile, political relations between Russia and the West have gone from bad to worse. In this report, we ask: Why was it so difficult to shift the Russia–West relationship from ‘conflict’ to ‘strategic cooperation’ mode, when the leadership on both sides in 2015 signalled readiness to cooperate to defeat international terrorism in Syria?

At times when overall political relations are at a high conflict level, as Russia–West relations have been since 2014, strategic cooperation on a specific case may present an opportunity to begin rapprochement. In this report, we set off from the theoretical premise that the foreign-policy identities of states are profoundly relational, continuously reproduced through everyday interaction at the international and domestic levels. We hold that a state’s room for foreign policy manoeuvring is enabled and restricted by its encounters with other states on the international arena and by discursive negotiations at the domestic level. In the case in focus here, we argue that Russia’s longstanding rejection of a world-order dominated by the West, along with recurrent depictions of Russia as a ‘rule-breaker’ by leading Western states, made it difficult for state leaders to cooperate on Syria, and to patch up relations when events on the ground caused controversies.

In the first part of this report, we present our theoretical claim: that foreign-policy identities and positions are shaped in relation to international encounters and domestic discursive battles. In the second part, we identify some long-standing, alternative foreign-policy positions in Russian, US and British debates on identity, and what implications the different positions have for relations with the other side. In the third part, trace the course of Russia–West cooperation efforts on Syria in the year after Putin and Obama’s UNGA handshake. We identify three evolutionary phases in Russia–West cooperation efforts that year: ‘cautious cooperation’, ‘impetus lost?’ and ‘from renewed optimism to full collapse’. We conclude that ingrained representations of the Other as untrustworthy and deceitful have jeopardized the possibilities for cooperation – particularly when the political leaders on both sides are held accountable to these representations by their domestic audiences and fail to discipline their own language of animosity at the negotiating table. Thus, rather than helping to reconcile Russia and the West post-Ukraine, cooperation efforts over Syria have come to epitomize the deep gap between the Western liberal internationalist order and Russia’s rejection of that same order.

How foreign policy emerges

Contrary to the claim that states are best perceived as unitary, predictable foreign-policy actors on the international political scene, we make the case here for viewing foreign policy as shaped through a two-level social interaction process, occurring simultaneously at the international and the domestic levels (cf. Putnam 1988). At the international level, states' foreign policy identities are formed and sustained through the relational dynamics with significant others. These relations between Self and Other may assume different forms: friendly, cooperative, rivalling or antagonistic, depending on what states themselves 'make of it' (Wendt 1992, 1999). The stability of such relational structures hinges on at least two factors: the degree to which certain representations of the other party are continuously reproduced in language and manifest themselves and are reconfirmed in everyday 'doings'. State identities are seen as constituted and upheld 'through a stylized repetition of acts', achieved not through isolated actions 'but rather a regulated process of repetition' (Campbell 1998: 10). We are, in other words, interested here in routinized interaction patterns over time. Importantly, and as Mitzen (2006) has pointed out, states will often seek to routinize and uphold also negative relations with significant other states, because that can help them to preserve a certain image of Self on the international political arena. Further, Mitzen continues, during the Cold War, the United States and the USSR both saw themselves as 'security seekers', while depicting the other party as 'aggressive' and wishing to overturn the status quo. This understanding of Self, and of the Other in relation to it, effectively led these states into 'arms races, disputes over missiles in Cuba, and proxy wars in Afghanistan and elsewhere' (Mitzen 2006: 353–56). By expanding the realist definition of security to include concerns about identity preservation as well, we get an explanation of persisting conflicts among security-seeking states, including 'enduring rivalries' (ibid: 342–43).

We see Russia–West relations in general as being constituted and constrained by ingrained identity positions and interaction patterns. Identity positions are produced and upheld in official statements by the top political leadership. They tend to remain fairly stable in a state's foreign policy discourses, but are never totally fixed. Consequentially, neither a state's interests nor the nature of its relations with other states can be seen as pre-given or eternal – change is always possible. We build on the assumption that both domestic debates on understandings of Self and Other as well as external exchanges with states depicted as 'foes' or

'friends' can contribute to challenging and altering identity positions and foreign relations. This 'two-level understanding' of how security policy is produced simultaneously at the domestic and the international levels has already been fruitfully applied on Russian security policy (Hopf 2005; Tsygankov 2006, 2016; Snetkov 2016) as well as on US security policy, perhaps most notably regarding Iran and Israel (Ansari 2006; Mearsheimer and Walt 2007).

More specifically, we hold that Russia–West dynamics cannot be understood without taking into account two social interaction patterns. The first concerns discursive negotiation or interaction *at the domestic level*. In Russia, but also in the United States and Britain, foreign policy is ultimately the prerogative of the president or government. Attributes of the political leadership – such as political colouration, ideology and overall profile – are thus likely to have an influence on the policy choices made by the state. This is also how foreign policy tends to be presented in international media – as 'government-made'. In our view, however, no leaders or governments are isolated from or uninfluenced by the domestic debate. As Peter Gourevitch (1978: 903) has put it, any 'explanation of the orientation of state policy requires some examination of the politics behind state action'. Questions concerning threats, partners/adversaries and, more broadly, the state's own role and identity on the international stage, are continuously debated in the domestic spheres – in national assemblies, by interest groups, in the media, in academic circles and among the general public. State leaders respond to and are held accountable to such debates, and their room for manoeuvre at the international negotiations table is constrained by dominant representations of Self and Other in the domestic debate. In the context of the present case, we indicate that the dominant representations of Self and Other in the Russian, British and US domestic debates have the capacity to induce changes in how identity positions are articulated at the level of the state leadership – and thereby also changes in the possibilities for these states to establish cooperation on fighting international terrorism in Syria.

Second, we hold that change in the enduring identity positions, interests and foreign relations of a given state can be set in motion through its interaction *with other states*. As noted by Hopf (2005), interaction in meetings between leaders of states triggers varying articulations of great-power identities. While Hopf observed that different Russian identities emerge at meetings with different state leaders, we propose that how states represent and speak of each other during such encounters, even the mere fact of an encounter taking place, serves to shape and empower different understandings of Self and Other. The dynamics here tend to be symmetrical and mutually reinforcing: the absence of encounters, or adversarial representations of the Other

during such encounters, will trigger adversarial representations of the Other on the other side as well. Conversely, encounters, and the recognition they imply, as well as positive representations of the Other as a potential partner during such encounters, will empower such identification of the Other on the other side as well. We suggest that the interactions between Russia and key Western powers – here represented by the United States and Britain – at the negotiating table on Syria have the capacity to produce changes in enduring identity positions. Such changes may help to make possible negotiated agreements as well as collaborative actions on the ground in Syria, if a ‘positive’ dynamic is set in motion at this level. Conversely, adversarial exchanges at the international negotiating table or non-encounter, will make such collaboration more unlikely, particularly if it is coupled with strong adversarial representations of the Other in the domestic debate.

In our analysis below, we apply this multi-level approach to the study of Russia-West cooperation efforts on Syria. We argue that these states’ policies on Syria, and on cooperation with the other party, often take their cue from enduring identity positions; but we also show how these identity positions are reproduced through statements and interaction patterns at the international scene and through discursive negotiations at home. We begin by identifying some enduring, alternative foreign policy positions in Russian, US and British identity debates which entail them differing implications for the view of Self, and for whether the Other is presented as ‘friend’, ‘partner’, ‘rival’ or ‘adversary’. Such positions do not amount to a ‘grand strategy’ which details the actions ahead. Rather, they stipulate a direction that makes conflict or cooperation on single events more likely, or less so. We present these enduring identity positions at the outset in an effort to provide a point of reference for analyzing the more complex and dynamic two-level interaction patterns pursued in the third part of this report.

Russia: Westernizer, statist, civilizationist?

In Russia at least three long-lasting, alternative foreign policy positions can be identified since Putin first became president in 2000: a ‘Westernizer’ position, a ‘statist’ position, and a ‘civilizationist’ position. The *Westernizer* position has been given many different names in the academic literature.² In essence, this position sees Russia as aligned with the West, against the Soviet Union, and as part of a universal civilization of modern liberal market democracy. It rejects Soviet

² ‘Westernizer’ (Neumann 1996), ‘Atlanticist’ (Rahr and Krause 1995), ‘Liberal’ (Hopf 2002), ‘Liberal Westernizer’ (Tsygankov 2005).

economic achievements, the Orthodox Church and ethno-nationalism as desirable elements in contemporary Russian identity (Hopf 2002). The association with the liberal West necessarily implies a disassociation from authoritarianism as well as from conservative religion and traditional values, which makes Islamic movements and Islamic states unlikely partners. The dominance of the Westernizer position in the early 1990s resulted in policies aimed at 'strategic partnership with the West', even 'integration' (Tsygankov 2016: 5). It could be argued that this position was to some extent projected early in Putin's presidency, especially during the period of Western–Russian strategic cooperation on terrorism following the events of 9/11 (Hopf 2005: 233–35). Or one could argue that it was stronger in Russian foreign policy during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency (2008–2012) (Tsygankov 2016: 6). However, when the crisis in Syria emerged, from 2011 onwards, this position, depicting the West as an ally and friend, had all but disappeared from the Kremlin's foreign-policy discourse.

The second identity position, the *statist* position (Tsygankov 2016), which also has been variously labelled in the literature,³ dominated Russian policies from the mid-1990s. This position rejects the idea that Russia is or should become a part of the West. Russia is 'identified with an idealized Soviet past, but explicitly rejects an ethnonational conceptualization of Russia and emphasizes the multinational character of the Russian Federation' (Hopf 2005: 234–35).⁴ This position does not necessarily call for confrontation with the West, but, as Tsygankov (2016: 6) points out, it explicitly ranks the values of power, stability and sovereignty over those of freedom and democracy. Restoration of Russia's great-power status is to be achieved through economic development and maintenance of military power at home (*ibid.*). In external politics, the *statist* position advances the image of Russia as a powerholder striving to preserve its own geopolitical interests and areas of influence in the world. Thus, competition among great powers is taken for granted; security is understood as resulting from a state's individual strength more than from collective efforts. The UN is seen as a key institution for upholding the balance of power between states. The *statist* position does not exclude interaction with the West – it acknowledges the value of strategic and tactical cooperation (Tsygankov

³ 'Realist' (Rahr and Krause 1995), 'Multipolar' (Fyodorov 2006), 'Centrist' (Hopf 2005).

⁴ As Tsygankov (2016: 100) notes when discussing the *statist* position of the 1990s, 'to many *statists* the notion of Eurasia became symbolic in describing Russia's special geopolitical location and multi-ethnic nature' and they 'warned against Russia unequivocally siding with Europe or the United States at the expense of relationships with key participants from the Eurasian continent, such as China, India and the Islamic world'.

2016: 99–100).⁵ In this position, pursuing friendship and cooperation with sovereign states in the Islamic world would be a logical policy, combined with a more antagonistic approach to non-state actors of any stripe. The statist position made increasing inroads into Russian foreign-policy discourse from 2000 and up until 2012, becoming the dominant position on many foreign-policy issues. During this period, the cautious and conditional view of the West implicit in the statist position was tilted towards cooperation on foreign-policy issues at times when terrorism was projected as the greater evil. The accentuation of terrorism as the shared foe and key external Other in US, British and Russian official discourse paved the way for a brief reinvigoration of mutually positive appraisals following 9/11 as well as an also brief tactical alliance (O’Loughlin et al. 2004; Wilhelmsen 2005). There was also an opening towards cooperation with Western powers in Russian foreign policy after the Beslan terrorist attack in 2004 (Tsygankov 2016: 163).

Finally, at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Westernizer position, we find what Tsygankov (2016: 8) calls the *civilizationist* position. This position values Soviet economic achievements, the Orthodox Church as well as ethno-nationalism, and rejects US individualism and its economic model.⁶ Russia is represented as a unique Eurasian power, and it is indicated that there is one strand committed to Orthodox Christianity and another committed to a view of Russia as a synthesis of various religions.⁷ Compared to the statist position, the civilizationist position portrays a one-sidedly negative image of the West, and makes the fight against Western expansionism or ‘imperialism’ a core rationale for challenging the Western system of values through Russian expansionism. In line with these representations, civilizationist responses to security dilemmas have always been more ‘aggressive’ than those of the statist (Tsygankov 2016: 8). The civilizationist view of Russia did not inform official Kremlin discourse in any significant way until 2012. However, following the large-scale demonstrations in Moscow in connection with the Duma

⁵ Tsygankov (2016: 8–9) sees a core difference between Primakov’s project, which was to rebuild the former Soviet Union and contain the United States through strategic alliance with China and India, and that of Putin, which has been to emphasize bilateral relations in Russia’s periphery and develop a partnership with the USA to deter terrorism.

⁶ This position which projects a deeply anti-Western Russian identity has also been given various labels, for example ‘Eurasianist’ (Rahr and Krause, 1995), ‘Romantic Nationalist’ (Neumann 1996) ‘hard Traditionalist’ (Fyodorov 2006).

⁷ Hopf (2009): conservative. The Eurasianists ‘view Russia as a constantly expanding land-based empire in a struggle for power against sea-based Atlanticism, associated especially with the United States’ (see also Laruelle).

elections in autumn 2011, this position began to emerge in many official statements, peaking with the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁸

Each of these positions is likely to play into Russia's current relations with the West in Syria, and on military actions undertaken. If, for instance, the Westernizer position were to make inroads into official discourse (which currently seems doubtful), Russian policies on Syria would be directed more at cooperation with the United States and Britain, and be guided by humanitarian concerns as much as military ones. Russia would pursue its policies more through international institutions than unilaterally. The authoritarian Assad regime in Syria would to a greater extent be problematized in Kremlin rhetoric, and would not get Russia's support on the ground.

A statist position on Russian policy in Syria rather prescribes that the Kremlin would seek limited and tactical cooperation with the West, but as a means of defeating the terrorist threat rather than as an aim in itself. Accentuating the terrorist threat while downplaying the West as a threat in Russian foreign policy rhetoric would enable broader tactical cooperation with the US-led coalition. However, given the primacy of the values of power, stability and sovereignty over freedom and democracy embedded in this position, Kremlin statements would attach a positive value to the Assad regime and take action in Syria to strengthen Russia's strategic position at the expense of any oppositional, non-state forces – be they 'moderate' or 'terrorist'. Russia would pursue a heavy-handed policy against such forces in Syria, in line with its sympathy for strongly centralized state power and the view of terrorism as an existential threat to power and stability in the Russian Federation (Wilhelmsen 2017). Given this position's accentuation of the Eurasian and multi-ethnic identity of Russia, there would probably also be positive descriptions of Muslim states in the region, as well as cautious diplomatic and cooperative efforts in relation to these states. Russia's engagement in the UN would be directed at using its veto power to secure its interests and as a means of balancing other powers – not at strengthening the power of the UN as a multilateral institution and key interlocutor for world peace. Russia's voting and statements in the UN on Syria would be as likely to align with those of key participants from the Eurasian continent, as with those of the United States and Britain. However, Russia would

⁸ For a brief account see Tsygankov (2016: 237–38). In Putin's rhetoric, there was a new emphasis on Russian civilization as distinct from Western civilization: he presented ethnic Russians as being the core of the state and of Russian culture and emphasized traditional and spiritual values, like family and religion.

still be seeking approval within the existing world order, and from the United States specifically, rather than seeking to overthrow that order.

Finally, a civilizationist on Kremlin's policy in and on Syria, would probably mean a pattern of Russian action isolated from and in competition (even confrontation) with the West. In negotiations on Syria, Russia would demand to be recognized as an *equal* participant in shaping the world order; it might also attempt to outline an alternative order. Russia would act alone if Western powers ignored its demands. Russian statements and voting in the UN on Syria would probably reveal a pattern of opposition to US/British practices, with the UN seen as a means of reducing US power – independent of pragmatic interests on specific issues. In relations with the Assad regime, Russia would be supportive, given the emphasis on the importance of a strong state. However, it would not necessarily be committed to Assad as the sole possible leader of Syria, and would simultaneously pursue policies of spreading Russian cultural influence in Syria. Given the different strands of this civilizationist position, relations with other Muslim countries engaged in Syria could be neutral or cooperative (if committed to the idea of Russia as a synthesis of various religions), or isolationist (if committed to the idea of Russia as committed to Orthodox Christianity). However, accentuation in Russian rhetoric of non-state Islamic actors and opposition as enemies, accompanied by harsh security practices intended to quench these forces in Syria, would be logical according to the civilizationist position.

