

## **Russia's Permanent Military Presence in Syrian Tartus Port for the Coming 49 Years: Increasing Maritime Security Challenges In the Region**

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### ***Abstract***

*Relations between states are always the result of permanent interests as there can never be permanent friends or foes in international relations. The changing geopolitical dynamics have engaged all the states in a struggle to maintain dominance across the world. Consequently, Russia's leasing of the Syrian Tartus port for the coming 49 years is directional towards the same geopolitical interest of making the state resurge. Nevertheless, this decision will have multiple implications for the region's maritime security. Permanent military presence of Russia on the Tartus port, close to the Mediterranean and black sea makes it a geopolitical hotspot for the major powers great game. Not only this, the region has become home to numerous non-traditional security threats in the maritime domain including drug trafficking, piracy, illicit trade, marine terrorism, etc. Therefore, this research paper aims to highlight how Russia's presence in the Syrian Tartus port will shift the regional dynamics. It endeavors to analyze the amassed maritime security challenges in the region by reconnoitering the tug of war between the US and Russia and the non-traditional threats that have made it a point of contention between states across the region.*

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## 1. Introduction

Russia and Syria enjoy warm relations with each other that were developed back in 1946 with the signing of an agreement, whereby Russia recognized Syrian independence after the French troops left. From here, the relations started gaining strength with each passing year. During World War 2 both states were on the Allied side against the Axis powers. Not only is this, but throughout the cold war era, the Soviets' relations with Syria became firm concerning the military support it provided and the defense agreements both states signed with each other. According to statistics, a total of \$2.3 billion worth of arms support was provided by Russia to Syria during the cold war years.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, in Yom Kippur War, when Syria along with Egypt was on the front line against Israel, the Soviet Union stepped in for Syrian support with approximately 3750 tons of aid. In 2011 and 2012, Russia (a permanent member of the UNSC) used its veto power to halt any sanctions or intervention in Syria. Moreover, it intervened in the Syrian civil war upon the request of president Bashar-ul-Assad's military assistance in a letter in 2015.<sup>2</sup> Together with this, both call each other the strongest Strategic Partner in the Middle East and for Russia, Syria is at the heart of all its designed strategy in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> Eman Ragab, "An Alternative Approach to Regional Security in the Middle East," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, February 1, 2020, <https://www.thecairoveview.com/essays/an-alternative-approach-to-regional-security-in-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>2</sup> "The Veto: UN Security Council Working Methods," *Security Council*, December 16, 2020, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-security-council-working-methods/the-veto.php>.

Nevertheless, this relationship is not just looked from the historical perspective but the hard geopolitics is at play as well. Since Russia's footholds in Syria would mean its grip in the wider Middle Eastern region. For President Vladimir Putin, who sees the Soviet collapse as an epic tragedy, this decision would mean restoring its status as a world player as it will allow Russia to alter the current balance of power in the region. Apart from this, it will be a source of increasing military confrontation between the US and Russia. Since presence in the Tartus port, close to the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, where the US had long maintained its presence, will increase rivalry in the maritime domain. Russia's decision to maintain a permanent military presence will not only intensify the security dilemma but will result in increasing maritime security challenges, traditional and non-traditional.

Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze the underlying implications of the leasing agreement between Russia and Syria. Section one of the paper provides an in-depth study of this decision of Russia to lease the Syrian Tartus port while practically applying the major contours of the system level of analysis to clasp the intentions Russia has in leasing the port for 49 years. Along with the domestic factors that are at play. It elucidates how Russia's presence in the Middle East poses major challenges to the regional interest of the US, and what policies did Biden administration undertake to counter them.

Alongside, section two of the paper will pinpoint some of the key non-traditional maritime challenges faced by the region, especially after Russia's presence in the Tartus. How the increasing instances of marine terrorism, illegal trafficking, piracy, etc. have led to new tension among the states. Clamping it all, it illustrates how the decision is going to be a game changer for Russia considering the shifting regional balance of power. Also, how Russia's presence in the Tartus port will help President Vladimir Putin accomplish his goal of making Russia resurge.

Russia's leasing of the Syrian Tartus port for the coming 49 years will shift the balance of power in the Middle Eastern region along with increasing the maritime security challenges.

