

RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE LIBYAN CRISIS: A NEOCLASSICAL REALIST ASSESSMENT

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Abstract. The processes taking place in the modern international system are both a catalyst and a consequence of the foreign policy of states. As a result of a number of systemic factors and the domestic political situation in Russia, the Middle East plays an important role on the Russian agenda. Moscow is pursuing an active policy towards the Libyan crisis, which resulted in the actual loss of statehood in Libya, which complicates the stabilization of the situation in the country and in the region. The purpose of this article is to analyze the systemic (independent variable) and domestic (intervening unit-level variables) processes that influence the formation of Russia's foreign policy in relation to the Libyan crisis, within the framework of the neoclassical realist theory. The significance of this study lies in the application of a relatively new theoretical approach (neoclassical realism) to a case study (the Libyan crisis) in the study of Russian foreign policy.

Keywords: Russia, Libyan crisis, neoclassical realist theory

Introduction

The current international situation is characterized by increased conflict, which is associated with the transformational processes taking place in the modern international system. The unipolar order is collapsing; it is being replaced by another type of power configuration, which has the features of multipolarity, although its contours are still not fully formed. Under these conditions, the declining hegemon (the United States) face the confrontation of the rising powers (China and Russia) in an explicit manner, through a proxy arena in order to avoid a direct military clash, which can have irreversible consequences for the whole world. One such hotspot is the Middle East. After a surge of discontent with authoritarian regimes in a number of Middle Eastern countries, known as the Arab Spring, regional rivalry for power has acquired a global scale involving various actors.

Russia's strategic policy in relation to the Middle East has also been changed in line with the shifts of the international system. It has spun from largely neutral behavior avoiding direct involvement in the Middle Eastern affairs to decisively responses to those regional events that threaten Russian interests in the region (Kozhanov, 2017, p. 116). Over the past decade, Russia has made great strides in recognizing its role in the Middle East as a major and influential actor. The question is whether Russia is projecting its power in the Middle East region just to assert itself as a great power globally or it has returned to the Middle East pursuing other interests as well.

The Libyan crisis is one among the range of Middle Eastern events that constitute a complex puzzle of issues linked with the shifts in the modern international system. The ambiguous situation unfolding in Libya has divided the international community essentially along existing fault lines, Russia versus the West. Russia's foreign policy decisions towards the Libyan crisis further raised the question of its position and motives in the Middle East.

Although global attention today is focused on the events in Ukraine, Middle Eastern affairs do not lose their relevance. Thus, this article sets out to analyze the formation and implementation of Russian foreign policy towards the Libyan crisis, which has been going on for more than ten years, which determines the relevance of this study. What are Russia's aspirations in the Middle East in the context of Libyan crisis? Which systemic imperatives and domestic factors influence its foreign policy decisions towards the Libyan crisis? Against the background of many previously studied aspects of Russian foreign policy, this case study represents an underresearched example of its Middle East policy. The peculiarity of this study is also the application of a theoretical approach to the case study, namely the analysis of Russia's foreign policy towards the Libyan crisis from the perspective of neoclassical realist theory, which takes into account both external (systemic) and domestic (unit-level) factors influencing foreign policy decisions. This article therefore sheds light on how Russia is dealing with volatile regional dynamics, including US declining role creating a power vacuum, an increasing re-

gional rivalry for dominance and a political climate at the domestic level.

This study explores the reasons behind Russia's stance towards the Libyan crisis as a part of the puzzle in order to draw conclusions about the wider context of Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East. With the strategic decisions especially during the period of Vladimir Putin's presidency, Russia used its position in the Libyan crisis to increase its influence in the regional affairs. This topic is also of interest because, using the example of Russia's interaction with respect to the Libyan crisis, it is possible to trace the dynamics of changes in its foreign policy taken into account systemic and domestic variables. Among those are, firstly, its turn to the East, secondly, the unwillingness to put up with the existing position within the international system and its assertive foreign policy, its multifaceted strategical approach to the regional affairs, and, finally, the shifts that occurred in Russia at this period and had an impact on its foreign policy decisions.