Many popular accounts have read Russia's engagement in Syria since 2011 as a manifestation and continuation of the prominence of the civilizationist position in Kremlin foreign policy. Given the combined and dynamic understanding of policy production that informs this study, we challenge this assertion. Instead, we seek to trace and analyse the changing representations of Self and Other that have guided Russian policies on Syria over the last year, evaluate which of the alternative identity positions are most strongly invoked as well as how these changes fluctuate with domestic debates and exchanges with external Others – the Western powers in particular. Ultimately, we are looking into the prospects for great-power interaction in Syria becoming a vehicle for improving Russian–Western relations. While the Ukraine crisis arguably brought civilizationist positions to prominence in

Kremlin discourse, the crisis in Syria initially brought back statism as the key prism through which Russian foreign policy was shaped.⁹

The United States: Internationalist, nationalist, realist?

As on the Russian side, at least three enduring positions can be identified in the US domestic foreign policy debate: a 'liberal internationalist', a 'nationalist' and a 'realist' position (Nau 2013). The *liberal internationalist* position has its historical roots in Wilsonianism.¹⁰ Advocating world peace through the promotion of democracy and nation building, it opposes isolationism and *laissez-faire* policies – the United States should work proactively, indeed strive to 'make the world safe for democracy' (Wilson 1917). This position tends to view the liberal world order as morally superior to any alternative, and its values as universally valid. That in turn means that the international community is morally obliged to act when other states do not abide by these universal rules. Diplomacy is the preferred path to resolving international conflict, and should always be attempted first. Rule-breaking states are therefore likely to be disciplined first by means of diplomatic isolation or economic sanctions – the use of military force should be a last resort, and not to be used without multilateral consent. The liberal internationalist position comes in many different shades. In the recent US political landscape, it has encompassed more 'hawkish' political figures like Senator John McCain (Republican) and former Secretary of State/2016 presidential candidate Hillary Clinton (Democrat). As for President Obama himself, it has been argued that, especially in his early years in the White House, there were distinctly realist elements in his rhetoric and policy choices, but that his foreign policy legacy overall also has liberal internationalist traits (see below). As for friends and foes on the international arena, to liberal internationalists, 'goodwill, patience, and persistent cooperation with other states' is the key to achieving the ultimate goals of a liberal world order characterized by 'multilateral decision-making, economic globalization, non-proliferation, promotion of human rights, and the spread of freedom' (see Nau 2014). The foes are the rule-breakers – in principle any state which refuses to abide by the rules of the liberal world order.

⁹ For a more detailed overview of Russia's approach to the Syria crisis between 2011 and 2015, see Wilhelmsen & Haugevik (2016).

¹⁰ Sometimes also referred to as 'liberal interventionism'. According to *The Atlantic*, Obama sees four positions in the US domestic foreign-policy debate: 'isolationism', 'realism', 'liberal interventionism' and 'internationalism'. Obama places himself partly within the realist, partly the internationalist position (Goldberg 2016).

By contrast, the *nationalist* foreign policy position assumes that all states should be concerned mainly with their own national security. Often associated with isolationism and non-interventionism, and historically linked to President George Washington as well as US foreign policy during the 1930s, its starting position is that all states, including the United States, should concentrate on nation-building at home, and on keeping their own territory safe. The establishment of alliances is 'admissible to defend the country', but these will be temporary measures (Nau 2013: 45). Although his foreign policy statements have been, at best, inconsistent, it has been suggested that recent president-elect Donald Trump is employing nationalist conceptions (see e.g. Hirsh 2016). During his campaign, Trump pledged to 'put the interests of the American people, and American security, above all else'. He has recurrently criticized past US interventions in other states and, in particular, the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in Iraq and Libya, which he sees as deriving from 'the dangerous idea that we could make Western democracies out of countries that had no experience or interest in becoming a Western Democracy'. He has also signalled that the United States is now 'getting out of the nation-building business' (Trump 2016).¹¹ As for friends and foes, Trump has said that European allies in NATO will have to step up and 'do their part', they must contribute more to defence and depend less on the United States. He has also said that he will seek 'an easing of tensions and improved relations with Russia' to end the current 'cycle of hostility'; and that he expects Russia to 'be reasonable' (ibid.).¹²

Finally, the *realist* position in US foreign policy debate is often linked to Henry Kissinger and his 'Realpolitik'. Kissinger, who was Secretary of State under both Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford in the 1970s, is noted for his emphasis on diplomatic handcraft and for advocating rapprochement in US–Soviet relations. The realist position holds that that the United States should strive to uphold power balance also in other regions, in order to safeguard US interests and territory.¹³ This position promotes 'institutional cooperation among allies', but is usually sceptical towards any steps that might empower adversaries. Nau (2013) also notes that while the realist position 'may consider Western values superior', it does not deem them to be universal. For realists, values 'apply at home, not abroad' – thus in contrast to the

¹¹ Arguably, Obama also invoked this position when he in 2011 declared: 'America, it is time to focus on nation building here at home' (White House 2011).

¹² This is not unique to Trump: it will be recalled how, in 2009, the Obama administration called for a 'reset' in US–Russia relations.

¹³ According to Nau (2013: 39), 'imperialism' can be seen as a 'maximalist' or 'offensive' version of realism.

liberal internationalist position (Nau 2013: 48). During the Cold War, the realist position manifested itself in US foreign policy through the deployment of US troops on the ground in Europe and Asia, intended to prevent Soviet domination in these regions. In recent years, and especially after the military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s, the realist position has come across as non-interventionist. Notably, many realists opposed the US-led, non-UN-mandated invasion of Iraq in 2003. Today, many realists call for offshore balancing (Nau 2014). Walt (2016) finds elements of realist thinking in the foreign policy of the Obama administration, but notes that Obama himself did not 'fully embrace a realist worldview'. According to Walt, he ultimately comes across more as an internationalist.

In the case of Syria, all the above-mentioned identity positions can be found in the US domestic debate on how to respond to Russia's activities in Syria, to the threat from international terrorism and to the Syrian regime and various opposition groups in theatre. Advocates of a liberal internationalist position, including Obama's then-Secretary of State Clinton, early called for intervention in Syria to defend liberal values. Obama himself engaged this position when he in August 2012 indicated that the use of chemical weapons in Syria would mean crossing a 'red line' that could trigger a US military intervention to unseat Assad.

From this position, it would follow that working with Russia is possible if it conforms to the liberal international order, but that Russia will be excluded from the process if it is seen to break the established rules. Conversely, from a nationalist position, it would follow that US involvement in Syria should be avoided or at least be restricted to fighting terrorism for the purpose of self-defence.¹⁴ The civil war should be left for the Syrian government and people to resolve, and nation building would be out of the question. The nationalist position would call for cautious co-existence with Russia on the international stage, as long as Russia is not seen to represent a risk to US national security. A tactical coalition to defeat the shared threat of international terrorism would be possible. Finally, the realist position predicates that intervention in Syria should be avoided if possible, because US power should be 'used to protect vital US interests', and because of the considerable risk of getting 'bogged down' (Walt 2013). While the brutality of the Assad regime is criticized and condemned, in realist terms a continued role for Assad might be the only alternative to 'endless war' (Walt 2015). Regional stability and power balance are chief aims, seen from the realist position, making rapprochement with Russia

¹⁴ Nau points out how, after the 9/11 attacks, Bush invoked nationalist rhetoric.

desirable. In Syria, ‘the partial overlap in American and Russian interests’ is seen to represent a possible path forward, and may serve as a basis for finding common ground (Adams and Walt 2015).

Britain: Internationalism, non-interventionism, nationalism?

The alternative British foreign-policy positions resemble the US ones. Historically, the overriding distinction in British foreign-policy discourse was between an ‘internationalist’ and an ‘isolationist’ position. The former held that Britain should strive to remain a global player, its post-imperial material limitations notwithstanding; the latter, that Britain should accept its decline and withdraw from international affairs (Zakaria 2015). The internationalist position has dominated the British foreign-policy debate in the post-war era, and has characterized the practical foreign policy of Labour as well as Conservative-led governments. A recent survey published by Chatham House found that the internationalist position is supported by a majority among opinion-formers and in the wider British population (Raines 2015).

The internationalist position is commonly linked to the notion of British ‘exceptionalism’: that Britain, because of its imperial past, great-power legacy, island position and special ties to the United States, possesses a unique power repertoire which allows it to ‘punch above its weight’ internationally. ‘We hold the key’, proclaimed Churchill in 1948, pointing to Britain being ‘the only country’ with a central role in the English-speaking world as well as in ‘United Europe’ and the Commonwealth of Nations (Churchill 1948). Consistent with this line of thinking, British officials have recently presented the country as a ‘bridge builder’ between the United States and Europe, ‘a pivotal power’ (Blair 1999) and ‘a global hub’ (Miliband 2008) –uniquely placed ‘at the centre of all the big discussions’ (Cameron 2010). In new PM Theresa May’s words, Britain does not need to punch above its weight internationally ‘because our weight is substantial enough already’ (May 2016). The internationalist position in British foreign policy debate is also closely tied to the policies of Atlanticism and (liberal) interventionism. As for Atlanticism, official British foreign policy discourse portrays the United States as alternately a ‘partner’ and ‘friend’, but always as Britain’s chief bilateral partnership (Haugevik 2014).¹⁵ As for liberal interventionism, during the Kosovo War, Tony

¹⁵ By contrast, relations with Europe and the EU have been a recurrent source of controversy in the British foreign-policy debate, culminating with the 2016 referendum in which the majority of those voting preferred the UK to leave the EU altogether.

Blair became the poster boy for military intervention ‘based not on any territorial ambitions but on values’ (Blair 1999). He used a similar line of reasoning in making the case for the Iraq war in 2003 (Blair 2003). As for relations with Russia, the internationalist position prescribes a pragmatic approach, opening for cooperation if Russia is willing to abide by the liberal world order. Since the end of the Cold War, Whitehall’s relations with Russia have been erratic, with several attempts of ‘resetting’ the relationship.¹⁶

With Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party (since 2015), an alternative, *non-interventionist* foreign policy position has left a stronger imprint on the British foreign policy discourse. Corbyn is a long-term critic of Western liberal interventionist practices and was among the harshest critics of the Iraq war and the Blair government’s role in it. Corbyn and his supporters are further critical to Britain’s dependence on the United States, and have questioned NATO’s eastern enlargement, criticizing the ‘hypocrisy of the West’. This position typically also advocates de-escalation of the tensions between Russia and the West (Kendall 2015). Finally, the *nationalist* position in the British foreign-policy discourse has also gained strength in recent years, with members of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) as its chief voice. The UKIP’s foreign-policy position combines EU-scepticism with immigration-scepticism; it aims to reduce foreign aid and increase the national defence budget, and opposes military intervention abroad unless that is seen to be in the British national interest (Tournier-Sol 2015: 146).

On Syria, the British government has largely pursued a policy founded in internationalism. From the time the conflict broke out in 2011 and onwards, Whitehall’s unequivocal stance was that the Assad regime must go. Britain expressed support for the moderate opposition and specifically the Syrian National Coalition, recognizing them as ‘legitimate representatives of the Syrian people’ (Cameron 2013; Clegg 2013). In this early period, the British government signalled the importance of working with Russia to resolve the Syrian crisis, including on the basis that while the two states shared ‘some fundamental aims’ on the ground – ending the conflict, keeping Syria united, and allowing the Syrian people to decide who should govern them. At a joint press conference in June 2013, Cameron and Putin gave positive descriptions of their conversations on Syria, and of the Anglo–Russian relationship

¹⁶ Maxine David suggests that Anglo–Russian relations have evolved from a period of ‘engagement’ immediately after the Cold War, via ‘disappointment’ in the late 1990s and to ‘wary co-operation’ in the early 2010s (David 2011: 201). However, since then, relations have become increasingly difficult, with the Russian Embassy in London now speaking of a new phase of ‘volatility’ (Embassy of the Russian Federation 2016).

as such (Cameron and Putin 2013). Following reports that Assad regime had used chemical weapons against the Syrian population, Britain was among the strongest advocates of taking international action. However, Cameron lost a vote in the House of Commons on whether Britain should, as he formulated it, 'play our part in a strong international response', and join the United States in responding to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons (Hansard 2013). While the government formally speaking did not need parliamentary approval, Cameron said he would respect the vote.

Collaborating with adversaries: One year of Russia–West interaction in Syria

Why were Russian and Western leaders unsuccessful in finding a common way to resolve the Syrian crisis after September 2015? From the initial orientations and positions outlined above, it is clear that only continued emphasis on the statist – and not the civilizationist – position on the Russian side, as well as the pursuit of a realist or at least more toned-down internationalist orientation on the Western side, would be able to open a window of opportunity for collaborative efforts.

In the remainder of this report, we trace and analyse Russia–West interaction on Syria between September 2015 to October 2016. The underlying assumption is that these initial orientations and positions have been negotiated and influenced through domestic debates in these countries as well through encounters between their top leaderships on the international stage. Thus, we trace how internal and external interaction patterns contributed to shaping the room for manoeuvre at the negotiating table. Our data collection was conducted in two steps. We began by tracing and analysing statements made about Syria cooperation on the international scene, including at top political summits and following bilateral exchanges. We rely mostly on primary sources derived from the official websites of the Russian president, the US president and the British prime minister, and from their foreign and defence ministries. We also draw on statements cited in secondary sources – media articles and policy analyses on both sides. Secondly, we traced and analysed developments in the domestic political debate in all three states, examining how their initial positions on Syria were challenged and adapted. Here, we rely on transcripts from debates in the Russian Duma, the British House of Commons and the US House of Representatives, as well as on media articles and on research reports.

Below we identify how the Russia–West relationship evolved through three successive phases, which we term ‘cautious cooperation’, ‘impetus lost?’ and ‘from renewed optimism to full collapse’. In the first phase, which began with the UNGA meeting in September 2015 and ended at the turn of the year, underlying scepticism towards the other party’s motives remained present, but there was an observable readiness on both sides to engage in talks and search for compromises. However,

in the second phase, running through the spring and early summer of 2016, cooperation efforts suffered various set-backs, as negotiations were put on hold and the Assad regime regained strength on the ground.

Table 1: One year of Russia-West interaction in Syria

Phase 1 Cautious cooperation	2015	September	Putin's speaks at the UN, calls for partnership against terrorism in Syria
		October	Russia carries out its first air strikes in Syria Putin and Assad have talks in Moscow Syria peace talks begin in Vienna Formation of the ISSG, with Russia and USA as co-chairs
		November	Putin-Obama-Cameron meetings at the G-20 Summit in Turkey
		December	The British Parliament authorizes airstrikes in Syria against ISIL The UNSC adopts Resolution 2254, establishing a road map for securing peace in Syria Russian National Security Strategy identifies United States as a challenge
Phase 2 Impetus lost?	2016	January	The British inquiry into the Litvinenko case concludes that the Russian state was 'probably' involved US Secretary of Defense pinpoints Russia as the main security threat to the United States
		February	Geneva peace talks begin, but are suspended after two days US-Russian-brokered partial ceasefire agreed, but fails to stick
		March	Putin says Russia will withdraw 'the main part' of its military from Syria
		April	First NATO-Russia Council meeting in two years Syrian government forces recapture Palmyra, with Russian air assistance
Phase 3 From renewed optimism to full collapse	2016	June	US diplomats sign memo calling for strikes against the Assad regime
		June/July	Start of intensive negotiating efforts Kerry/Lavrov US presidential campaign intensifies; Russia becomes important topic
		August	Increasing Russian military activity in Syria in support of Assad Turkish-Russian rapprochement
		September	Obama and Putin hold 90 minute-meeting at G-20 meeting in China Geneva talks resumed US-Russia agreement on establishing 'joint integration center' in Vienna US-led coalition bombs Syrian army positions Air strike on UN lorries, USA/UK hold Russia responsible
		October	The United States suspends all talks with Russia over Syria.