- i. What are the Geo-economic and Geo-strategic interests of Russia in leasing the Tartus port located in Syria?
- ii. How is it going to shift the balance of power in the region and help Russia in regaining its status as the major world power?
- iii. How Russia's presence in the Syrian Tartus port will upsurge both the traditional and non-traditional maritime security challenges in the region?
- iv. What is the US strategy under the Biden Administration to curtail Russia's increasing influence in the region?

The topic is of vital significance because increasing Russia's influence in the Middle East holds multifaceted aspects which need to be analyzed. As the current government of Vladimir is highly motivated to work toward Russia's resurgence and to make it an influential power in the region. Therefore, this makes it an important area of study. Moreover, the growing rhetoric in the west about the emergence of Russia as a key player provided the ground for scholars to study what steps Putin will take to follow his vision. Likewise, President Joe Biden who has yet to put forward his Middle East plan is highly motivated towards increasing the US influence in the region. At this time, Russia's resurgence and its increasing foothold in the region using Syria against the US interest turn the region to be a major geopolitical hotspot.

Apart from this, the increasing maritime security challenges with the two major powers coming one-to-one in the region is an indication of a tense future. Russia's deployment of nuclear-armed vessels on the Tartus port near the Mediterranean poses a major threat

to US security and its presence in the region. Likewise, the emerging cases of non-traditional threats had also made the region a major point of concern for the states. Consequently, these important aspects are vital to be analyzed in the context of changing geopolitics of the world.

## **2. Russia's leasing of Syrian Tartus port for the coming 49 years: A System Level Analysis**

In 2017, an agreement was concluded between Syria and Russia whereby it was agreed that Russia will maintain its military presence at the Syrian Tartus Port for the coming 49 years. This agreement while on one hand will open the windows of opportunity for both states and will at the same time increase regional tensions. Largely because under the agreement, Russia can deploy up to 11 warships, including nuclear-powered combat vessels, at the Tartus naval facility. It has been granted the right to carry out the seaborne and airborne protection of the base. Also, temporary mobile outposts can also be set up. With this agreement, Russia will regulate legal issues along with security.

Therefore, Russia's decision of leasing the port can be analyzed by using the System level of analysis since it focuses on the factors that are present within the sovereign territorial jurisdiction of a state and impacts its foreign policy. Similarly, a state's leading role conception, public opinion, and interests of the elites in society are equally significant to comprehend the state's action and decision-making. This section of paper will therefore incorporate all these factors to explain Russia's decision of leasing the Tartus port and its underlying objectives that are at play.

To begin with, Russia and Syria, both share friendly relations that were developed back in 1946. Both states call each other strategic partners. In 2006, President Vladimir Putin announced Syria and

Russia as “*Important strategic partners of each other in the Middle East.*”<sup>3</sup> Not only is this, but during an interview to Syria TV, Syrian transport minister, Ali Hammoud stated, “*Tartus will remain Syrian, as it is managed by a country that is a friend of Syria.*”<sup>4</sup> Hence, this depicts the perception two states have regarding each other which is shaping their decision-making based identity as friends of each other.

Apart from this, state is not always a unitary actor but there are different interest and pressure groups involved that influence the decision-making process of a state. Analyzing the agreement of leasing Syrian Tartus port many business elites have a strong influence. According to the deal, Russia plans to invest around \$ 500 million in the port<sup>5</sup> for the coming 4 years, primarily economical in its nature with plans to build the country’s infrastructure including motorways, airports, and a railway connecting Tartus port to Gulf for goods transfers. To look at how the business companies have their influence, we can simply look to whom the port construction contract was handed over. It is a Russian industrial group Stroytranzgas, headed by Gennady Timchenko, who is a childhood very friend of President Putin

Under the Tartus port agreement, Stroytranzgas is exempted from paying taxes for about six years. Alongside, public opinion which represents the core values and moods of states also tends to play a critical role in states foreign policy actions. Importantly, Vladimir Putin holding power for the 4<sup>th</sup> time as President with popular voting is

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<sup>3</sup> Amir Asmar, “Why Would Arab Leaders Pursue Strategic Partnerships with Russia?” *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 5, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-would-arab-leaders-pursue-strategic-partnerships-russia>.