Literature Review

In attempt to develop this research, the present article is based on a number of sources dealing with both theoretical and empirical issues. The review of the literature helps to identify certain gaps in the existing works that this article aims to fill. Proponents of realism believe mainly that Russian foreign policy is shaped mainly in response to systemic pressures, losing sight of the internal component. The theoretical basis of this article is based on fundamental works on the neoclassical realist theory, which includes both systemic and state- and individual-level variables. As mentioned above, Gideon Rose is considered the founder of this theory. Thereafter, it was developed in the works of such researchers as Colin Dueck, Victor Cha, and Nicholas Kitchen (Dueck, 2006; Cha, 2009/2010; Kitchen, 2010). Their contribution is attributed to Type I and Type II neoclassical realism. The Type I neoclassical realism is the simplest form of this theory, whose proponents introduced intervening variables to explain empirical anomalies that could not be explained by structural realism. The Type II neoclassical realism no longer just addressed anomalies, but attempted to explain foreign policy using system- and unit-level variables. The most recent version of neoclassical realism (Type III) is displayed in the joint work of Norrin Ripsman, Jeffrey Taliaferro, and Steven Lobel (Ripsman et al., 2016). The scholars explain international politics addressing to system-level variables

and four broad categories of intervening unit-level variables, i.e. leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions.

Although academic studies on Russian foreign policy in the Middle East have increased significantly in the recent years, there are very few works that analyze Russian foreign policy from the standpoint of neoclassical realism. Romanova and Pavlova (2012) discuss the development of three key concepts of realism (polarity, national interest and neighborhood/coalitions) in the modern Russian IR thinking and political practice, and come to the conclusion that neoclassical realism in Russian practice has its own characteristics, the so-called "neoclassical realism in Russian." Another work that links system-level variables to unit-level variables is the study conducted by Emre İşeri and Volkan Özdemir (2020), who apply neoclassical realist theory to analyze Russia's foreign economic policy in the Eurasian space, arguing that the perception of Russian political elites shapes the geopolitical contours of foreign policy. Hence, the authors associate geopolitical economics with neoclassical realism. Thus, there are not many works that analyze Russian foreign policy from the neoclassical realist perspective, and even fewer works dealing with Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East and, in particular, towards the Libyan crisis. Among the studies devoted to the various aspects of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East, the works of Kozhanov (2022), Balci and Monceau (2021), Bechev et al. (2021), Facon (2017), and many others can be mentioned. Among the authors who contributed to the study of Russia's foreign policy in relation to the Libyan crisis, the studies of Ibryamova (2022), Stepanova (2018), Beccaro (2017), and Allison (2013) deserve special attention. Nuray Ibryamova (2022) explore Russia's role in the regional conflicts, including Libyan crisis. She puts it in the framework of Russia's interaction with other actors, such as Turkey and Egypt. She concludes that Moscow has achieved the status of regional power by the means of its active diplomacy, military presence and energy cooperation. In addition, Stepanova (2018) provides a detailed analysis of the Russian approach to the conflict in Libya. She focuses on Russia's interests in Libya and its role in stabilizing the situation there in the context of international efforts, namely in the framework of the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Even though these authors contribute to the issue under investigation, none of them has linked system-level variables to unit-level variables.

Methodology

Since this article represents a study of empirical aspect (Russian foreign policy towards the Libyan crisis) through the prism of a theoretical approach (neoclassical realist theory), the materials used for this research can be divided into two groups, empirical and theoretical. Methodologically, this study is based on the investigation of primary sources (official documents and speeches of officials) and supportive secondary materials, such as research articles, scientific works, books and reports for the empirical aspects of the topic, and fundamental works devoted to the neoclassical realist theory and methodology for conducting qualitative research, for theoretical questions.

The neoclassical realist theory represents a quite new research program of foreign policy. Its appearance is associated with the name of Gideon Rose, who introduced the concept of “neoclassical realism” in a review article of *World Politics* in 1998 (Rose, 1998). Later, this theory was developed by such scholars as Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, who initially did not call themselves neoclassical realists, but identified themselves with this theory (Lobell et al., 2009; Taliaferro et al., 2012; Ripsman et al., 2016).