The ingrained negative images of the other side now seemed to 'catch up with' the leaders: these images regained strength in the public

domestic debates and made it more difficult to patch up relations as new controversies arose. The third and final phase was from July 2016 and until the United States broke off diplomatic dialogue with Russia in October. This phase began with intense diplomatic efforts to re-establish cooperation, but ended with full collapse and mutual accusations about hidden agendas.

Phase one: Cautious cooperation

Already prior to the UNGA summit in September 2015, some movement was observable in the Russian as well as the US and British positions on the contested issue of the Assad regime. While the recurrent message from the Kremlin had long been that the international community could not dictate who should govern Syria, Putin indicated that Russia might be willing to meet Western demands that Assad had to step down, if this could be accomplished by means of a transitional process in which the Assad family played a role (*Moscow Times* 23.09.2015). Until this point, the United States and Britain had ruled out that Assad could be part of the political solution in Syria. However, in early September, British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond said the Assad regime would not have to go ‘on day one’, whereas US Secretary of State Kerry noted that disagreement concerning the future role of Assad remained a key question, and that the Obama administration was looking for new ways ‘to find a common ground’ with Russia on this (*Guardian* 10.09.2015; *NYT* 18.09.2015). Against this backdrop, it seems fair to say that when Putin delivered his UNGA speech at the end of September 2015, there was a small but evident window of opportunity for strategic Russia–West cooperation in Syria: firstly, because Russia and the West seemed to agree that they had a shared primary agenda in fighting internationalist terrorism in Syria; secondly, because they seemed to agree that since fighting the terrorist group ISIL¹⁷ had become of immediate importance, it might be necessary to compromise on the question of the political future of the Assad regime, or at least put it temporarily on hold. However, the overlap between the Russian and Western ‘win-sets’ was limited, and mirrored their initial incompatible policy orientations on Syria and their ingrained adversarial representations of each other.¹⁸ A

¹⁷ The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) also known as The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS); Islamic State (IS), or by its Arabic language acronym Daesh is a jihadist terrorist organisation.

¹⁸ A ‘win-set’ refers to the individual parties range of acceptable alternative outcomes, international compromises become possible when there is an overlap between the respective parties’ win-sets (cf. Putnam 1988).

Guardian reporter's recap of the handshake between Putin and Obama at the UN may serve as an illustration:

Their public handshake was a terse and stiff occasion, over in a few camera flashes. They came out of a door together, quickly shook hands, and were gone. There was no repartee. There were no smiles (Jones 29.09.2015).

The domestic backdrop to Obama's performance at the UN was strong calls from leading Republicans in the domestic foreign-policy debate to 'stand up to Putin' (Ryan 23.10.2016) and to 'stop letting Putin set the agenda' in Syria (McCarthy 28.09.2015). '[Russia is] no ally of ours', said Congressman Adam Kinzinger, adding with reference to ISIL: 'Sometimes the enemy of our enemy is still our enemy' (Kinzinger 2015). By a similar token, while recognizing that cooperation with Russia might be the only way to resolve the Syrian crisis, the *New York Times* warned that 'no one should be fooled about Russia's culpability in Syria's agony' (*NYT* 21.09.2015). Such signals, from influential political voices and media outlets, gave the Obama administration limited room for manoeuvre in its interaction with Russia on Syria. Even within the White House and State Department, there were reportedly disagreements as to whether Obama should have a formal sit-down with Putin at the UN, with some worrying that such a meeting could 'embolden' the Russian president and might help to restore 'his stature as a major world player on one of the biggest stages' post-Ukraine (*NYT* 15.09.2015). Similarly, on the Russian side, Putin's sharp criticism of the West in his UNGA speech prior to calling for cooperation against international terrorism, resonated well with heavily anti-Western representations in the Russian domestic debate at the time. Assessing Putin's speech, Russian experts questioned whether Syria cooperation with the West would be possible in practice – even if Obama accepted the invitation to fight terrorism together (*Vedomosti* 29.09.2015). Against this backdrop, it could be argued that the leeway for both Putin and Obama to change their initial courses on Syria, and to cooperate, was restricted not only by the already strained Russia–West relations post-Ukraine, but also by ingrained negative representations of the other party that dominated the domestic debates on both sides.

Despite domestic pressure to not trust Russia, the Obama administration signalled through its statements and actions in September that it was ready to engage in dialogue with the Russian administration over Syria during the autumn of 2015. When Western media criticized the Russian military build-up around Latakia in Syria immediately prior to the Russian intervention, Kerry stated that this build-up appeared to be 'limited to protecting its own forces in the country', thereby presenting the Russian move as an understandable

tactic (cited in *BBC* 23.09.2015). On the Russian side, Kerry's statement, which was followed by Obama's decision to sit down with Putin at the UN, was well received. Both events indicated that the United States was willing to engage publicly with Russia on the world stage. Following the UNGA meeting, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov assessed the overall relational dynamics favourably:

I believe that President Obama heard what President Putin had to say. It was a very constructive discussion. We did not agree on any specific steps. But what they did agree was to continue our cooperation, discussions between the foreign ministries, between the ministries of defense, in order to identify specific ways and means, which will make our common goal more achievable (RT 29.09.2015).

The effect of recognition and cooperation which the new contacts between the US administration and Moscow in September lingered on, and could be seen in more positive assessments of the Obama administration in the Russian media (*Izvestia* 02.10.2015).

On 30 September 2015, two days after Putin's UNGA speech, Russia carried out its first airstrikes in Syria, having received unanimous authorization from the Russian Federation Council. This was the first time since the end of the Cold War that Russia took military action beyond the boundaries of the former Soviet Union. Leading Western media outlets framed the Russian intervention as a 'game-changer' in Syria (e.g. *Black* 30.09.2015). Sergey Ivanov, Putin's chief of staff, declared that the goal of the Russian military campaign was 'exclusively air support of the Syrian armed forces in their fight against ISIL', adding: 'We are not pursuing any foreign political goals or ambitions, of which we have been regularly accused. The point is just to defend Russia's national interests' (cited in *United States Today* 29.09.2015). While the Assad regime had invited and therefore welcomed Russian intervention, Western states voiced concern about Russia's 'real' agenda. First, however, British PM Cameron made a point of not jumping to conclusions:

*I have a clear view that if this is a part of international action against [ISIL], that appalling terrorist death cult outfit, then that is all to the good [...] If, on the other hand, this is action against the Free Syrian Army in support of Assad the dictator, then obviously that is a retrograde step but let us see exactly what has happened (cited in *Guardian* 30.09.2015).*

On the US side, Kerry said that the United States 'would have grave concerns should Russia strike areas where ISIL and al Qaeda affiliated targets are not operating. Strikes of that kind would question Russia's real intentions – fighting ISIL or protecting the Assad regime' (cited in

CNN 01.10.2015). On this occasion, Kerry thus questioned whether the two rationales given by Russia itself – to fight international terrorism, and to help the Assad regime – were combinable. The day after, on 2 October, the United States and Britain issued a statement along with other international allies, calling on Russia ‘to immediately cease its attacks on the Syrian opposition and civilians and to focus its efforts on fighting ISIL’. The coalition warned that Russian military actions would ‘constitute a further escalation’ of the conflict and ‘fuel more extremism and radicalization’ (FCO 02.10.2015). Throughout the autumn, US and British government officials continued to criticize Russia’s air campaign for targeting the moderate Syrian opposition rather than ISIL, which they saw as evidence that the Kremlin’s primary concern was to help Assad to remain in power, rather than to fight ISIL.¹⁹

On the Russian side, such statements played into longstanding and ingrained representations of Western states deliberately misreading Russian motives and actions. Commenting on the accusations that Russia’s actions left the Syrian population suffering, Putin said his country had ‘been prepared for such information attacks’, adding that ‘the first reports about civilian casualties emerged even before our planes got in the air’ (cited in *RT* 01.10.2015). On the question of whether Russia was bombing other groupings besides ISIL, Russian officials did not deny this. Instead, in line with a statist foreign-policy position, they noted that Russia – unlike the US-led coalition – was in Syria on the invitation of the legitimate Syrian government: in other words, that Russia’s presence in Syria was legitimate and in accordance with international law, while the West was illegitimately intervening in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. This war of words directly reflected a key controversy between Russia and the West on the Syrian conflict, one that sprung from their primary and initial commitment to, respectively, the statist and liberal internationalist positions: namely, the categorization of various non-state local groupings on the ground in Syria as hostile or friendly. The West claimed that the Russian air

¹⁹ In a House of Commons debate, British PM Cameron implied that Russia was being untruthful when it claimed to be in Syria to fight ISIS: ‘85% of the targets that Russia has attacked have not been ISIL targets. It is quite easy to tell that by looking at the parts of the country where the Russians have been attacking – ISIL are not in those parts of the country, but the Free Syrian Army and others are. It is true to say that some six days of Russian air strikes went by before a single ISIL target was attacked’ (Cameron 19.10.2015). Similarly, a US State Department spokesman said that ‘90 percent of the strikes that we’ve seen [Russia] take to date have not been against ISIL or Al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorists [...] They’ve been largely against opposition groups that want a better future for Syria and don’t want to see the Assad regime stay in power’ (cited in *Guardian* 7.10.2015).

campaign was also targeting what the US-led coalition considered to be moderate and legitimate opposition groups, whereas Russian officials held that the bombing strategies were consistent with the shared Russia–West agenda on fighting international terrorism:

If it looks like a terrorist, if it acts like a terrorist, if it walks like a terrorist, if it fights like a terrorist – it's a terrorist. Right? I would recall that we always were saying that we are going to fight ISIL and other terrorist groups. This is the same position which the Americans are taking. The representatives of the coalition command have always been saying that their targets are ISIL, the al-Nusra and other terrorist groups. This is basically our position as well. We see eye to eye with the coalition on this one. (Lavrov 01.10.2015, emphasis added)

Meanwhile, practical steps were taken to coordinate the US-led and the Russian air campaigns. As Lavrov put it, the two campaigns had to 'get in touch and establish channels of communications to avoid any unintended incidents'. On the US side, Pentagon signalled that it would practise 'open lines of communication with Russia on de-confliction', so as 'to ensure the safety of coalition air crews' (both cited in *CNN* 01.10.2015). At a press conference, Obama made it clear that he did not wish to turn Syria into 'a proxy war' or 'some superpower chessboard contest'. 'It is in our interest for Russia to be a responsible, effective actor on the international stage that can share burdens with us', he underscored (Obama 02.10.2015). At the same time, Obama continued to face domestic pressure from critics calling for a tougher response to Russia's actions in Syria. Newspapers such as *New York Times* questioned Russia's stated reason for intervening in Syria, and urged Obama to work with its allies 'on a unified response to Russia's moves' (see *NYT* 02.10.2015). John McCain, Chairman of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, called the Obama administration's line 'an abdication of American leadership' (cited in *CNN* 04.10.2015). Others again argued that Russia's intervention in support of Assad made it 'complicit in, and legally accountable for' the regime's wrongdoings on the ground (Dobriansky and Rivkin 05.10.2015). The Democratic front-runner for the US presidency, Hillary Clinton, called for 'a no-fly zone and humanitarian corridors to try to stop the carnage on the ground and from the air' (cited in *NYT* 03.10.2015). Such pressures should be kept in mind when analysing the steps taken by the Obama administration on Syria during this period. On the one hand, Obama and Kerry were toning down the overall Russia–West conflict and the Pentagon was undertaking practical steps to avoid clashes with Russia in the air. On the other hand, Obama also engaged with a liberal internationalist position and cautioned that practical cooperation with Russia in Syria would be difficult if the two sides continued to view the crisis so differently:

I also said to [Putin] that it is true that the United States and Russia and the entire world have a common interest in destroying ISIL. But what was very clear – and regardless of what Mr. Putin said – was that he doesn't distinguish between ISIL and a moderate Sunni opposition that wants to see Mr. Assad go. From their perspective, they're all terrorists. And that's a recipe for disaster, and it's one that I reject. So where we are now is that we are having technical conversations about de-confliction so that we're not seeing U.S. and American firefights in the air. But beyond that, we're very clear in sticking to our belief and our policy that the problem here is Assad and the brutality that he has inflicted on the Syrian people, and that it has to stop. And in order for it to stop, we're prepared to work with all the parties concerned. But we are not going to cooperate with a Russian campaign to simply try to destroy anybody who is disgusted and fed up with Mr. Assad's behavior. Keep in mind also, from a practical perspective, the moderate opposition in Syria is one that if we're ever going to have to have a political transition, we need. And the Russian policy is driving those folks underground or creating a situation in which they are de-capacitated, and it's only strengthening ISIL. And that's not good for anybody. (Obama 02.10.2015)

Throughout October 2015, Western and Russian officials continued to present differing accounts of developments on the ground in Syria following the launch of the Russian military intervention. The Russian reaction to Western criticism of its campaign in Syria was denial, and a fall-back to deeply ingrained positions on enemies and friends in the Syria crisis. This was shown in rhetorical support for Assad, portraying him as a loyal and important partner in the fight against international terrorism, and in the engagement of him in the exclusive 'Moscow format' during a clandestine meeting in Moscow (RIA Novosti 01.10.2015). Concerning Russian representations of the West, Maria Zakharova, spokesperson for the Russian MFA, put it like this:

From the very beginning of the military part of Russia's counter-terror operation in Syria, which was initiated after the official request of the government of that country, international media launched a powerful anti-Russian campaign [...] Russia is not planning to join the US-led antiterrorist coalition, as it views its actions as illegitimate since neither the UN Security Council nor the Syrian government have given their approval for military actions inside the country. (RMFA 06.10.2015)

Russian officials hinted that the 'moderate opposition' in Syria was non-existent (TASS 05.10.2015), and offered hefty representations of the terrorist threat, likening ISIL to the Nazi threat (Reuters 07.10.2015). The negative representations of the West were re-emphasized, with indications that these states were indulging in 'conspiracy theories' (RIA Novosti 03.10.2015), wilfully distorting Russian objectives, in practice supporting terrorism (RT 08.10.2015), and generally operating beyond international law and seeking unipolar dominance of the world (RT

11.10.2015; see also RMFA 14.10.2015). Speaking at the Valdai Club on 22 October, Putin reiterated all these representations on 'terrorism', 'the moderate opposition', 'the US' and the 'Assad regime' (Kremlin 22.10.2015). On balance, the Russian orientation in Syria seemed to be tilting in the direction of confrontation with the West and toward the uncompromising attitudes of the civilizationalist position.

These assessments can be seen in the prolongation of critical representations of the other side more broadly in the domestic debate in the United States and in Russia. In mid-October, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter identified Russia as a 'serious challenge' to the United States, and called for 'a different kind of campaign to deter Russian aggression in Europe' (cited in *Breitbart* 14.10.2015).²⁰ Later that same month, a US domestic survey found that 79% of those interviewed saw Syria as a likely threat to the United States in the near future, while 74% saw Russia as a future military threat to the United States. The *Wall Street Journal* saw 'the hawkish foreign policy positions being articulated on the 2016 presidential campaign trail' as a response to this sentiment in the US public (*WSJ* 21.10.2015). Also on the Russian side, among senior military officials, the representations of the United States seemed particularly inimical.²¹ The thesis that the United States was supporting and 'creating terrorists', together with the growing conviction that Russia could achieve what the United States never managed in Syria – stabilization and cooperation with local and regional actors in fighting ISIL – re-emerged among the Russian expert community as well (Yevseyev 12.10.2015; Kosach 16.10.2015). On 14 October, the Levada Center reported that 75 percent of Russians surveyed thought that major Western countries (the United States, Germany, Japan, Britain and others) were 'Russia's adversaries seeking to resolve their problems at its expense and using every opportunity to damage its interests' (*Interfax* 14.10.2015). Moreover, Putin's approval ratings soared to a historical high of 90% in a poll conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center; pollsters interpreted the high ratings as being 'primarily connected with events in Syria, Russian airstrikes at terrorist positions' (cited in *Business New Europe* 23.10.2015). That, of course, is a domestic setting which could spur the Russian president to choose to 'go solo' in Syria.