<sup>4</sup> “Transport Minister: Russian Investment in Tartus Port Comes With High Economic Benefits,” *The Syrian Observer*, April 30, 2019, <https://syrianobserver.com/news/50098/transport-minister-russian-investment-in-tartous-port-comes-with-high-economic-benefits.html>

<sup>5</sup> “UPDATE 1-Russia to invest \$500 mln in Syrian port, build grain hub –Interfax,” *Reuters*, December 17, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-security-russia-grains-idUSL8N28R32J>

an indication of the popular support he enjoys in the state. During the recent constitution amendment, around 77.9% voted in his favor making him president till the year 2036.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, the job opportunities this agreement will bring for the people is another factor leading to strong support for the decision. Deputy Prime Minister, Yuri Borisov stated in Dec 2019, “*The port has provided employment opportunities for 3700 people in Tartus, and the Russian side plans to modernize the port to a modern level, restore its activity, in addition to allocating and establishing a new railway through Syria and Iraq to create a corridor to the Mediterranean linking it with the Gulf via Iraq, which It will increase the shipping capacity and commercial traffic in the Syrian port.*”<sup>7</sup> Lastly, the role of political parties is also important. In Russia, the federal assembly of both houses, the upper Federation council, and the lower Duma has a United Russia (Putin’s political party) majority which is why both parties have ratified the agreement to leasing the Tartus port.

In this regard, the Russian Lawmaker, Franz Klintsevich announced that Duma ratified the agreement on December 21. Henceforth, this decision has got a lot of economic and strategic benefits for Russia, keeping in view the changing geopolitical demands of the system. Through this Vladimir Putin can easily make his dream of Russia’s resurgence a reality. Yet, the maritime security challenges have to be addressed at the earliest. Thus, the section down below will provide an insight into the key geo-strategic and geo-economic interests of Russia in leasing the Tartus port and the likely challenges in the maritime domain that will emerge as a result. Alongside this, the role conception of President Vladimir Putin will be

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Osborn and Vladimir Soldatkin, “Russians Grant Putin Right to Extend His Rule until 2036 in Landslide Vote,” *Reuters*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-vote/russians-grant-putin-right-to-extend-his-rule-until-2036-in-landslide-vote-partial-results-idUSKBN24254A>.

<sup>7</sup> “Russia allocates \$ 500 million to modernize the Syrian port of Tartus,” *Syrializm*, October 9, 2022, <https://syrializm.net/?p=10874>

discussed in detail to comprehend his view of the state and its status in the power trajectory.

### 3. Geo-strategic and Geo-economic interests of Russia

Russia's decision of leasing the Tartus port for 49 years has multiple underlying objectives and interests. On December 13, 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin on December 28, 2017, announced that, "*More than 48,000 Russian military personnel have served in the operation in Syria, and that the facilities at Khmeimim and Tartus would continue to operate "on a permanent basis."*"<sup>8</sup> As per the agreement, Russia has planned to invest \$500 million along with building grain hubs on the port. Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov stated, "*Russia will invest \$500 million in Tartus, and will build a grain hub for increase presence in Middle East markets.*"<sup>9</sup> From this statement, we can easily infer Russia's interest in having Tartus port. Through the port Russia would easily gain access to Middle Eastern markets, which accounts for 18% of Russia's total arms export.<sup>10</sup> This is the reason Middle Eastern region is significant as a market for sales of arms and nuclear technology, which ultimately contribute to its GDP growth.

Also, in Vladimir Putin's major military reform of August 2008, the MENA region remained a core of attention. From 2000 to 2016, MENA got 5<sup>th</sup> largest arms exports of Russia.<sup>11</sup> In 2009 a total

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<sup>8</sup> "Putin Signs Law Allowing Expansion Of Russian Naval Facility In Syria," *RadioFreeEurope*, December 29, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-signs-law-syria-Tartus-naval-facility/28946167.html>

<sup>9</sup> "Russia to invest \$500m in Syria's Tartus," *The National*, December 18, 2019, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/russia-to-invest-500m-in-syria-s-Tartus-1.953157>

<sup>10</sup> Robert Mason, "Russia in Syria: An Unequivocal Return to the Middle East?" *Middle East Policy* 25, no. 4 (2018): P., 101-115. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/mepo.12381>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



of \$9 billion, and \$21.4 billion in 2016<sup>12</sup> worth of arms were sold to this region. Particularly in Syria, Russia's arms exports reached almost \$4.7 billion from 2007-2010.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the Middle Eastern market is the largest export target for Russia. Moreover, the agreement would be crucial for trade with Syria as both states agreed to undertake different infrastructure projects.