Neoclassical realism covers both the systemic and domestic levels to explain state’s behavior, which do not always derive from rational position. The key element of qualitative research is to explain the outcomes of individual case. Therefore, choosing an aspect to conduct a research about Russian foreign policy the first task was to identify an appropriate research area (Russia’s foreign policy towards the Libyan crisis) that could be interesting from the practical point of view and could be analyzed applying a theory-oriented method.

Ripsman et al. (2016) distinguishes between the concepts of a “research question” and a “research puzzle.” The research question implies a theoretical component of the study, while the research puzzle is intended to explain empirical observations. This study refers to one of the types of research puzzle, which is aimed at explaining political phenomena that are not anomalous as such, but are not sufficiently explained from the standpoint of other theories.

Following the logic of neoclassical realism, methodologically, this study develops gradually from the consideration of systemic imperatives, then proceeds to the definition of internal variables (leader image, strategic culture, state-society relations and domestic institutions) that influence Russia’s

decision making process and its policy responses regarding the Libyan crisis, which, in its turn, lead to particular international outcomes.

Since neoclassical realism includes system- and unit-level variables, theory testing is limited by human subjectivity and interpretation of phenomena, due to the appeal to cognitive aspects and ideological factors that cannot always be adequately assessed in terms of facts and value (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 105). Therefore, neoclassical realism addresses to the so-called “soft” positivist approach.

Deriving from soft-positivist epistemology, the chosen case (Libyan crisis) is tested applying process-tracing analysis in order to assess the causal impact of systemic pressures (independent variables) and domestic factors (intervening variables) on the dependent variable (Russia’s foreign policy choices and subsequent international outcomes).

Neoclassical realists differ two dimensions of the dependent variable, that is, the time frame and the level-of-analysis (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 109). The current study is conducted over a short-to-medium time-span covering the period from 2011, when the Libyan Civil War began, to the present. Hence, it is possible to investigate Russia’s foreign policy (including security and economic components) and strategic planning, perhaps with the elements of grand strategy formation. According to the Lobell’s definition of grand strategy, Russia apparently shapes its grand strategy through formulation of its military doctrine, although it may be implicitly reflected in foundational national security documents, increased diplomatic activity, its quest for foreign economic cooperation, and domestic resource extraction (Lobell, 2006, p. 14).

When applying the neoclassical realist theory to a case study, one should refer to the corresponding structural realist baseline in order to determine the value that neoclassical realism can add to the explanation of a dependent variable through the introduction of intervening variables, as opposed to the explanatory power of a structural realism. In fact, it represents the core of the explanation of the relevant issue at the system level, i.e. a systemic-level independent variable (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 114). This study applies the balance-of-power theory as its structural realist baseline to identify phenomena in which an independent variable does not have sufficient explanatory power to determine the nature of Russian foreign policy towards the Libyan crisis.

Since this study seeks to explain a phenomenon of short-to-medium term, it is appropriate to pay greater attention to the intervening variables of lead-

er image and strategic culture. Despite the fact that the influence of individual leaders decreases over time (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 119), the rigid vertical of power restricts the activities of domestic institutions and suppresses public activity, which does not allow to fully explain the foreign policy behavior of the state without taking into account the leader image.

Results & Discussion

System Level

From the second decade of the 2000s, Russia has been pursuing a more active policy in the Middle East, which is associated with its desire to improve Russia's status in the international system. These ambitions, in turn, are linked to the accumulation of resources and the distribution of material capabilities among the major states in the international system, which determines its place in it. The once unipolar world began to fade, transforming to the system with multiple poles.

Russia, dissatisfied with its role in the unipolar world order, is challenging the declining hegemony of the United States. At the same time, the Middle East was shaken by the events of the Arab Spring, which brought protracted instability in the region. One of the countries affected by this instability in the Middle East is Libya, where a civil war broke out. In 2011, NATO intervened militarily in a conflict that had devastating consequences for Libya's statehood.