²⁰ NATO officials echoed this message: Russia was accused of being 'more interested in shocking, surprising and intimidating than in calming and building confidence' (*AP* 16.10.2015).

²¹ See for example interview with Colonel General Andrey Kartaplov, deputy chief of the Russian Armed Forces General Staff and head of the General Staff's Main Operations Directorate, in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 16 October 2015.

Despite recurring expressions of distrust in the other party's intentions and actions – in Syria and in political relations more broadly – there were also indications that the two sides were moving closer together at the top political level. The move to resume talks on safe air conduct over Syria (and subsequently the signing of a memorandum on flight safety on 20 October) are illustrative examples (*Reuters* 06.10.2015; *Interfax* 20.10.2015, *TASS* 20.10.2015). The Russian authorities also proposed to send a high-profile Russian delegation led by former President Dmitry Medvedev to Washington to agree on joint steps (*Interfax* 14.10.2015); and publicly expressed some willingness to cooperate with moderate rebels (i.e. the Free Syrian Army) in Syria and to transform the Syrian regime into an 'inclusive government' through a 'political process', and early elections (*Reuters* 05.10.2015).²² Russia then hosted meetings in Cairo with representatives of the Syrian opposition (RBTH 20.10.2015). While also nurturing the negative narrative of US interventionism and its international role, official Kremlin language repeatedly identified international terrorism as the greater evil in Syria in these months before Christmas 2015, pushing the idea of Russia–Western cooperation in the fight against international terrorism (Yakovenko 17.10.2015). Indeed, in another public opinion poll by the Levada Center, conducted earlier in October and closer to the Putin–Obama meeting, 49% of those surveyed said they were confident that Western countries, Russia and the current Syrian leadership would 'be able to reach common ground on ways to settle the situation in Syria'.²³

Overall, it could be argued that the Kremlin was keeping two possible policy tracks alive on Syria: On the one hand, Russia was developing a more Moscow-oriented and exclusive approach to the crisis in Syria, in line with the civilizationist position and aimed at forging a 'political process' – while at the same time fighting the terrorist threat through a coalition that included neither the Western actors, nor the 'moderate opposition' which was viewed as actually 'terrorist' (*Moscow Times* 26.10.2015). On the other hand, Russia, in line with the classical statist

²² According to *The Financial Times*, Russia was 'pushing for fresh elections in Syria next year and offering air support to the opposition Free Syrian Army in its fight with Isis, as Moscow seeks to use the momentum of its military campaign to move towards political stabilisation in the war-torn country' (*FT* 25.10.2015)

²³ 30% thought this would not be possible. (Levada Center poll, referred in *Interfax*, Moscow (2015) 'Russian citizens interviewed by Levada Center sociologists' 8 October. The results showed that 31% of the Russians surveyed approved of their country's air campaign targeting ISIL positions in Syria, 14% were outraged by it, 25% neither approved nor disapproved of it, and another 22% said they did not know the situation well enough.)

position, was keeping the door open to cooperating with the West in Syria. While that possible track did have some support domestically, undercurrents in the Russian domestic debate headed in the direction of the former.

Also on the US side there was some support, particularly in expert commentary, for a pragmatic, cooperative approach toward Russia (*The National Interest* 16.10.2015; see also *WSJ* 16.10.2015). By October, the Obama administration, and Secretary of State Kerry in particular, seemed to endorse this pragmatic approach, seeking to sidestep the domestic pressure to counter Russian initiatives and policies in Syria. And that made negotiations with Russia (and Iran) on Syria possible (*WSJ* 26.10.2015).

As October 2015 came to an end, the United States and Russia were in the driver's seat when a series of diplomatic talks on Syria were initiated in Vienna, with all the major international and regional players involved in the Syrian conflict present around the table. In the initial rounds of talks, Kerry and Lavrov met with their counterparts from Saudi Arabia and Turkey (*Reuters* 23.10.2015). The subsequent, broader, round of talks encompassed 17 parties – including Iran, which had been invited to participate following diplomatic pressure from Russia. *The New York Times* assessed Iran's presence as 'another example of how Russia's military entry into the Syrian war has changed the power dynamic of the sporadic negotiations' (*NYT* 28.10.2015).

The apparent willingness of the Obama administration to meet some of Russia's demands in Vienna was criticized at home, exemplified in Senator Lindsey Graham's comment that 'Assad is as secure as the day is long', adding, 'you have turned Syria over to Russia and Iran'. And Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, declared: 'If you want to talk about a nation that could pose an existential threat to the United States, I'd have to point to Russia' (both cited in *Consortiumnews.com* 29.10.2015). Similarly, on the Russian side, Putin did not find much support for a cooperative approach in the domestic debate. There were rumours of a US ground offensive, in breach of international law (*TASS* 28.10.2015), and the Russian defence establishment was confronting Western powers verbally by demanding 'proof' of accusations that Russian jets had bombed hospitals in Syria (*RBTH* 28.10.2015).

Domestic pressure on both sides notwithstanding, the Vienna talks led to the establishment of the International Syria Support Group

(ISSG).²⁴ This was to be co-chaired by Russia and the United States, thereby placing Russia on an equal footing with the United States as a chief player in Syria. On 15 November, the ISSG released a joint statement, setting 1 January 2016 as the deadline for starting talks between the Syrian government and opposition, and 14 May as the deadline for agreeing on a ceasefire. No stance was taken on the future of the Assad regime; in fact, Assad was not mentioned at all. However, the group stated its ‘commitment to ensure a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition’ and ‘that State institutions remain intact’ (ISSG 14.11.2015). The latter point could be interpreted as being more in line with the Russian position.

Once again, in Russia, the domestic effect of cooperation and engagement with the West on Syria was greater support for Putin’s cooperative initiatives and slightly more optimistic representations of the West both in the Russian expert community (*TASS* 02.11.2015) and media. Illustratively, a report from one of the Vienna meetings, published in the Russian government newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, stressed how the US and Russian representatives, as well as the UN special envoy for the Syria crisis, were seated *together* on the presidium and that Russian views such as the commitment to the ‘unity, independence, territorial integrity and secular character’ had been accepted as rational and good by the Western parties (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 02.11.2015).

In mid-November, Putin had private meetings with both Obama and Cameron at the G-20 summit in Turkey. Following the Cameron/Putin meeting, a Downing Street press release informed that the two leaders had ‘focussed on terrorism, Syria, Ukraine, and the UK–Russia relationship’ in their talks, and that they had agreed ‘that despite some significant policy disagreements there remained positive aspects to the UK–Russia relationship’ (Prime Minister’s Office 16.11.2015). Cameron stated that Britain could ‘compromise with Russia to end the Syrian war’, while Putin observed that there had been ‘a certain revival’ of the difficult British–Russian relationship (both cited in *Guardian* 16.11.2015). The British government’s willingness to adjust its rhetoric in order to cooperate with Russia was reflected also in a House of Commons debate in late November, where Cameron noted ‘how vital it is to have all the key regional players around the table, including Iran and Russia’, and added that ‘on Russian objectives, the gap between us

²⁴ The Arab League, China, Egypt, the EU, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the UK the UN and the USA.

has narrowed' (*Hansard* 26.11.2015). Making the case for British participation in the airstrikes against ISIL in Syria a week later, Cameron again struck a positive note on the prospects of cooperation with Russia in Syria. Noting that there had been 'an enormous gap' between Russia and the West at the outset of the conflict, especially on the issue of Assad's future, he said this gap had now narrowed, and predicted that it would 'narrow further as the vital talks in Vienna get under way' (*Hansard* 02.12.2015).

In the debate, many MPs questioned whether pragmatic cooperation with Russia in Syria was at all possible, since Russia and the Western powers seemed to have very different friends and foes. MPs observed that 'Russia bombs our allies but it seems that we will not, or cannot, bomb theirs' (*Hansard* 02.12.2015). However, seeking to reassure those who doubted 'the commitment of the United States or the engagement of Russia in this process', then-Foreign Secretary Hammond cited a letter from Kerry, which said that 'Senior Russian officials have helped lead the effort to find a common way forward and have expressed firm commitment to the Geneva principles' and that 'Russian leaders have indicated both publicly and privately on numerous occasions that they are open to a political transition, including a new constitution and elections' (*Hansard* 02.12.2015). On this occasion, the Cameron government was thus sticking to an internationalist position – but, unlike in the parliamentary debate in 2013 where Assad was the enemy, terrorism was now framed as a threat to Britain, and that the case for intervention in Syria to fight ISIL had 'only grown stronger after the Paris attacks' on 23 November. While the critics were questioning the Kremlin's trustworthiness, Cameron portrayed Russia as a potential rule-follower with which cooperation could be possible, and which shared the agenda to fight international terrorism. Similarly, in Russia, for the first time in Putin's third term, his annual address to the Russian Federal Assembly on 3 December was devoid of anti-Western rhetoric (*Politikom.ru* 07.12.2015). Conciliatory rhetoric on the West was also noticeable in Putin's annual year-end press conference (*Russia Direct* 18.12.2015).

On 15 December, Kerry travelled to Moscow, where he had talks 'for nearly four hours' with President Putin, according to US media. After the meeting, diplomats reported that the two countries 'had narrowed a gap on defining which Syrian militias belonged on a terrorist list'. Both Kerry and Lavrov assessed the meeting in positive terms: Lavrov said that 'despite our differences we demonstrated that when our countries pull together, progress can be made'; Kerry stated that Russia and the United States actually saw Syria 'fundamentally very similarly':

Vienna 1 and Vienna 2 were a strong beginning, opening up possibilities, and I think there is no question – Foreign Minister Lavrov and I have agreed – that together the United States and Russia have an ability to be able to make a significant difference here. (Kerry & Putin 15.12.2015)

A few days later, on 18 December, the UNSC unanimously adopted Resolution 2254, establishing an international road map for securing peace in Syria. Reporting on the event, *Reuters* referred to the agreement as ‘a rare show of unity among big powers’, noting that the UNSC Resolution had come ‘after Moscow and Washington clinched a deal on a text’. While both Kerry and Lavrov admitted that differences remained, the overall tone was optimistic (*Reuters* 19.12.2015).

On the Russian side, immediate leadership-level reactions to Kerry’s visit to Moscow on 15 December and the adoption of the UNSC Resolutions on Syria was that the United States was an actor with which it is possible – even desirable – to cooperate. In his annual news conference on 17 December, Putin stated that Russia supported the US view on the newly adopted Resolution 2254. As to the way forward, Putin went on to say: ‘In its key aspects, strange as it may sound, it coincides with the American vision, proposed by the United States: cooperative work on the constitution, creating mechanisms to control future early elections, holding the elections and recognizing the results based on this political process’ (Kremlin.ru 17.12.2015). This view, on opening up for cooperation, was affirmed by Dmitry Polikanov, member of the Expert Commission of the Government of the Russian Federation, who noted that Putin’s tone with respect to the United States has become more moderate, and that ‘the two parties are actively seeking political compromise on conflict resolution in Syria’ (Polikanov 18.12.2015).

However, the image of the United States as a reliable partner on Syria was also significantly challenged within the Russian media and expert community. Here we can note scepticism as to Washington’s ‘real’ intentions in reaching out to Moscow. An article in the government-sponsored *Russia Beyond the Headlines* asked, ‘what’s behind John Kerry’s festive goodwill to the Kremlin?’, and questioned whether the Moscow visit reflected any significant change in the US view on Russia. Such scepticism was echoed by the Director of the Russian Council of International Relations, Andrei Kortunov, who stated that the current state of affairs ‘does not mean that we should expect miracles to happen’ (RBTH 17.12.2015). A similar view was advocated in a news article headlined ‘Kerry’s visit to Moscow should be met with cautious optimism’, citing several Russian and international experts (*Russia Direct* 16.12.2015). Sergei Naryshkin, then-Chairman of the State Duma, was more sceptical, exemplifying the more civilizationist position found

within the Russian debate. Naryshkin called the US involvement in the Middle East an ‘echo of the imperial past of its European great-grandparents’, adding that the Western countries were going to ‘make their favorite mistake there one more time’ – he was drawing up a sharp boundary between the United States and Russia that made cooperation seem unlikely (cited in *Interfax* 22.12.2015). Following the adoption of UNSC Resolution 2254, we also note a view that places Russia in the limelight of the international efforts around Syria, implying that the events in the UN served to give ‘Russia what is starting to look like a winning hand’ (*Russia Insider* 21.12.2015). The more positive images of the United States discernible in official statements following Kerry’s visit to Moscow and the adoption of the UNSC resolutions now seemed to be fading. On 20 December, Putin was cited as saying: ‘our partners ought to have thought about how to take advantage of this situation and become moral leaders in the world affairs the way they are shaping up’ (cited in *Interfax* 20.12.2015).

To sum up, in the three-month period after Putin called for a Russia–West partnership against terrorism in Syria at the UN, Russia and the West seemed to move closer to each other on certain key issues in relation to Syria, most notably on the question of the political future of the Assad regime. The new engagement was fortified by intensified political contact at the top level: there were three face-to-face meetings between Presidents Putin and Obama during this period, while US Secretary of State Kerry travelled to Russia twice between September and December 2015. It is worth noting that this top-level engagement approach even withstood the downing of a Russian Su-24 jet by a Turkish F-16 on 24 November that year. Western NATO countries defended or condoned Turkey’s actions, whereas Russia branded the incident as a ‘stab in the back’ committed by ‘accomplices of terrorists’ – but the negotiations continued. Further, we have seen how the increased contact with and acknowledgement of the other party that such meetings imply served to elicit more forthcoming representations in official discourse. On the other hand, it should be borne in mind that on neither side did the domestic debate provide substantial support for this top-level rapprochement. The alternative official representation of the Other as an enemy remained on tap, and could readily be invoked in line with these sceptical domestic debates when events on the ground in Syria served as an occasion for renewed tension.

Phase two: Impetus lost?

If 2015 ended on a cautiously optimistic note as far as Russia–West strategic cooperation on Syria was concerned, then 2016 got off to a more challenging start. In the early spring, critical depictions of the

other side in official political discourse were making media headlines in Russia and in the two Western states studied in this report. The Kremlin's new security strategy, published on 31 December 2015, portrayed the United States as 'leading its allies in undermining the global order, [placing] Russia at risk because of its opposition to those policies' (Kremlin 31.12.2015; see also Oliker 2016). Then, in mid-January, the British public inquiry into the poisoning of former FSB agent Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006 concluded that he had been murdered in an 'FSB operation' which had 'probably' been approved by President Putin himself (Owen 2016). Upon the release of the report, PM Cameron said the inquiry had confirmed 'what we always believed': that the murder had been 'state-sponsored action' (cited in *BBC* 21.01.2016). Russia's Ambassador to London called the allegations 'absolutely unacceptable', and said 'this gross provocation' would harm Anglo-Russian relations (Yakovenko 21.01.2016). Cameron's dismissive response was that Britain had 'a pretty difficult relationship with the Russians in any event'; however, he recognized that Britain would 'at some level have to go on having some sort of relationship with [Russia] because we need a solution to the Syrian crisis' (cited in *BBC* 21.01.2016). A Downing Street spokesperson expressed this duality even clearer, when she said that the urgent need to resolve the Syrian crisis trumped the need to impose new sanctions on Russia in response to the Litvinenko case. 'We have to weigh carefully the need to take measures with the broader need to work with Russia on certain issues. When you look at the threat from Daesh, it is an example of where you put... national security first' (cited in *Guardian* 21.01.2016). The statements from Downing Street, and the representation of Russia implicit in them, arguably point to an internationalist but pragmatic foreign policy position: Russia would not be punished with new sanctions for its alleged involvement in the Litvinenko case, because there were other 'important fish to fry', as a former British ambassador to Moscow put it; Britain needed to work with Russia on issues such as Syria (cited in *The Independent* 21.01.2016).