Syrian head of planning and international commission, Imad Sabuni, said to the media “*A project to build an airport in Tartus at the site of an agricultural airfield within the framework of the Build-operate-transfer cooperation.*”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Yuri Borisov stated that the Russian side intends to improve the operations of the old port and build a new commercial port. Therefore this agreement between Russia and Syria will be economically very prosperous for the two. Likewise, these exports will contribute to the economy of Russia yet, liberal's idea of using soft means to dominate is quite visible, as Russia through Tartus port would gain access to the Middle Eastern market and from where it can exert its influence on the whole region.

Nevertheless, nothing is without states' military interest since changing geopolitical settings demands states to increase their military muscles to counter any present or future threat. Therefore, the leasing of the port can be further analyzed using the realist lens which believes that more power is the ultimate indicator of a state's security and survival. Henceforth, for a geographically locked or restrained country like Russia whose access to the Mediterranean is controlled by Turkey and other littoral Black Sea states<sup>15</sup>, presence in Tartus port would

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “Russia Plans to Construct Vaccine Plant, Airport in Syria's Tartus – Official,” *Sputnik*, December 26, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/20181226/russia-plant-airport-Tartus-1071019009.html>

<sup>15</sup> Tanvi Chauhan, “Why Are Warm-Water Ports Important to Russian Security? The Cases of Sevastopol and Tartus Compared,” *European, Middle Eastern, and*

mean access to Mediterranean to further its geopolitical and economic interests.

#### 4. Importance for Syria

This agreement is not only going to benefit Russia or would be a means to achieve its goals but would be ideal for Syria. From the liberal perspective, this agreement is going to economically benefit both states as Borisov stated “*It will be a hope for mutual trade and a centerpiece to rebuild the Syrian economy.*”<sup>16</sup> Thus, it is not only serving Russian interests but will also be ideal for a war-torn country like Syria. As per the agreement, Russia has exported 100,000 metric tons of grain<sup>17</sup> and wheat to the port of Tartus to help Syria in having a constant supply of food. Moreover, the idea of how much it would be beneficial for Syria can be gauged by Syrian Transport Minister Ali Hammoud interview with Syrian TV where he stated, “*The Port generates annual revenue of 24 million dollars, yet with Russian investment, it will receive 84 million dollars annually.*”<sup>18</sup> In January 2020, President Bashar al-Assad approved contracts with three Qatari brothers that will build two oil refineries and will expand the oil terminal in Tartus port. So this is all how Syria is going to benefit by cooperating with Russia.

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*Africa Affairs* 20, no.2 (2020): P., 66, [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/JEMEAA/Journals/Volume-02\\_Issue-1/Chauhan.pdf](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/JEMEAA/Journals/Volume-02_Issue-1/Chauhan.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Dorian Archus, “Russia to invest for the modernization of Tartus port,” *Naval Post*, December 18, 2019, <https://navalpost.com/russia-to-invest-for-the-modernization-of-Tartus-port/>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “Transport Minister: Russian Investment in Tartous Port Comes With High Economic Benefits,” *The Syrian Observer*, April 30, 2019, <https://syrianobserver.com/news/50098/transport-minister-russian-investment-in-tartous-port-comes-with-high-economic-benefits.html>

## 5. Emerging Maritime security threats in the region

The presence of two major powers in any region makes it a geopolitical hotspot for a power struggle. It gives space for new challenges to fill the stage and bring key stakeholders into the rivalry. Consequently, Russia's permanent military presence in the region through Tartus port will result in a major maritime security confrontation between the US and Russia. Since the Russian presence in Tartus port is not new, instead, it has had its presence here since the Soviet era (1970, Hafez-ul-Assad time), but at that time it was used only for food supplies and refueling. However, with 2015 Russia's involvement in Syria, Tartus port acts as a strategic logistical hub. Therefore, Russia's interest in the extension of the leasing port for the next 49 years was to protect its only Mediterranean naval base-Black Sea Fleet which is located in the port of Syria. Also, Mediterranean holds a key position in any state's policy as Nurhayat ulusoy stated, *"The struggle over the strategic control of the Mediterranean is one of the most persistent and continuous struggles in the history of humanity."*<sup>19</sup>

Along with this, another key objective of Russia is to increase its military, naval, and air deployment on the Tartus port from where it can easily eye the US activities. The reference of it can be found in the statement of Russia's defense minister, Sergei Shoigu who said, *"Russia has started establishing a permanent military presence at naval and air bases in Syria."*<sup>20</sup> This is a clear depiction of Russia's interest. Important to note here is that Russian Naval facilities at

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<sup>19</sup> Nurhayat ULUSOY, "The presence of Russia in Syria according to the BARAKAH Circle Theory: The Tartus Naval Base," *Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies* 21, no. 2 (2021): P., 190, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/640513>

<sup>20</sup> "Russia starts to establish permanent presence at its Syrian bases," *Middle East Eye*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/news/russia-starts-establish-permanent-presence-its-syrian-bases-590935799>

Tartus port are very close to Russia's Khmeimim airbase in Latakia with an estimated travel distance of 45 miles.