Russia perceived its involvement in Syria as successful, which convinced her to believe that it has enough power to influence the development of events in the region. Initially, Moscow decided to support politically and militarily a former Gaddafi loyalist General Khalifa Haftar but the impact of domestic factors pushed the Kremlin to conduct a balancing policy. Due to Russia's policies, the 2015 UN-led Libyan agreement on reconciliation process was failed.

Domestic Factors

Intervening unit-level variables have a value-added importance for the understanding of state's behavior, which seems sometimes irrational. An important role in Russia's foreign policy towards Libya is playing domestic formal, as well as informal structures, which are able to establish communication with various actors involved in the Libyan crisis, including numerous non-state and quasi-state structures. A special role in influencing Russia's decision-making process in relation to Libya has been

assigned to the domestic energy sector players. Although from the beginning Russia took a decision to side by Haftar, Russian energy companies inclined Moscow to keep balance in the relations with Haftar's forces and the Government of National Accord in Tripoli under the leadership of Fayeze al-Sarraj, as they have a great interest in Tripoli, namely Russian majority state-owned energy corporation Gazprom has strong connections to the Libyan National Oil Corporation based in Tripoli (Kozhanov, 2022, p. 20). Therefore, in 2019-2020, Russia withdrew substantial military supplies to Haftar, angering him and calling into question Russia's ability to play a decisive role in resolving the crisis, but at the same time maintaining Russia's energy interests in Tripoli. In attempt to balance between two sides, Russia still provides military assistance to Haftar through third parties and in limited quantities (Kozhanov, 2022, p. 21).

Another category of influential actors is assigned to individuals who, in accordance with their own position and, consequently, their cognitive factors such as prescribed values, beliefs, and images, can push through decisions at the state level. Therefore, in 2017-2020, Russia used the connections of a Belarus-born businessman Lev Dengov to establish contact with ex-Prime Minister Sarraj. He performed a kind of unofficial functions of an honorary consul, having received the status of the "head of the contact group on Libya at the Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation" (Kozhanov, 2022, p. 21).

Such a diversity of the players involved also makes its own adjustments to the intra-elite situation, opposing Haftar's supporters (led by Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu) to Sarraj's supporters (led by special representative for the Middle East of the Russian Foreign Ministry Mikhail Bogdanov), which naturally destabilizes the domestic political environment and sometimes prevents rational decisions from being made. The lack of elite consensus hinders effective balancing.

Policy Responses

In 2011, Russia abstained from voting in the UN Security Council on the introduction of a no-fly zone over Libya, which was followed by NATO military intervention in Libya. At that time, Dmitry Medvedev was the President of Russia. Since Putin returned to the presidency, his approach to Middle East policy has become tougher, which was also facilitated by the situation in Libya, which, according to Putin, was a violation of the terms of the 1973 Resolution and once again demonstrated an attempt of the West,

led by the United States, to unilaterally resolve international issues, which categorically contradicted Putin's worldview (Kozhanov, 2022, p. 50).

Conclusion

Russian multilateral involvement in the Middle East (both in terms of the range of actors and agenda topics) has become a demonstration to the United States and its Western allies about the assertion of Russia's position as a significant player in the Middle East, whose interests will have to be reckoned with. However, while Russia seeks to increase its weight in international affairs, it has limited resources, mainly due to its economic weakness. Pursuing a foreign policy and grand strategy in remote regions, as Russia does in the Middle East, requires huge human, material, and monetary resources (Ripsman et al., 2016), which Russia cannot afford to extract

from state, especially in the current conditions of military involvement in the Ukrainian conflict, when it faces restrictive international environment.

Nevertheless, not only systemic factors play a decisive role in shaping Russia's foreign policy in relation to the Libyan crisis. Systemic imperatives pass through the cognitive filters of the head of state. In addition, in the case of Libya, the lack of internal political cohesion of the Russian elites complicates the decision-making process.

Thus, the independent systemic variables (US declining hegemony, Western unilateral approach in the resolving of Libyan crisis) and the domestic intervening variables (leader image, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions) have an impact on the dependent variable (Russian foreign policy towards Libyan crisis), which, in its turn, can influence systemic outcomes and structural changes.

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