The British balancing act between shaming Russia as a rule-breaker over the Litvinenko case, and continuing to recognize the need for pragmatic cooperation on Syria had its parallel on the US side. In early February, US Secretary of Defense Carter pinpointed Russia as the main security threat to the United States (cited in *NYT* 03.02.2016). Meanwhile, Carter's colleague in the State Department, John Kerry, continued to express cautious optimism about the upcoming Russia-Western facilitated peace talks in Geneva between the Syrian government and the opposition. In January, Kerry had noted that the fight against ISIL in Syria was progressing, and that the United States was 'opening the aperture for further cooperation with others in the

region, including Russia' (Kerry 13.01.2016). This noticeable difference between Pentagon and State Department assessments of Russia – as a major threat / a possible cooperation partner, respectively – did not go unnoticed on the Russian side. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* questioned Carter's threat assessment, noting that he had put ISIL only in fifth place, and also noted the mixed signals sent from officials in the Obama administration: 'On the diplomatic track John Kerry advocates the enlistment of Russia in the negotiating process, and Ashton Carter flatly refuses to discuss on an equal footing with the Russian military any collaboration against the common enemy' (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 04.02.2016).

Developments on the ground also continued to test the diplomatic route to resolving the Syria crisis and the continuing Russia–Western efforts to find common ground. From early spring onwards, Western media were reporting how, after three and a half months of Russian airstrikes in Syria, the Assad regime was regaining control over Syrian territory long controlled by ISIL and rebel groups. On 24 January, it was reported that Syrian government, aided by Russian air strikes, had recaptured the rebel-controlled town of Rabia (*BBC* 24.01.2016). As the Assad regime's chances of political survival seemed to be growing day by day, the dynamics of the conflict were changing, and this of course also influenced Russian–Western relations, and their representations of and engagement with one another.

The Geneva peace talks, scheduled to begin on 25 January, were delayed in the first round, due largely to disagreement as to which Syrian opposition groups should be represented, and by whom. The talks eventually began on 1 February, but were suspended only two days later. Russian and Western reactions to the breakdown bared the underlying gap between the two sides' assessment of the parties in the Syrian conflict. In Kerry's interpretation, the Syrian regime's attack on 'opposition-held areas' aided by Russia was to blame. The moves confirmed these actors' intent 'to seek a military solution rather than enable a political one,' he said (Kerry 04.02.2016). By contrast, Lavrov blamed 'part of the opposition' for the breakdown, claiming that some of these groups had taken 'a completely unconstructive position' even before the talks had begun (*RT* 12.02.2016). For both men, much seemed to be at stake. A glance at the domestic US debate on Syria during this period indicates that Kerry had little domestic support for continuing to pursue the diplomatic route. For instance, *The Washington Post* noted how Russia's intervention had 'tilt[ed] the battlefield in favor of President Bashar al-Assad', making the Obama administration's quest for a negotiated settlement 'a lot less likely to succeed' (*WP* 19.01.2016). Other critics concluded that it was time to declare 'the moral bankruptcy

of American and Western policy in Syria', calling for the United States to step up its leadership in Syria, rather than allowing 'the Syrian tyrant' and 'the Russian tyrant' to set the rules (Ignatieff & Wieseltier 09.02.2016).

While Kerry maintained that it was difficult to envision peace in Syria with Assad still in power, and continued to represent Assad as a tyrant and rule-breaker, his reiterated message was now that it was 'up to the Syrians to decide what happens to Assad' (cited in *NYT* 26.01.2015). Some observers saw this as an undesirable, even unacceptable, tilt toward the Russian position, leading them to conclude that the Kremlin was calling the shots in Syria and that Obama had been 'outfoxed' by Putin (see e.g. *NYT* 11.02.2016; Hiatt 14.02.2016). One critic claimed that by giving consideration to allowing Assad even a transitory role in post-conflict Syria, the Obama administration had 'undermined prospects for success, damaged U.S. credibility with the opposition [in Syria], and further eroded America's leverage in the Middle East' (Heydemann 2016). The harshest criticism of the diplomatic route on Syria came from liberal internationalist 'hawks' like Republican Senators McCain and Graham, who called for confronting Russia, not conceding on the issue of Assad, and for stronger support to certain opposition groups. Such arguments were also reflected in the media discourse; for instance, *Washington Post's* Fred Hiatt painted a gloomy picture of Kerry's diplomatic efforts:

As Kerry was discussing the latest diplomatic development, Russian planes were bombing civilians in the city of Aleppo and cutting off its supply line, raising the possibility that the city will be encircled and 400,000 more people forced to flee or face possible starvation. (Hiatt 14.02.2016)

Others again concluded that the Obama administration had underestimated Russia in Syria, observing that the Russian intervention was not about 'propping up an ally through reckless spending' nor about 'pursuing an alternative strategy to defeat the Islamic State'. No, they held, Syria represented 'a land of opportunity' for Russia, an arena where it could 'reset its competition with the West' (Goujon 16.02.2016). Such liberal interventionist critique dominated the domestic debate, also in the US presidential election cycle, where most of the candidates were calling for more and tougher action on Assad and Russia (*NYT* 19.10.2015).²⁵ What these examples of criticism serve to illustrate is

²⁵ An alternative criticism, which appeared closer to a nationalist position, was fronted by Republican candidate Donald Trump, who advocated a tough response to ISIS in Syria, assessed Russia's intervention favourably, and questioned whether it was

that the Obama administration – and particularly Kerry, who was the front figure in the negotiation efforts with Russia – was facing growing pressure from domestic critics urging a tougher stance on Russia and the Assad regime. Meanwhile, the prospects for successful talks were also influenced by differing assessments by Washington and by the Kremlin of developments on the ground in Syria.

At this point, Russian officials were still advocating cooperation with the Western powers in Syria, while also highlighting issues on which there was disagreement. However, Russian media and expert communities appeared more pessimistic, observing that negative representations of the other party on both sides were likely to cause further tension in the overall relationship. On 4 February, shortly after the break in the Geneva peace talks, the Russian MFA issued a press release following a Lavrov–Kerry phone conversation, stating that both regretted that the dialogue on Syria had been put on hold and were calling upon the Syrian government as well as opposition forces to ‘allow humanitarian relief aid to reach areas in Syria’. In the press release, Russia also expressed concern over the preconditions of the negotiating process, urging the United States and its allies to remain firmly committed to all the provisions contained in UNSC Resolution 2254 (RMFA 04.02.2016a). In an interview with the Italian geopolitical magazine *Limes*, Lavrov said Russia hoped the US view on Russia would evolve towards greater ‘pragmatism and balance’, that ‘attempts to create a unipolar model of the world have failed’ and that the fight against international terrorism was a challenge uniting the two countries (cited in RMFA 04.02.2016b). Such statements indicate that the statist position continued to influence statements from the Kremlin: Russia would cooperate with the United States when this was seen to be in its interest to do so, but Russia would set its own terms. That said, domestic pressure was building up also on the Russian side. One analyst noted how the Russian state-controlled media were alternately presenting two images of the West: as ‘partner’ and as ‘enemy’ (cited in Koshkin 04.02.2016). Russian foreign policy expert Andrey Tsygankov observed: ‘the more that the West attempts to back Putin into a corner, the more he will be able to consolidate Russian public support for his policies.’ According to Tsygankov, no matter how harsh Western criticisms might be, Russia would not back down – it had demonstrated before ‘that it cooperates with other nations from a position of equality

sensible of the USA to support Syrian opposition groups. Moreover, a non-interventionist position was voiced by Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders, who also warned against imposing regime change but took a more critical stance on Russia’s actions (see Robinson 28.01.2016). Both Trump and Sanders were represented in the mainstream US press as ‘anti-establishment’ candidates.

or strength, not weakness' (Tsygankov 04.02.2016). Such sentiments were echoed in a Levada Center opinion poll, where 54% of those surveyed felt that Russia should strengthen its ties to the West – but a majority also believed that the Western countries saw Russia as a competitor, or even a foe (RT 04.02.2016). What these peeks into the domestic debate in Russia and in the United States indicate is that, while there was still a shared commitment at the top level to continue to seek common ground on Syria, recurring signals of distrust in the Other more broadly at the international level, as well as domestic support (or pressure) for acting more independently, was restricting the room for manoeuvre and narrowing the possible 'win-sets' of both sides.

On 11 February, following a new round of talks in Munich, Russia and the United States issued a joint statement in their capacity as ISSG co-chairs, proposing terms for cessation of hostilities in Syria. The terms were to apply to all parties except the UN-designated terrorist groups. In line with the agreement, Russia subsequently set up a coordination centre to monitor the truce. Kerry and Lavrov also announced that they had agreed on the delivery of humanitarian aid to besieged Syrian cities, to 'be followed by a "cessation of hostilities" within a week on the way to a more formal cease-fire'. Both men appeared cautiously optimistic, with respect to the ceasefire and future coordination with the other party. At a joint press conference with Kerry and UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, Lavrov stated that Russia and the United States shared 'the same resolve to ease the suffering of the Syrian people', noting:

You might think that John Kerry's and my assessments of the events do not always coincide. We have differences, indeed. This is exactly why it is so important to establish direct contacts to clear up these and other issues. We need contacts not only on procedures for avoiding incidents but also on cooperation in Syria between the military, notably, the US-led coalition and the Russian military, which is now operating in Syria at the invitation of its legitimate government. This will be our point of departure. (RMFA 11.02.2016)

Also in early February, it was announced that the NATO–Russia Council would hold 'the first meeting on the level of the organization's permanent envoys since Moscow–NATO ties began to chill' as a result of the Ukraine crisis. According to the Russian news agency *Sputnik*, both Russia and NATO now 'admitted the need for normalizing contacts to resolve a number of issues'; however, the article added, such normalization would be possible only if Russia and the United States could find a way to cooperate on Syria (*Sputnik* 07.02.2016). The news that NATO was considering the resumption of dialogue with Russia in the form of the NATO–Russia Council could indicate that cooperation on

Syria was a top priority for both Britain and the United States – they were willing to moderate their criticisms of Russia on Ukraine to find a solution. At least, this is how it was interpreted on the Russian side. As *Sputnik* described it:

...as the Ukrainian conflict has calmed and Russia has been engaged in a military operation in Syria the need for dialogue between Moscow and NATO has surfaced again. Some NATO members, including Germany and France, have repeatedly called to restore dialogue with Russia. [...] However, analysts have said that the possible reset in Russia-NATO ties heavily depends on the US, which dominates the alliance's agenda. (Sputnik 07.02.2016)

Russia and the United States also remained critical of each other's policy on the ground in Syria. Kerry expressed concern about Assad gaining strength, stating that when Assad seized more territory, this would give rise to new terrorists (cited in *NYT* 12.02.2016). Lavrov criticized the United States for being too focused on the 'issue of Assad', noting that only the Syrian people could decide the outcome of the conflict (RMFA 11.02.2016).

At this point, Russian officials were still balancing between arguing that Syria could 'only be solved through a concerted effort' (Lavrov, cited in RMFA 13.02.2016), and criticizing the West for downgrading Russia to 'a "second-rate country," or a "regional" power at best' (Medvedev, cited in Government.ru 12.02.2016). The Russian media were generally sceptical towards the ceasefire agreement and towards finding a sustainable common ground on Syria (e.g. Zamyatina 12.02.2016, see also Bovt 15.02.2016), further noting how Syrian government troops were making 'considerable gains thanks to Russian airstrikes,' and that 'the Syrian army – backed by Iran and Russia – is close to winning a decisive victory in Syria' (Bovt 15.02.2016, *Russia Insider* 15.02.2016). Also the Russian expert community indicated that, while finding common ground with the West in the fight against terrorism was desirable, that would be difficult, not least since 'neither party wishes to make concessions', and since Russia–West relations were additionally complicated by the involvement of regional players like Turkey and Saudi Arabia (Zamyatina 15.02.2016, see also *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 16.02.2016). A Russian analyst argued that Russia was not banking on the Assad military regime, and wanted the peace talks to continue, but 'not on the terms proposed by the Riyadh group of opposition members who put forth preconditions'. The analyst further noted that the 'threat posed by "ungoverned spaces" in the Middle East' could force Russia and the United States 'to put aside their differences and jointly counter potential disintegration of the regional system of nation states, rampant terrorism and violence' (Naumkin 10.02.2016).

On 22 February, Russia and the United States once again released a joint statement, in their capacity as co-chairs of the ISSG, on the cessation of hostilities in Syria. They signalled their preparedness to ‘develop effective mechanisms to promote and monitor compliance with the ceasefire’, including to establish ‘a communication hotline and, if necessary and appropriate, a working group to exchange relevant information after the cessation of hostilities has gone into effect’ (ISSG 22.02.2016). Both sides welcomed the agreement. Kerry said it resulted ‘from the committed diplomacy of many countries and groups’, highlighting in particular the efforts of the US and Russian delegations. He referred to ‘all parties’ on the ground in noting the importance of meeting one’s commitments, with mentioning Assad specifically (Kerry 22.02.2016). On the Russian side, Putin offered a statement after a telephone conversation with Obama, where he expressed optimism:

I am sure that the joint actions agreed upon with the American side will be enough to radically reverse the crisis situation in Syria. We are finally seeing a real chance to bring an end to the long-standing bloodshed and violence. As a result, humanitarian access to all Syrian citizens in need should be made easier. (Putin 22.02.2016)

But, with clear address to the United States and continuing the double agenda visible in the UNSC speech from September 2015, Putin criticized previous interventions Libya, Iraq, Somalia and Yemen for having been ‘one-sided actions not sanctioned by the UN’. He said the current agreement on Syria could ‘become an example of responsible actions the global community takes against the threat of terrorism, which are based on international law and UN principles’, and expressed the hope that ‘the Syrian leadership and all our partners in the region and beyond’ would support the agreement (Putin 22.02.2016). Hence, both Russian and US officials in their statements toned down the criticism of the other party and of the groups they supported on the ground in Syria, with Kerry referring to ‘all parties’ and Putin encouraging the Syrian government to comply with the agreement – also indicating a line between Russia and the Syrian government. Notably, British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond struck a more critical note in his statement, holding the ceasefire could ‘only succeed if there is a major change of behaviour by the Syrian regime and its backers’. Russia in particular would have to stop attacking ‘Syrian civilians and moderate opposition groups’ and should influence the Assad regime to do the same. Hammond also reiterated that, when the peace talks were resumed, the outcome must be ‘a political transition in Syria, away from Assad’ (Hammond 22.02.2016)

Then, on 14 March, Putin announced that Russia would pull out ‘the main part’ of its military from Syria, taking many politicians and

analysts on the Western side by surprise. Official reactions from Washington were cautiously optimistic, with Press Secretary Josh Earnest stating that Russia's intervention had 'propped up Assad and only made it more difficult for that political resolution to be reached' but that if Russia now continued 'to follow through, then that would be a positive outcome' (cited in Landler 15.03.2016). Many media outlets also expressed hope that the war might be coming to an end. *The New York Times* suggested that Putin's announcement could be seen both as 'a constructive move toward a more lasting peace settlement', and as 'a practical necessity, reflecting a desire not to get bogged down in the Syrian morass indefinitely' (NYT 15.03.2016). As both Western and Russian sources noted, however, despite Putin's announcement, Russian forces continued to remain heavily involved in Syria (NYT 16.04.2016; see also Kureev 19.07.2016). As March drew to an end, Syrian government forces recaptured the city of Palmyra from ISIL, with Russian air assistance. On the Russian side, one observer later noted how the timing of the Russian announcement of its military withdrawal could not have been better:

With Russian military support, the Syrian Army liberated Palmyra, a city with tremendous significance for the world's heritage. This was a city that had been continuously destroyed by the radical Islamists. That victory was extensively covered by the Russian media and was meant to underline the effectiveness of Russian support to Assad for the international community. (Kureev 19.07.2016

British officials got tougher in their statements on Russia and on 'Russia's continued illegal annexation of Crimea'. In a speech in early April, Hammond said fighting had 'flared up again in the last few days in eastern Ukraine', and expressed approval of how the EU had imposed 'hard-hitting, coordinated sanctions' on Russia. He stated that 'Russia's unannounced intervention' had 'strengthened Assad', and said that Russia and Iran had a 'responsibility for telling Assad that it is time to go' (Hammond 07.04.2016). As we shall see below, there is reason to believe that the rising tensions between Russia and NATO in the European theatre, evident in statements and in military activity, was affecting Russia–West relations in Syria.²⁶

²⁶ Actions like Russian fighter jets 'buzzing' of the US destroyer *SS Donald Cook* in the Baltic Sea on 11 April, the continued build-up of Russian capabilities in the Black Sea, the switching-on of one segment of the missile defence system in Romania on 10 May and the initiation of another one in Poland a week later, as well as the Anaconda military exercise which gathered 31 000 NATO soldiers in Poland in June in the run-up to the Warsaw summit all shaped and sharpened mutually antagonistic views of the Other.