So by having a presence in the Tartus port, Russia would better ensure the security of its airbase, Khmeimim. In addition, the real interest of Russia in attaining power can be gauged by President Vladimir Putin's order on May 29, 2019, to Russia's minister of defense for signing a new deal with Syria that will increase its military rights in Syria. Again having done this, it can exercise control in the Middle East by using Syria as a core stone of all its strategy. This idea is reflected in Russian naval expert Captain Anatoly Ivanov statement *“Russia, the Mediterranean Sea is close both geographically and geopolitically. Therefore, using it as an opportunity for building closely in Syria that is there in the Middle East appears to be a reasonable measure.”*<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, according to Russia's RIA news agency, the deal will allow Russia to have its 11 warships at the port, including nuclear-armed Pyotr Veliky. Also, Russian military personnel was granted immunity and their ships are allowed to use internal waters along with the Tartus port free of charge. That is why recent development in the Tartus port are noticeable. Captain Sergei, who commands the Russian Navy said, *“In addition to two submarines moored at the harbor, Tartus now also hosts two missile corvettes, three patrol boats, and three supply vessels.”*<sup>22</sup>Hence, a clear depiction of Moscow's growing military foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea will not only make it a point of contention between the US and Russia because of the

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<sup>21</sup> Eugene Rumer, "Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 31, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/31/russia-in-middle-east-jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none-pub-80233>

<sup>22</sup> YURAS KARMANAU, “Naval base in Syria cements Russia’s Mediterranean foothold,” *Associated Press*, September 26, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/soviet-union-moscow-syria-international-news-mediterranean-sea-95362ddb4383945900a928296dde>

emerging maritime challenges but other stakeholders will also jump in with the increasing confrontations.

## 6. Maritime Naval exercises in the Tartus port

Amid the rising maritime tensions in the region between the US and Russia, we get to see an upsurge in the maritime Naval drills of Russia in the Tartus port which has long been causing severe tensions. On June 25, 2021, Russia launched a naval drill in the Mediterranean Sea close to Tartus as Britain did an exercise in the black sea with its destroyers. It included Russian warplanes with hypersonic missiles and two submarines along with Tu-22M combat craft.<sup>23</sup> Also, Russia together with Syrian forces conducted a joint drill at Tartus port in May 2021 which was intended to show the defense capabilities of both against the potential threat from the US. Interestingly, it included altogether 2000 personnel and a Russian mine sweeper as well. Thus, it was a great strategic move by Russia to show its military might in the region.

Not only recently, but if we look a little back in history then Russia has been involved in such maritime exercises together with other states in the region. For instance, Russia and China both did their first-ever joint naval exercise in the Mediterranean in 2015.<sup>24</sup> This exercise by the two rivals of the US posed a great threat to US security in the region since it had already the presence of the US naval fleet. Apart from this, the 2020 Ocean Shield exercise of Russia in the Mediterranean Sea was yet again significant to show its maritime muscles to the opponent side.

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<sup>23</sup> "Russia Launches Mediterranean Drills amid Rift with UK," *Al Jazeera*, June 25, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/25/russia-launches-mediterranean-drills-amid-rift-with-uk>.

<sup>24</sup> Franz-Stefan Gady, "China and Russia Conclude Naval Drill in Mediterranean," *The Diplomat*, May 2, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/05/china-and-russia-conclude-naval-drill-in-mediterranean>.

Furthermore, Russia together with Turkey did a live-fire naval drill in the eastern Mediterranean which lasted for a week but gave a significant message to the US whose 5<sup>th</sup> fleet is also present in the Eastern Mediterranean. Another Egypt-Russia naval exercise under the title 'Friendship Bridge-4' in the Mediterranean in December 2021 was also crucial. All these maritime exercises depict an interest of Russia to dominate the region by using Tartus port as a jump-start. Yet, this struggle to maintain dominance has at the same time added to the maritime tensions because confrontation in the future is most likely if these exercises kept ongoing. Besides, other actors could jump in as we seen in case of Egypt, Turkey, and China which have already held exercises with Russia.