In mid-April, Russia's military presence near Aleppo was reported to be increasing, and Kerry warned that this could threaten the fragile truce (cited in *NYT* 23.04.2016). At the same time, the Obama administration announced it would send 250 more military personnel to Syria to fight ISIL. *New York Times* called it 'a risky American expansion', criticizing the lack of 'proper authorization from Congress' and observing that 'the troops in Syria will be operating in another sovereign nation with no clear legal right' (*NYT* 25.04.2016). Lavrov stated on 25 April that the United States and Russia had agreed 'to continue cooperation' within the ISSG framework (RMFA 24.04.2016). However, more generally, official Russian statements on the West, and the United States in particular, were becoming increasingly confrontational. That same day, Putin stated that foreign foundations and institutions involved in Russian education were 'extremely dangerous', because they were not in line with Russian traditions and culture (cited in *TASS* 24.04.2016). Alexey Pushkov, the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the State Duma, said he looked forward to cooperating with Donald Trump, as Trump appeared 'less ideologically biased than Obama' (cited in *Russia Today* 26.04.2016). Meanwhile, Russian media and expert community appeared increasingly sceptical to cooperation with the United States and to Russia's military involvement in Syria as such. Russian officials and several experts made clear statements that held up Russian identity and culture as radically different from the West, thus concurring with the civilizationist position. The exception was again Lavrov, who on occasion highlighted the issue uniting Russia and the United States: the fight against ISIL in Syria.

The apparent rhetorical re-enforcement of boundaries between Russia and the West, and especially the United States, occurred shortly after the NATO-Russia Council meeting on 20 April, the first such meeting after the crisis over Ukraine. After the meeting, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said that 'NATO and Russia have profound and persistent disagreements. Today's meeting did not change that' (Stoltenberg 20.04.2016). *Russia Insider* reported that the CIA and the German Secret Service (GSS) had programmes in which they sought to influence Western media to demonize Putin, also by paying such reports to be prepared (*Russia Insider* 22.04.2016). Sergey Karaganov, Dean at the School of World Economic and International Relations, asked whether the world was now seeing a new ideological struggle, and adding that one reason for this was that the West had started to 'impose its political positions and values even with the use of military force (in Afghanistan, Iran, and Libya) and lost. Its support for the Arab Spring further destabilized the Middle East and made democracy less attractive' (Karaganov 21.04.2016). Further, one analyst noted that 'for Russia, the Syria operation is a down payment on future engagements', another

questioned Russia's continued presence in Syria, as Putin had announced the withdrawal of troops (both cited in *Russia Direct* 25.04.2016). Although Russian discourse in this period does not fit with one of the identity positions mentioned earlier, while the dialogue with the West over Syria was continuing, the overall representation of political relations with the West seemed to be falling back into a civilizationist mode.

By the end of April, UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, said that the partial ceasefire from February remained in force but was cited having said it would be 'in great trouble if we don't act quickly' (*NYT* 22.04.2016). In early May, it was reported that Syrian civilians had been killed in air strikes on a refugee camp in northern Syria. Syrian or Russian warplanes were suspected of having been involved, but this was denied by Russian and Syrian officials (AP 06.05.2016). A reiterated message from Russian officials at this point was that the United States should cut its ties to the moderate opposition, which Russia defined as terrorist. Further, Russian diplomats underlined that their country was open to cooperating with both the United States and Assad, but criticized what were seen as unreasonable claims from the United States. On 6 May, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova stated that the media reports on the situation in and around Aleppo were 'far from disinterested because these stories are focused around traditional accusations, based on rather dubious sources, against the Syrian government, whose aggressive steps purportedly jeopardize the ceasefire regime (...)'. She added that the current escalation of violence was not a result of the government forces, but 'terrorists', and that 'our US partners are not yet in a position to force the Syrian opposition groups they support to dissociate themselves from Jabhat al-Nusra'. Despite urging the United States to 'disassociate from terrorists', Zakharova underlined that Russia would coordinate its efforts in Syria with the United States (cited in *RMFA* 06.05.2016). In an interview on 4 May, Lavrov criticized the opposition group calling itself High Negotiations Committee (HNC) for demanding the departure of Assad. Further, Lavrov took issue with what he saw as a US claim of Russia being Assad's ally: 'he is not our ally. We support him in his fight against terrorism and in his efforts to preserve the Syrian state, but he is not Russia's ally in the sense that Turkey is an ally of the United States' (cited in *Reuters* 04.05.2016). In short, the Kremlin advocated cooperation – but emphasized Russia's position on the US-backed opposition.

The Russian media and expert community were now discussing the US Presidential elections as well as the increasingly aggressive tone between Russia and the West. Alexey Pushkov, Head of the State Duma

Committee on Foreign Affairs, portrayed the West as aggressive: ‘by stating that NATO should be “able to fight tonight” with Russia the new chief commander of the alliance has surpassed his predecessor in warmongering.’ Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov followed up by stating that ‘Russia certainly cannot ignore any action that can potentially threaten its national security’, that ‘Russia will continue to defend its interests’ while also suggesting that the West and Russia should unite in the fight against terrorism (cited in *RT* 05.05.2016). Experts and statesmen were now indicating that Trump would be a better partner for Russia than the Obama administration. Sergey Mikheev, Director of the Center for Current Policy, observed that while Trump was ‘unpredictable to a great extent’ he gave ‘a chance to Russia. There are no such chances with Clinton.’ Leonid Kalashnikov, Deputy Head of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the State Duma, followed up by stating: ‘Trump seems to be much more beneficial for the Kremlin because he is pragmatic’, and that Clinton had expressed a ‘destructive anti-Russian position on many issues’ (*Russia Direct* 10.05.2016). Pavel Koshkin, editor of *Russia Direct*, noted ‘it’s no longer inconceivable that the great powers could find themselves involved in a conventional war’, referring to NATO’s military build-up near the Russian border (*Russia Direct* 04.05.2016). *Russia Today* also reported that Putin’s popularity was continuing to rise, and that 82% of Russians were satisfied with his work (*RT* 05.05.2016). It was also reported that the Russian counter-terrorism operation in Syria had made Russians more interested in politics, as it had become one of the most-discussed topics in the public sphere (*RT* 06.05.2016). In early May, Russia sent an orchestra to play in Palmyra. According to *The Economist*, the message was clear: to show the positive effects of Russia’s intervention in Syria. ‘Mr Putin did everything he could to underline the concert’s message that Russia is leading the fight for Western civilisation’ – but no representatives of Western countries attended the concert, allegedly because they did not want to indicate support for Assad (*Economist* 06.05.2016). It could be argued that *The Economist* here was misreading the situation. Russian actions in Syria during these months are more reasonably understood as implementation of Russia’s alternative and civilizationist-inspired policy track, one in which Russian civilization is projected as *opposed* to and irreconcilable with the West, and where the country’s logical partners are to be found among countries in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, on 20 May, Russia reportedly ‘proposed to the US-led coalition that they stage joint air strikes on Syrian rebels, including militant Islamist group al-Nursa Front, who are not observing a ceasefire’ (*Reuters* 20.05.2016). However, the United States was said to have ‘responded coolly’, with a US State Department spokesman saying that the United States believed the Assad government was ‘responsible

for most of the violations of the fitful ceasefire' from February, and looked to Russia 'to end such (government) violations' (*Reuters* 20.05.2016). On 7 June, *The New York Times* reported that Assad, whose position had been bolstered by the Russian intervention in the war, had vowed to win back 'every inch' of Syria. A State Department spokesman observed that the Syrian regime's failure to conform with 'deadlines and limits' set out by the ISSG, was defying not only the United States, but also the Syrian regime's 'two most vital allies, Russia and Iran' (*NYT* 07.06.2016).

A few weeks earlier, Kerry had pushed internally for a 'plan B', calling for 'escalated military action' if the Assad regime continued its defiance. However, according to the *New York Times*, Obama had 'not acted on it', reportedly because he was 'wary of drawing the United States deeper into a conflict in which he initially saw no vital American interest' (*NYT* 07.06.2016). On 17 June, 51 US diplomats signed an internal memo criticizing the Obama administration's current approach in Syria, and urging the Obama administration to issue strikes against the Assad regime 'to stop its persistent violations of a ceasefire'; they diplomats claimed they were not 'advocating for a slippery slope that ends in a military confrontation with Russia', but recognized that such strikes could cause 'further tensions with Russia' (*NYT* 17.06.2016).

What we see throughout the spring and early summer of 2016, then, is that the fragile momentum for cooperation against international terrorism, established in late 2015, was gradually fading. As negotiations failed, Russia pursued the alternative, civilizationalist policy track in Syria, excluding the West. The Assad regime regained strength on the ground with help from Iran and Russia, and Western accusations arose of civilians being targeted in airstrikes. The Syria priorities of Russia and of the US-led coalition seemed increasingly mismatched. When negative depictions of the other party resurfaced in the domestic debates on both sides as well as on other 'events' (like the security situation in Europe), it became more difficult to patch up relations on the leadership level and continue negotiations on Syria.

Phase three: From renewed optimism to full collapse

From late June 2016, fairly intensive diplomatic activity on the top Russian and US political levels took place, aimed at securing cooperation on political negotiations in Syria as well as on joint military

efforts against ISIL and the al-Nusra Front (*WP* 30.06.2016).²⁷ According to Stratfor Forecasting, an agreement was reached on 27 June as a result of 'U.S. diplomatic efforts to contain the crisis in Syria after peace talks failed' (Stratfor 01.07.2016). It is difficult to ascertain who initiated the proposal and what it actually amounted to at this stage. However, it probably concerned US efforts to divide the 'moderate opposition' from the al-Nusra Front and cooperate with Russia on targeting this Front, as well as IS, in exchange for Russian efforts to press Assad to comply with the ceasefire agreement and engage in a political process which would include the 'moderate opposition.' These collaborative efforts were all the more noteworthy because they took place against the backdrop of continuing tensions between Russia and NATO in Europe, driven by Russian military posturing and exercises on one side of the border, and decisions to expand NATO's military presence in the Baltic states and Poland on the other.

That the Russian leadership continued to paint a more positive picture of the United States during this period²⁸ arguably attests to the important effects on Russian official expressions of identity of being acknowledged in positive terms and as an equal world player by the Western leaderships. Although it did not include Russia, and it extended sanctions (even announcing the possibility of strengthening them) the G7 meeting on 27 May made positive mention, in its final document, of

²⁷ 'Under the proposal, which was personally approved by President Obama and heavily supported by Secretary of State John F. Kerry, the American and Russian militaries would cooperate at an unprecedented level, something the Russians have sought for a long time' (*Washington Post* 30.06.2016). The ensuing diplomatic activity in July and August included frequent communication between Lavrov and Kerry, like Kerry's visit to Moscow in mid-July and talks in Geneva on 29 August. There was also direct communication between Putin and Obama, for example a telephone conversation prior to the Warsaw NATO summit.

²⁸ For instance, at the bi-annual meeting of Russian ambassadors on 1 July, Putin sidestepped sabre-rattling over NATO's decisions to deploy additional forces in the Baltics and instead called Western countries 'partners' in creating a 'broad anti-terrorist front'. He also emphasized Russia's interest in 'close cooperation' with the USA on international affairs. Two weeks before, at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, Putin had said Russia accepted the USA as the 'only superpower' and wanted to work with it, provided the USA kept its democracy lectures to itself (cited in *Moscow Times* 05.07.2016). Following the meeting in Geneva on 29 August, Lavrov explained: 'The fact that we are not putting out documents does not mean that we are not finding increasingly more points of contact [...] Merely the fact that we have been able and are continuing to try to reduce the areas of misunderstanding and, most important, probably, to lower the level of mutual distrust is in itself an achievement' (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 01.09.2016) In an interview with *Bloomberg* in early September, Putin noted difficulties in the negotiations, but said the USA saw eye-to-eye with Russia on the problems. He did not accuse the USA of playing a double game, but praised Kerry, saying his 'patience and determination' was making accord possible (cited in *Bloomberg* 02.09.2016).

Russia's positive role in the settlement of the Syrian crisis, and the need to maintain contact with Russia to resolve global problems. This was duly noted on the Russian side (cited in *Russia Direct* 30.05.2016), as was CIA Director Tom Brennan's statement:

The Russians play a critical role in this [...] There is going to be no way forward on a political front without active Russian cooperation, as well as true and genuine Russian interest in trying to find a political path' was presented as positive acknowledgment of Russia's role in the Russian press. (Cited in Sputnik 29.06.2016)

After a telephone conversation between Putin and Obama in early July, the Kremlin noted that Obama had given a positive evaluation of Russia's efforts to 'mediate the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh' (*RT* 06.07.2016). Moreover, the official US reaction to the Turkish–Russian rapprochement in August was pragmatic, emphasizing that both states were fighting ISIL, and 'there's a lot of common goals, common interests there' (cited in *WSJ* 19.08.2016). After the Geneva negotiations in late August, at a joint press conference, Kerry thanked his 'friend Sergey' for the 'honest and productive effort', confirming that the two teams had 'achieved clarity on the way forward' (cited in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 01.09.2016). While the meeting brought few specific results, this, along with the fact that Obama and Putin met for 90 minutes at the September G20 meeting in Hangzhou, China, were seen as acts of recognition on the Russian side. After his meeting with Putin, Obama acknowledged the lack of trust between the two parties, but said they had had 'some productive conversations about what a real cessation of hostilities would look like that would allow us [...] to focus our attention on common enemies'. This statement could be seen as precisely the kind of parity in relations in the fight against international terrorism that speaks to the Russian statist position and that in turn enabled Putin to say that his government would intensify cooperation with the United States to combat extremists in Syria and that Russia was 'up for a full-format recovery' of its relations with the United States (cited in *WSJ* 06.09.2016).

In Hangzhou, also the new British PM Theresa May struck a more positive note towards Russia and signalled readiness to improve Anglo–Russian relations: 'While I recognize there will be some differences between us, there are some complex and serious areas of concern and issues to discuss; I hope we will be able to have a frank and open relationship and dialogue,' she said (cited in *RBTH* 07.09.2016). The point we are trying to make here is that these identifications of Russia in Western statements empowered and enhanced the statist position in the Russian foreign policy debate. Rather than shaming and dismissing Russia, and thereby further fuelling the arguments of the civilizationist

positions, the official Western representations seemed to facilitate the statist position, and the Russian government's self-image as a legitimate and equal world player. They contributed to pushing the Western threat to Russia's international identity beneath the terrorist threat in the Russian hierarchy of threats, thereby making cooperation possible.

These more accommodating Western representations of Russia also had repercussions in the Russian domestic debate. Russian expert commentary constantly accentuated how Syria was making Russia a 'player' on the international scene and that cooperation with the United States was necessary to maintain this position.²⁹ July was also the month that saw the least US-sceptical public opinion in Russia since the beginning of the intervention in Syria. A Levada Center sociologist explained that anti-American sentiment had calmed since the height of the Ukraine Crisis, with Washington and the Kremlin now cooperating more closely over the conflict in Syria.³⁰ Thus, we can see how Western actors' acknowledgement and positive representation of Russia in this period played into and shaped Russia's acknowledgement of the West and willingness to cooperate.

There is also another domestic interaction pattern to be noted. While domestic pressure on the US leadership to step back from cooperation clearly was stronger on than on the Russian side, where the political system and regime type provide less room to challenge official policies, also the Russian leadership faced the US-sceptical narrative which it had been nurturing itself for years. This was particularly evident following the above-mentioned appeal from top-ranking US diplomats for the use of military force against the Syrian government in June: The leaked document was regarded as an appeal for repeating in Syria the scenarios of Iraq and Libya, and even Russian experts who were in favour of cooperation with the United States on Syria concluded that any negotiations would have to take place after a new US president was in place in late January 2017 (*Russia Direct* 27.06.2016, *Reuters*

²⁹ See for example comments by Andrey Kortunov, Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council referred in *Reuters* (30.06.2016); Nikolay Pakhomov, a Russian International Affairs Council expert, in *National Interest* (31.08.2016), and Nikolay Surkov, Associate Professor in the Oriental Studies Department of Moscow State Institute of International Relations MGIMO-University, in *Russia Direct* (Surkov 14.09.2016). According to Surkov, 'Russian officials didn't hide their discontent with the fact that the Americans had refused to recognize the Kremlin's constructive role even on such issues as the release of an American hostage in Spring 2015. Up until September 2016, Washington had even tried to conceal from the general public its partnership with Moscow aimed at resolving the crises.'

³⁰ Sixty-nine percent of 1,600 respondents considered the USA a threat, down from 77 in February 2015. Polls by the independent Levada Center (*Moscow Times* 12.07.2016).

30.06.2016). The idea that the United States would *not* honour its part of the agreement by contributing to fight the al-Nusra Front, but would instead seek to support the ‘terrorists’, was a recurrent refrain among Russian ‘hawks’ as well as in the press – even though the agreement was negotiated at the top political level.³¹ Putin was also held accountable by anti US youth movements which he himself had contributed to fostering: On the same day as Putin sent a US Independence Day message to Obama recalling that at one time the two countries had managed to solve ‘the most difficult international problems to the benefit of both our nations and all humankind’ and expressing hope that this experience would help them get back to working together, Young Guard activists staged an impromptu demonstration in a central square in Moscow, condemning the United States. Their message was that the United States, under its current leadership, had become ‘a parasite state that attacks other countries under any pretext, violating their sovereignty, causing revolutions, using military force, killing civilians and their destroying statehood’ (cited in *AP* 04.07.2016). While the Russian leadership did speak more positively of the United States and the West in this period, it also continued to cater for this domestic narrative in official speech, echoing the main refrain concerning Western interventionism and support for terrorism as a threat to Russian as well as international security. As Putin noted in an interview with *Bloomberg*:

I've always been of the opinion that you can't change things from the outside, regarding political regimes, power change... I'm sure - and the events of the past decade add to this certainty - in particular the attempts at democratization in Iraq, Libya, we see what they led to: the destruction of state systems and the rise of terrorism. (Kremlin 05.09.2016)

Finally, even if the US leadership was trying to hedge and protect the negotiations with the Russian leadership, the intensifying US debate on Russia, discussed in greater detail below, had a direct effect on how the

³¹ For example, the Head of the Russian General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, complained: ‘Washington still hasn’t provided a list of groups it considers terrorist, allowing jihadists to regroup and escape Russian-led air raids on their positions [...] As a result, terrorists in Syria are actively regrouping and tensions are soaring again. It cannot continue this way indefinitely [...] Our US partners are still undecided where there are opposition forces and where there are ‘turncoats’ from international terrorist organizations’ (RT 01.07.2016; see also *Izvestia* 03.08.2016). In *Sputnik* (10.08.2016), a Senior Research Fellow at the Moscow-based Institute of US and Canada Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences maintained that ex-CIA chief Morell’s comments that the USA should covertly kill Russians and Iranians in Syria was ‘what the United States has secretly and surreptitiously been doing and most importantly what Washington will do if Hillary wins presidential election.’

Russian leadership viewed negotiations with the West. As put by Lavrov on 17 August:

The anti-Russian slant which can be felt in the presidential race creates momentum in the American establishment, which is hardly conducive to promoting our dialogue with the United States, including on topical international issues. I believe that time will heal all those who are now 'sick', and our relations will resume their normal course. However, to do so, it is imperative to do away with Russophobic paranoia and stop trying to exploit instincts that harken back to the era of McCarthyism or the Cold War in order to achieve political goals in the United States. (RMFA 17.08.2016)

One week later, the Russian Information and Press Department even indicated that the public, Russophobic 'campaign' had been prompted by the US leadership itself (RMFA 23.08.2016). The view that Obama and Kerry would be unable to deliver on cooperation with Russia due to opposition from the Pentagon and the CIA was expressed publicly by members of the Russian diplomatic corps (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 01.09.2016).

Moscow also continued to keep alive an alternative 'Moscow-exclusive' policy track on Syria in this period. Firstly, Russia sought to forge a political solution in Syria on its own, without Western participation.³² Secondly, although Russia had scaled down its military activity Syria, it had not ended its engagement, as Putin had announced on 14 March. The agreement on military assistance between Russia and Syria indicated that Moscow could send instructors and military advisors in sizable numbers, and the number of military personnel sent to Syria did probably not decrease significantly (*Russia Direct* 19.07.2016). In the middle of June, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu travelled to Syria to inspect the Russian troops fighting in Syria and met with Assad to discuss 'military cooperation, the supply of Russian weapons and fighting terrorism'.³³ Also, Lieutenant General Alexander Zhuravlev,

³² According to the Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbar*, 'Moscow, has recently made a number of proposals for a new constitution, which may greatly restrict and decentralize Assad's power. Besides, the Russian draft will supposedly give the Syrian Kurds a constitutional right to speak their own language on par with Arabic. However, the Kurdish autonomy must not be political or economic, but rather cultural.' Earlier, Lavrov had said Russia would support Syria's federalization, as long as it is backed by the country's inhabitants. 'Whichever form of government, be it federalization, decentralization or a unitary state, must be approved by all Syrians' and: 'We have never tried to make decisions on behalf of the Syrian people' (see Sputnik 01.06.2016).

³³ Support for this policy was evident in comments by the First Deputy Chair of the Duma Committee on Defence, Andrei Krasov, that after Shoigu's visit, Russia will increase its support for Assad's forces 'to help cleanse Syria of different terrorists as

First Deputy Commander of the South Military District, was appointed Commander of the Russian forces in Syria; his prime objective was to fight militants advancing on Palmyra. According to Russian media, strikes were carried out already on 12, 14 and 21 July in the eastern suburbs of Palmyra (RBTH 22.07.2016). On 15 July, Shoigu said that the operations of Russian Air and Space Forces (ASF) in Syria have ‘turned the tide in favor of the legitimate government of Syria [...] As a result of Russian air activity, the supplies coming to the terrorists have been interrupted, and in some places completely blocked,’ Shoigu said. The defence minister also said that, in the course of operations in Syria, the Russian Air and Space Forces (ASF) had eliminated more than 2,000 émigré-terrorists from Russia, including 17 field commanders. Moreover, with ASF support of, more than 12,000 km² and 150 cities had been liberated in Syria (*Russia Direct* 21.07.2016). Finally, work on building a new, alternative coalition in Syria, without the West, proceeded. Russia had been cooperating closely with Iran for a long time, and expanded this cooperation by deploying long-distance and tactical bombers to Iran’s Hamadan air base in August. The new rapprochement with Turkey and the mutual efforts to ‘patch up relations’ following the downing of the Russian airplane in November 2015 represented important steps in this direction (*NYT* 08.08.2016). The Russian expert community was already discussing the viability of such as alternative strategic coalition (*Gazeta.ru* 21.08.2016).

On the US side, Kerry and Obama seemed even more out of step with domestic opinion. Defense Secretary Carter as well as influential voices in and outside the administration, like former US ambassador to Syria Robert Ford, were directly opposed to cooperating with Russia. Significant numbers of officials at the Pentagon, in the US military and in the US intelligence community were against it as well (see *WSJ* 01.07.2016, *AP* 14.07.2016, *Daily Beast* 12.07.2016).³⁴ In Obama’s own team, presidential candidate Hillary Clinton’s support for greater military intervention in Syria *against* Assad, Russia and Iran was publicly supported by influential voices in the US defence and intelligence community.³⁵ With increasing accusations that Russia was

swiftly as possible’ (cited in *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 23.06.2016). Well-known Russian journalist Dmitry Kiselev suggested that Shoigu’s surprise visit to Syria was a message to Washington to stop trying to pressure Moscow over Assad (cited in *Reuters* 30.06.2016).

³⁴ ‘The Russians, two US defence officials said, could not be trusted to honour any agreement, and added that they believe Moscow would eventually exploit any agreement to bolster the regime-and weaken Syria’s beleaguered rebel fighters. As one US official asked: ‘What do we gain?’ (cited in *Daily Beast* 12.07.2016).

³⁵ For example, Former acting CIA Director Michael Morell expressed support for Clinton and a policy of increased military intervention in Syria, saying that US policy in

meddling in the US elections, other key members of Obama team expressed representations of Russia that would make cooperation unacceptable. Defense Secretary Carter, for example, said Russia was ‘undermining the international order’ and that ‘we will defend our allies, the principled international order and the positive future it affords all of us’ (cited in *WSJ* 07.09.2016).

Also important for the domestic pressure facing Obama and Kerry was the broader picture of Russia painted in influential media outlets. In influential US newspapers, the plans for cooperating with Russia were portrayed as a betrayal of the moderate opposition in Syria and the mission of forcing Assad to leave, often with references to Russia as incapable of keeping its word or of compromising.³⁶ On 8 August, *Middle East Briefing* observed:

A bipartisan chorus of prominent national security veterans have launched a serious attack on US President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry, for what they collectively call an appeasement of Russia. The attacks come at a sensitive moment, with Kerry working closely with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on a last-ditch effort to end the five-year Syrian War and engineer a joint US–Russia military campaign to wipe out the Islamic State (ISIL) and Jabhat al-Nusra. (Middle East Briefing 2016)

Repeated depictions of Russia as not trustworthy, indeed as a ‘liar’, in the US mainstream press on issues such as the Olympics in Rio³⁷ or in connection with the upcoming US elections must also be taken into consideration if we want to understand the pressure *against* cooperating with Russia in the US domestic debate. In contrast to the rather positive depictions of Russia at the top level, the US media and expert community increasingly projected highly negative images. Voices presenting Russia as the most radically different and dangerous adversary of the West could be found in highly reputed newspapers like the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, often with criticism of presidential candidate Trump’s friendly tone towards Russia. Citing intelligence reports, an

Syria should be to make Iran and Russia ‘pay a price’ by arming local groups (cited in *Intercept* 09.08.2016).

³⁶ See for example *Washington Post* (30.06.2016) and *Wall Street Journal* (01.07.2016). A *Washington Post* editorial observed ‘In every case, the Russian and Syrian regimes have betrayed their commitments, continuing to bomb civilian areas, employ chemical weapons and deny aid to besieged communities. And no wonder: Each time the U.S. response has been to return to the Russians, offering more concessions and pleading for another deal’ (*Washington Post* 03.07.2016).

³⁷ See *New York Times* (19.07.2016), *Washington Post* (19.07.2016), *Wall Street Journal* (19.07.2016).

editorial in the *Washington Post* claimed that the reported Russian interference in the US elections represented the ‘reckless aggressiveness Mr. Putin has embraced in foreign affairs since returning to the presidency in 2012’ (*WP* 25.07.2016). In an op-ed in the same newspaper, columnist Anne Applebaum held that US voters should elect Hillary Clinton, as otherwise the United States would ‘be led by a man who appears bent on destroying the alliances that preserve international peace and American power’, referring to Trump’s statement where he suggested Russia to leak his opponent Clinton’s e-mails. Applebaum added that if ‘that’s how [Putin] feels about Russia, there’s no guarantee that he’ll feel any different about China or Iran’ (Applebaum 28.07.2016). *The New York Times* took a similar stance, asking ‘What was Mr. Trump thinking?’ and noting that Trump had crossed a new line ‘by practically inviting Russia, an increasingly aggressive American adversary, to interfere in the presidential election’ (*NYT* 28.07.2016). Former US ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, cited intelligence reports indicating Russian involvement in the US elections, because ‘who else?’. McFaul went on to refer to Russian intelligence interceptions of phone calls and meetings during his time as ambassador in Moscow, adding that ‘the Kremlin deploys such tactics all the time’. Interestingly, McFaul suggested responding with similar measures: ‘Just as the Kremlin has become more sophisticated at exporting its ideas and supporting its friends, so must we’ (McFaul 31.07.2016). In sum, August 2016 and the September days prior to the Geneva negotiations can be seen as a period even more intense in terms of US media projecting Russia as an adversary.³⁸

³⁸ The headings in the following articles may serve as examples: *Wall Street Journal* (18.08.2016) ‘Don’t Forget Putin’s Pal in the White House. Obama administration policies have done plenty to help a more assertive Russia’; *New York Post* (18.08.2016) ‘Putin is gobbling up whatever he can - while Obama does nothing’; Bolton (16.08.2016), ‘Putin Rolls Over Obama - and Everyone Else’; *New York Times* (20.08.2016) ‘Playing With Fire in Ukraine’; *New York Times* (21.08.2016) ‘More of Kremlin’s Opponents Are Ending Up Dead A Pattern That Suggests State Involvement’; Courtney & Shlapak (27.08.2016) ‘The West must do more to keep Putin at bay’; *New York Times* (29.08.2016) ‘A Powerful Russian Weapon: The Spread of False Stories’; *New York Times* (29.08.2016) ‘Russia Blames Others for Its Doping Woes’; *Newsweek* (29.08.2016) ‘How Vladimir Putin Is Using Donald Trump to Advance Russia’s Goals’; *New York Times* (09.09.2016) ‘Trump’s Love for Putin: a Presidential Role Model’; *Wall Street Journal* (09.09.2016) ‘Obama and the Russia Hacks .Why shouldn’t Putin believe he can get away with it?’; *The Economist* (10.09.2016) ‘Donald Trump and the Russians’, Applebaum (09.09.2016) ‘How Russia could spark a U.S. electoral disaster’.

However, there were also many within the US media and expert community who presented more nuanced images of Russia.³⁹ An editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* held that cooperating with Russia on Syria was Obama's 'best option', and that renewed US–Russia cooperation was 'more likely to produce a negotiated end to the fighting than the alternative proposed by President Obama's critics: U.S. military action against Assad' (*LA Times* 07.07.2016). Daniel DePetris made a similar point, stating that the United States was becoming desperate with regard to its options in Syria, and had 'no choice but to cooperate with Russia' (*National Interest* 18.07.2016). Nikolas Gvosdev of the US Naval War College questioned that the 'Russia threat' was one of the main topics of the presidential campaign, and indicated that Russia was used to 'to throw red meat into the scrum' (Gvosdev 30.07.2016). Similarly, Ted Carpenter indicated that the on-going smear-campaign of Trump and Russia was a new McCarthyism which produced stereotypes and rigidities that in the long term would damage US interests abroad (Carpenter 29.07.2016). Hence, in the US media debate there was clearly an alternative position arguing for a more pragmatic approach to Russia, and for compromise and conditional cooperation with Russia in and over Syria. However, these voices were fewer in number and were often published in less influential media outlets.

On balance, when the Geneva talks resumed in September, the US leadership faced a mass wall of opposition against negotiating with Russia on Syria. Concerning cooperation with Russia on Syria, suspicions that Russia might not honour its word after an agreement had been reached were never far below the surface.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, on 9 September the Geneva talks resulted in an agreement between Russia and the United States to establish a 'joint integration center' in Vienna if they succeeded in upholding one week of ceasefire in Syria, beginning on 12 September. This initiative meant that Russia and the United States would discuss shared targets for the first time since the Second World War and would carry out coordinated strikes, with the participation of military and special forces representatives from both countries, targeting ISIL as well as the al-Nusra Front. The agreement also called for the grounding of the Syrian air force over non-ISIL-held territory and for the creation of a humanitarian corridor to supply the besieged city of Aleppo.

³⁹ In the expert community these voices included foreign policy experts such as former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, International Relations scholar John Mearsheimer and professor emeritus of Russian studies and politics Stephen F. Cohen.

⁴⁰ See Obama's comments during the G20 meeting, cited in *Wall Street Journal* (05.09.2016).