### **7. Non-traditional maritime security challenges**

Presence of Russia in the Tartus port has not only raised tensions among the great powers, but has too led to numerous non-traditional maritime security threats in the region. The number of illegal immigrants crossing the Mediterranean touching the Tartus port has increased since then. On December 30, 2014, an Italian coast Guard helicopter named 'Blue Sky M' was caught with around 768 illegal immigrants.<sup>25</sup> Reports found Abu Haidar, based in Tartus, as the main culprit smuggling these migrants. Much like this, in 2015 a ship destined for the coast of Libya had nearly 800 people smuggled illegally through the Mediterranean.<sup>26</sup>

Another case was filed by the Turkish authorities when on January 13, they seized around 2.5 tons of cannabis resin that was illegally trafficked with the Syrian crew member. This ship which started its journey from Tartus port was heading towards Western

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<sup>25</sup> Hamoud Almahmoud, "Pirates of the Mediterranean Sea," *Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism*, March 6, 2016, <https://en.arij.net/investigation/pirates-of-the-mediterranean-sea/>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Europe. Likewise, in 2020, Captagon was exported from Syria worth \$3.46 billion illegally through the seas.<sup>27</sup> Thus, drug trafficking through illegal means has posed a major threat to the security of the port and states who have their interest aligned with it.

Not only is illegal immigration but the incidents of pirates' attacks on the sea have also gain new momentum. For instance, an Iranian container ship was targeted in March 2021 from an unknown source in the Mediterranean Sea. The authorities in Iran accused Israel of the attack under the terrorism act. Yet, sources remain controversial. Nonetheless, attacks like these have raised concerns not only for the US, Russia, and Syria but also for other states in Europe and Africa since they are also dependent on the Mediterranean for their trade transports and other economic activities. Henceforth, such non-traditional maritime threats are worth the attention of the authorities concerned.

## **8. A new threat for the US**

Extending Russia's military presence at the Tartus Port is a key element of Putin's Foreign policy goal of making Russia great again. Since this is the only Naval Facility that Russia is having outside the former soviet bloc. Moreover, as part of the agreement, Russia is allowed to deploy 11 warships including nuclear-armed which ultimately makes it a stronger player in the Mediterranean as Tartus port is near the Mediterranean so by having a permanent presence here it can better eye USA actions which has 6th Fleet,<sup>28</sup> ship repair and training centers of the Navy in the Mediterranean.

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<sup>27</sup> Martin Chulov, "ADirty Business': How One Drug is Turning Syria into a Narco-state," *The Guardian*, May 7, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/07/drug-captagon-turning-syria-into-narco-state>

<sup>28</sup> Eugene Rumer, "Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 31, 2019,

This raises tensions for the US not only in military domain but also for its influence regionally. Largely because the US and Russia are a counter-force to each other in Syria considering their support for the opposite sides. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) coordinates procurement and delivery of arms and trains rebels in camps set up in Jordan<sup>29</sup> while Russia backs Assad regime. Therefore, Russia's presence and increasing footsteps in the Syrian territory would mean the US losing its strong grip in the region and particularly over the Kurds. This concern is evident in the statement of the then US top military official, General Martin Dempsey, who while criticizing Russia's shipment of advanced anti-air missiles to Syria that he believed would raise confidence of Assad regime said, "*It's at the very least an unfortunate decision that will embolden the regime and prolong the suffering.*"<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, Putin's confrontational language toward the west in his speeches is quite evident. At Munich Conference in 2007, Putin while criticizing the US for being an irresponsible hegemon and taking unilateral action against Syria said: "*Millions don't see the USA as a model of democracy but for its reliance on brute force.*"<sup>31</sup> Herewith, Putin is trying to generate a perception of the US in the world and the Middle East of an aggressor state and of Russia as a responsible great power, ultimately creating ways for Russian increasing involvement in the Middle East.

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<https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/31/russia-in-middle-east-jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none-pub-80233>.

<sup>29</sup> Sanu Kainikara, "*In the Bear's Shadow: Russian Intervention in Syria*," (Australia: Air Power Development Centre, 2018).

<sup>30</sup> Phile Stewart, "Russian missiles to Syria could embolden Assad: U.S. general warns," *Reuters*, May 18, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-russia-usa-idUKBRE94G0RS20130517>

<sup>31</sup> "President Address to the Federal Assembly," Kremlin Moscow, December 12, 2012, 2022, <https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17118>.



## 9. Putin's Role Conception

State leader's role conception matters. They give direction to the state and same is the case of having this Syrian Tartus port. Vladimir Putin, who is the current president of the Russian Federation has the same role conception and ideology in his mind as he wants to make Russia great again. Throughout, he has enjoyed popular support, above 70%, a level which has barely dipped below ever since. From the time of holding office, President Vladimir has reinstated key Soviet symbols, brought back the Soviet national anthem, and acclaimed the Soviet triumph in the World War Two.

Recalling the past glory of Russia, he wants to make it great again by uplifting its status as an independent player in the world politics. The idea of this can be gauged by his 4<sup>th</sup> inauguration speech *"I understand my responsibility to Motherland. We have gained the dignity of a great nation. The world saw a revival of Russia. We are ready for future challenges, Russia has a great history and a great future ahead."*<sup>32</sup> So here the impression of Russia having regained its dignity as a great nation shows his mind's conception and where he wants to take Russia.

Importantly, reason for his decision to maintain a permanent military presence at the Tartus port can be gauged by his statement *"As head of state, I will do my best to increase Russia's prosperity. Russia will keep on expanding military competence. This "unmatched" military, will make us all proud of becoming again a superpower, which is respected, and feared around the world."*<sup>33</sup> Then as the Tartus port will serve economic interests, it would help Putin achieve

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> "Russia inauguration: What did Vladimir Putin say," *Aljazeera*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/5/8/russia-inauguration-what-did-vladimir-putin-say>

his year 2024 goal as he wants Russia to be among the top five economies globally. This idea he stated in his year 2018 goal.

So based on this, Putin has devised a new foreign policy approach towards the Middle East, whereby maintaining good relations with anti-western states like Syria, and Iran is an utmost priority. On Oct 13, 2019, Putin in an interview with Al-Arabiya TV stated, “*Russia can play a central role in the Middle East because we are having friendly ties with many Arab states like Syria and Iran.*”<sup>34</sup>Henceforth, considering Syria as a core stone of all Russia’s policies in the Middle East, we can say that Vladimir Putin's role conception of making Russia regain its glory is evident.

## **10. Response of the US under the Biden Administration**

America has always tried to maintain its dominance in the region by any means possible, largely because of the oil-rich resources and the geostrategic locations that attract attention and bring it to the top of the foreign policy agenda. In this regard, Russia increasing steps in the region poses a challenge to its wider interest. Therefore, all administrations including Biden came with a strict policy response against Russia’s move into the Middle East.

President Joe Biden showed his intentions of re-engaging in the region, repairing coalitions, and most importantly said to reassert its leadership role in the region. In Feb 2021, the US carried out an airstrike targeting Iran-backed militias in Syria so to give a message to Russia. Moreover, in May 2021 White House called on the Assad regime and its backers to stop the war against its people along with this has extended sanctions imposed on the regime for human rights violations for another year. Thus, it shows how much is the US

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<sup>34</sup> Interview of President Putin with Al-Arabiya News-Transcript, “*Al-Arabiya News*, October 13, 2019, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2019/10/13/Full-transcript-of-Russian-president-Vladimir-Putin-interview-with-Al-Arabiya>

concerned about Russia grounding boots in the region and Syria against the US interest.

## 11. Conclusion

Conclusively, having seen all the state-level factors that influence the foreign policy decision-making of Russia towards Syria, the research hypothesis through empirical data proves that this decision of leasing the Syrian Tartus port by Russia is ultimately (once completed) going to shift the balance of power in the Middle Eastern region, and will be a counter force to USA supremacy in the region. Besides, Russia's increased military presence at Tartus naval base, its control over Eastern Mediterranean; through the Syrian Tartus port to the gulf by constructing infrastructural projects will result in Russia becoming a key player in the region and during all this, Syria as always and will continually be at the core stone of Russia Middle Eastern strategy. Moreover, the traditional, as well as the non-traditional maritime security challenges, will keep bulging up and continue to pose a challenge to both the US and Russia while creating grounds for increasing tensions in the region. To conclude, this agreement is ideal for Russia to regain its lost legacy and tighten its foothold in the Middle Eastern region.

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