Predictably, the avalanche of opposition in the US domestic debate kept on moving when the agreement was announced, with the Chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security, Texas Congressman Michael McCaul, commenting: 'I don't really trust the Russians' (cited in *Nation* 12.09.2016). *AP* reported that the 'proposed level of U.S.-Russian interaction has upset several leading national security officials in Washington, including Defense Secretary Ash Carter and National Intelligence Director James Clapper [...] Kerry only appeared at the news conference after several hours of internal U.S. discussions' (*AP* 10.09.2016). Almost every single day of the ceasefire saw critical incidents that *could* trigger accusations of the other side breaching it.⁴¹

Two events in particular caused considerable controversy. Firstly, on 17 September, US-led coalition airstrikes, involving the British military, killed 60 Syrian soldiers at Deir ez-Zor. Secondly, on 19 September, an aid convoy was attacked and 12 people killed near Aleppo. After the latter incident, US mainstream press immediately blamed Russia (*NYT* 21.09.2016). Also US defence officials publicly claimed that Russian aircraft had dropped bombs on the aid convoy, but the White House officials did not confirm these allegations. Moreover, Kerry and his new British counterpart Boris Johnson insisted on continuing the negotiations following the incident with the aid convoy, with Kerry announcing that 'the ceasefire is not dead'. Johnson exclaimed, 'Quite frankly, the Kerry-Lavrov process is the only show in town and we have to get that show back on the road' (*Guardian* 21.09.2016). Still, over time and in interplay with the surge in the US-sceptical narrative in the Russian debate, the Western leadership reverted to the argument that Russia could not be trusted – and, ultimately, that cooperation with Russia in and over Syria was not possible.⁴² On Saturday 24 September, foreign ministers from the US, UK, France, Italy, Germany and the EU issued a denunciation of Russia's role in the escalating violence in Syria, and declared that the bombing of the humanitarian convoy and the

⁴¹ On 15 September Russia accused the USA of covering up Syrian opposition violations of the ceasefire. On 16 September the White House accused the government in Damascus of blocking the flow of humanitarian assistance. On 18 the USA accused Russia and Syria of violating the ceasefire by carrying out airstrikes and blocking aid from reaching besieged areas.

⁴² In Senate testimony on 22 September, Marine Corps Gen. Joe Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made it clear the USA did not trust Moscow, saying: 'I do not believe it would be a good idea to share intelligence with the Russians.' 'Direct coordination of military operations with Russia would be "deeply counterproductive" to U.S. national-security interests, in part because of the risk the U.S. would reveal sensitive intelligence-collection capabilities', said Chris Harmer, senior naval analyst for the Institute for the Study of War in Washington. (As referred in *Wall Street Journal* (26.09.2016).

offensive in eastern Aleppo, among other actions, ‘blatantly contradicts Russia’s claim that it supports a diplomatic resolution.’⁴³

On the Russian side the blame-game picked up momentum after the above-mentioned airstrike killing of 60 Syrian soldiers on 17 September 2016. Assad had immediately announced that such airstrikes on Syrian troops were not accidental and said the United States lacked ‘the will’ to join forces with Russia in fighting extremists. A few days later at the UN, Lavrov called for the UN to expand its terrorism list to include groups on the fringes of a US-backed rebel umbrella group, and labelled the errant strikes an ‘outrageous violation’. He also put the blame for the ongoing crisis in the Middle East as such on the United States, calling the conflict in Syria, as well as those in Iraq and Libya, a ‘direct consequence’ of foreign military interventions and ‘political engineering’ (cited in *PBS Newshour* 22.09.2016). Official Russian statements in the system ‘below’ Lavrov indicated that the Western counterpart was unwilling to separate moderate opposition forces from terrorists and was arming them instead.⁴⁴ By October the Russian government, in written statements, had moved from giving the Western leadership the benefit of the doubt to concluding that it was unwilling to carry out the commitment to control the opposition in Syria:

The Syrian government, acting in good will, was willing to pull back its forces and even started withdrawing them three weeks ago. But Washington was unable at that time and is unwilling now to ensure that the opposition forces it controls act likewise. The reason behind this could be Washington’s disregard for the humanitarian needs in Syria, which it only uses for political arguments, or its inability to influence the opposition forces. (RMFA 03.010.2016)

Like the Western leadership, the Russian leadership seemed to be reverting to the core representation of the West as an untrustworthy and deceitful player – an enemy intent on dominating the world and downgrading Russia. Military intervention, support of ‘terrorists’ as well as the instrumental use humanitarian and human rights criticisms to delegitimize other states are cited as the West’s prime tools to achieve this goal. As noted, this view of the West as an adversary enjoys strong backing in the Russian domestic debate. While the consensus among the

⁴³ As referred in *Wall Street Journal* (26.09.2016).

⁴⁴ See for example RT (26.09.2016) ‘West still arming Al-Nusra in Syria, peace almost impossible - Russia’s UN envoy’, or Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov in a conference call with reporters, reported in Reuters (26.09.2016) ‘Kremlin Says Worried That Terrorists Regrouping in Syria’.

four parties represented in the new Duma after the September 2016 elections rested largely on the need to withstand NATO/US aggression and the common appraisal of Russian policies in Ukraine and Syria as a success, the breakdown of negotiations brought the traditional hawks to prominence in the Russian debate on cooperation with the West in Syria. In the words of Russia's Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, the intensive Russian–US negotiations on Syria 'were used by Washington [merely] to delay time to allow the militants to regroup' (cited in *Sputnik* 01.11.2016). Russian public opinion remained broadly supportive of the military intervention in Syria, but the faith that Russia–US cooperation in Syria could succeed had dwindled. In October, Levada reported that 48 per cent of those surveyed said they feared the conflict in Syria could escalate into World War III.⁴⁵

During October and November 2016, the top Russian leadership still seemed to be in favour of holding back Russian anti-US sentiments and pursuing a cooperative approach in words and in deeds. Following a two-week pause in the bombing of Aleppo from October 18, the Russian ambassador to the UN said that Russia was hoping to turn the pause into a lasting truce through talks with the United States and regional powers. The overarching point of reference for cooperation was still the common fight against terrorism. Moreover, Putin had rejected a request from the Russian military to resume bombing of militants in Aleppo – allegedly because he wanted to give the United States more time to fulfil the pledge under the September ceasefire deal to separate moderate Syrian rebels from terrorist groups (*Bloomberg* 02.11.2016). By the end of December however, this faded and the cooperative attitude toward the United States and the West was gone. When Assad's forces, with Russian help, had all but retaken control over Aleppo, the Russian leadership simply dismissed all pressure from the 'international community' on implementing a ceasefire. The impassioned statements of US Ambassador Samantha Powers at the UN to Russia, Assad and Iran, with reference to the humanitarian situation in Aleppo, asking whether they

⁴⁵ A survey released by the independent Levada Center in Moscow found that 52 per cent supported the military operation now, compared with 55 per cent a year previous. Then, 40 per cent of Russians surveyed believed relations with the USA would improve as a result of Russia's actions, while only 16 per cent thought they would worsen. 'Asked last week, just 21 percent thought relations with the US had gotten better over the past year, while 32 percent said they'd become worse. More ominously, 48 percent of Russian respondents said last week they feared the conflict in Syria could escalate into World War III' (*Christian Science Monitor*, 04.11.2016). Despite military successes, Russia's main goal in Syria has remained elusive. While Russian and Syrian forces are set for a major offensive on Aleppo after the end of the ceasefire, possible military success is overshadowed by the Kremlin's inability to return to superpower-style dealing with the USA.

‘were truly incapable of shame’ and whether ‘no act of barbarism against civilians, no execution of a child that gets under your skin?’ were seen as just yet another example of double standards and Western propaganda (*Huffington Post* 14.12.2016).

Instead, and since then, Russia has pursued its alternative track in Syria, in cooperation with the non-Western and regional powers it had courted so carefully in parallel to the Russia–Western track. It was a deal between Russia and Turkey that made it possible to transport fighters and civilians out of Aleppo in December. In the words of Lavrov, the talks with US officials on Syria had been ‘fruitless chatter’ (*besplodnye posidelki*). He accused Washington of having tried ‘to delay us in order to save the terrorists.’ In the future, he signalled, Moscow would be working with Turkey instead (cited in *RIA Novosti* 14.12.2016). Accordingly, subsequent meetings to negotiate ‘peace in Syria’ were to take place in Moscow and Astana, Kazakhstan – and with Russia, Iran and Turkey as the key players around the table.

Conclusions

This report set out to examine why efforts made by Russia and the West to collaborate in and over the crises in Syria have failed. Our point of departure was that cooperation between Russia and the West in and over Syria *could* have been possible – especially if framed as a shared interest in fighting international terrorism together, akin to how Russia and the West found common ground following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. However, given the strained Russia-West relations post-Crimea, in the case of Syria, our core assumption was that ingrained negative representations of the Other, in official statements as well as in the broader, domestic foreign policy debate on both sides, made negotiations and collaboration difficult, from the outset.

Analysing Russia–West interaction over a period of one year, starting with Putin’s invitation to collaborate back in September 2015, we found that adversarial representations of the other were continuously reiterated in the domestic debate in these states, and at times also reinforced by the political leaderships who initiated and fronted the Syria negotiations. These negative representations, we hold, restricted the room for manoeuvre available to the political leadership on both sides, making collaboration on Syria appear increasingly more impossible and unlikely.

We started the analysis by presenting a set of well-established alternative foreign policy positions in the Russian, US and British foreign policy debate. Despite being changeable in the long *durée*, such positions could provide a baseline for the states’ orientation and engagement on the international scene and thus also on the prospects for collaboration in Syria. For Russia, it is fair to say that although the ‘civilizationist’ position, prescribing a more confrontational approach to the West, was growing stronger in Russian official foreign policy discourse, peaking with the annexation of Crimea, the international engagement in and over Syria initially bore the hallmarks of the statist position. The latter puts the principles of state sovereignty and non-intervention first, but allows for pragmatic cooperation with the West on the basis of shared interests. On the US side in the years prior to 2015, there was a combination in policies of what might be termed a realist position, making cooperation with Russia in Syria possible on the basis of shared interests; and a liberal internationalist position, which saw conflict with Russia as more likely due to differing views on non-

intervention and regime change. While generally inclined to a realist position, Obama and his administration were continuously challenged by liberal internationalist criticism, also inside the government apparatus, calling for a more confrontational approach to the Assad regime, and a tougher tone against Russia. In Britain, the corresponding internationalist position received a blow with the 2013 Parliamentary vote not to 'play our part in a strong international response' to Assad in Syria (for which the government had requested permission). Still, the UK government's arguments on Syria remained basically in line with an internationalist positing. With the benefit of hindsight, we would suggest that the US administration's decision not to take action against the Assad regime in 2013 – despite President Obama himself drawing a 'red line' following reports that Assad had used chemical weapons against his own people – can be seen as a choice for maintaining a realist foreign policy position. By the same token, the subsequent efforts to negotiate with Russia in Syria throughout the Obama administration's final year in office could be interpreted as an attempt to continue the realist position.

In the first phase examined in this report, beginning in September 2015 and lasting until the end of the year, we saw how the US leadership, fronted mainly by Secretary of State John Kerry, circumvented the Russia-sceptical domestic debate and pressed forward to find common ground and establish working relations with Russia on the Syria question. Concrete manifestations of this policy were the progress made in the Vienna talks and the agreement on a peace plan for Syria, in turn endorsed by the UN in Security Council Resolution 2254 on 18 December 2015. These efforts were supported by a British leadership which also seemed willing to calm critical voices warning that Russia could not be trusted as a cooperation partner. The terrorist attacks on Paris in November 2015 and the constant portrayal of ISIL's brutality in the Western press are likely to have contributed to downgrading the threat from Russia to a place below international terrorism in the Western public hierarchy of threats. This, in turn, made Western leaders' arguments about cooperation with Russia against the shared terrorist enemy appear more reasonable. In Russia, the top leadership is freer to pursue its own cooperative agenda with the West. During autumn 2015, we saw a Russian leadership that was willing to compromise on key points regarding Syria, including the issue of Assad's political future, on condition of being recognized as an equal partner at the negotiating table. While the deep anti-Western, civilizationist undercurrent in the Russian domestic debate continued, the positive acceptance of Russia by Western leaders seemed to have the effect of eliciting more positive representations of the West in the Russian media and expert community.

However, in the second phase, we observe that the difficult cooperative path was gradually falling apart. Both sides had always pursued alternative, even parallel, policy paths in Syria. While seeking cooperation with the West in the fight against ISIL, and working with the United States to facilitate peace talks between Assad and the opposition, on the ground Russia continued to strengthen Assad's strategic position and cultivate an alternative coalition on Syria, one which would not include the West. The re-taking of Palmyra by the Assad forces in the end of March was assisted by Russian and Iranian airpower, and was followed by a classical music concert performed by the St Peterburg Malinsky Symphony Orchestra in the ruins of this symbolically important city. This latter event was perhaps the most striking policy demonstration of a civilizationist position. The United States also seemed to be keeping two policy tracks open: While Kerry fronted the diplomatic route, softening the requirement that Assad must go, and often toning down disagreements with Russia on Syria, domestic pressure was building up – in the mainstream US media and in the domestic political debate – to hold Assad accountable for violations against the Syrian population, and denouncing Russia for its air support to the Syrian regime. In Britain, criticisms of Russia's involvement in Syria remained more uncompromising, with Foreign Secretary Hammond adamant that Assad had to go. We have argued that the reversal to positions that would make cooperation between Russia and the West in Syria impossible has been driven by the ingrained adversarial views of the Other which dominated both sides before cooperation was embarked upon and which the leaders themselves repeatedly expressed publicly during the negotiation and implementation of ceasefires and agreements in the first half of 2016. Particularly on the Western side, this reversal can be explained with reference to the domestic debate that has projected the other party as an unreliable partner, even as an outright adversary.

This relational dynamic became increasingly evident in the third phase, which started with rigorous efforts of the leadership on both sides to get the diplomatic route back on track. The agreement on 9 September on the establishment of the 'joint integration center' in Vienna can be seen as the high point of these efforts. However, the negotiation efforts took place against the backdrop of increasingly critical domestic debates on both sides. In the United States, the media debate during summer 2016 grew increasingly critical of the Obama administration's final attempts to salvage the cooperation efforts with Russia, arguing that Assad's activities on the ground in Syria should be punished, and that Russia was not a partner to be trusted. The Russian leadership did not face quite such a hefty anti-US debate during that autumn: it was freer to disregard it, given the political system, and actually tried to keep the

cooperative approach toward the West on Syria open well into November. All the same, the effect of negative Western public representations of Russia was noteworthy. They seemed to alienate the Russian leadership and also played into the Russian domestic debate, empowering the traditional hawks and their civilizationalist representations of the West as an eternal and deceitful enemy.

Here, a key difference in US and Russian identity orientations and interaction-patterns also suggests itself: Whereas Russia remains fundamentally preoccupied with the West, and especially the United States – whether framed as a potential partner or as adversary – the United States to a larger extent relates to Russia as one of many others on the international political scene. How the US leadership talks about and engages Russia has strong repercussions for Russia's own identity articulation – at the top political level as well as in the domestic foreign policy debate more broadly. By contrast, Russian representations of the United States do *not* appear to have a similar impact on US expressions of its own role in the world or on how to relate to other states. Put differently, while the US leadership comes across as sensitive to criticism arising within its own domestic foreign policy debate, it seems less vulnerable to criticism from the Russian Other – whether voiced by Russian officials or within the Russian domestic debate. It is first and foremost the domestic debate that influences US foreign policy towards other states and shapes the leadership's room for manoeuvre. On the Russian side, it could be argued, the foreign policy ambition of being recognized as a legitimate world player makes Russia more vulnerable to criticism from the United States – which could be seen as being the Other best placed to grant such status.

Our study indicates that in September 2015, the crisis in Syria presented itself as a window of opportunity for collaborative Russia–Western efforts, at a time when such cooperation and coordination had become rare due to a rapid cooling of political relations post-Ukraine. Unlike in the Ukraine case, where Russian rhetoric derived from a civilizationist position, on Syria the Russian leadership seemed to construe its policies and statement from a statist line of reasoning. This position allowed for the possibility of pragmatic cooperation with the West. However, there was always the possibility that the Russian leadership would revert to a civilizationist line of reasoning – especially if it were felt that Russia was not being recognized as a key player and if its objections against Western liberal interventionist practices were to be triggered in Syria. When the United States broke off diplomatic talks with Russia in October 2016, it could be argued that the Obama administration put the cooperation alternative on ice. In response,

Russia has set out, for the time being, to pursue a Syria path that excludes the West.

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