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**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FOREIGN POLICY DISCOURSES OF RUSSIA AND THE UNITED STATES FROM 2012 TO 2016**

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**Abstract.** The Syrian Civil War has dominated US-Russian relations from its inception in 2011 to the present day. The same period has been characterized by geopolitical rivalry and clashing visions between the two countries. In large part, the US and Russia have played critical roles in the Syrian civil war, and their interaction in the UN Security Council has defined the development of the conflict.

The discourses developed by the two sides in relation to Syria led to both cooperation and disagreement. This thesis analyzes the discursive elements that led to passed and vetoed resolutions on Syria in the UN Security Council. The timeline of the thesis is from 2011 to the end of 2016.

Using mixed methods approach combining discourse analysis theory and statistical analysis using the AntConc program, the thesis determines and compares the integral elements of both countries positions in the UNSC, assesses which elements led to cooperation and which led to conflict, and provides an assessment for possible future avenues for bilateral cooperation on Syria. The analysis determines the central story lines, metaphors, and floating signifiers of the discursive struggle.

The thesis leads to the conclusion that discursive conflicts defined the US-Russia interaction on Syria, and that despite periods of cooperation, relations returned to their base status of confrontation in the sphere of discourse. The main cause for the failure of the US and Russia to find a diplomatic solution was found to be the consistency with which the two sides stuck to the story lines and signifiers that they established in in the early days of the conflict.

**Keywords**: US-Russia relations, discourse analysis, UN Security Council, Syria, civil war, discursive struggle, hegemony.

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**INTRODUCTION**

The years 2011-2016 mark the worst period in US-Russian relations since the end of the Cold War. After periods of bilateral cooperation on issues like nuclear non-proliferation and the war in Afghanistan in the 2000’s, serious disagreements arose in the second half of that decade, as Russia took steps that challenged the American-led post-Cold War order.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Despite the sought-after reset of relations in 2009 that followed the coming of the Obama administration, fundamental differences between the two countries re-emerged with the Arab uprisings in 2011. After President Vladimir Putin’s re-election in Russia and President Barack Obama’s re-election in the United States in 2012, the issue that came to dominate US-Russia relations was the civil war in Syria.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Syrian Civil War became the first conflict around which the two countries clashed so consistently and so fundamentally. The war also brought with it periods in which hope for cooperation emerged that seemed to offer a breakthrough in relations between the two countries: periods in which common interests and norms were identified and conjoined diplomatic efforts attempted to mediate a solution to the developing war. However, time and again, bilateral cooperation was derailed and the countries failed to find a solution to the war or overcome their differences. Syria and its people became the victims of that failure. The conflict has now raged on for more than 6 years, resulting in mass suffering and death, a refugee crisis, the use of norm-breaking chemical weapons, and the rise of terrorist armies.

In large part, the most important battle of the Syrian Civil War was a discursive battle fought in the UN Security Council (UNSC) between the US and Russia— in the sole body that could sanction a coordinated international response to the conflict. The discussions in the body shaped the situation on the ground in Syria, affecting the expectations and legitimacy of the different actors in the war. The failure to find a diplomatic solution in the UNSC was mirrored by the failure to end the war raging in Syria. As veto-holding members that became militarily involved in the Syrian civil war, the United States and Russia had the biggest roles to play in that failure. Their speeches, draft resolutions, and votes betrayed different interests and visions of the world—the components of two clashing discourses.

An examination of this discursive struggle is the starting point to this research, which will be aimed at providing a better understanding of the successes and failures of US and Russian efforts to mediate the Syrian Civil War.

**Research Overview**

The social constructivist assumption that language is a medium that both reflects and shapes reality will be the basis for the research (more in Chapter 1). The key assumption is that the discourse in the UNSC significantly impacts the reality of the Syrian Civil war, and is thus important to study.

The aim of the research is to evaluate why the US and Russia failed to resolve the Syrian conflict in the UNSC, despite many attempts. This is done through an analysis of all 16 UNSC draft resolutions about Syria in the chosen time period and the US and Russian speeches that accompanied them. The time frame chosen is between the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in March 2011 and the end of 2016. UNSC discussions in 2017 were disregarded because of the major shifts in US discourse that occurred with the inauguration of US President Donald Trump. The speeches were accessed through the official meeting records provided by the UNSC. The speeches of the two countries are grouped separately and comprise the ‘discourse’ of the countries for the purposes of this study, using Martin Hajer’s definition for discourse:

“[an] ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The US and Russian discourses are first evaluated independently of one another, to better understand each country’s position on the Syrian conflict. The *floating signifiers* of each discourse are identified — empty signs that discourses struggle to invest with meaning in their own particular way — as well as the central story lines and metaphors employed (Chapter 1). They are identified in a corpus linguistics approach by employing the open-souce AntConc 3.4.4w program, which searches for concordance—to see which words are regularly used in the corpus, as well as collocates—to see which words they are used together with. Afterwards, a comparative approach is employed to see how the discourses differed and how that impacted subsequent discussions in the UNSC throughout the duration of the Syrian Civil War. The 10 resolutions that were passed in this period are taken as instances of agreement, while the 6 times that draft resolutions were vetoed are taken as instances of conflict. A comparison of the speeches that led to agreement and conflict is used to identify the points of overlap and divergence between the two discourses.

They key research questions to be answered are:

* What issues define US and Russian discourses about the Syrian civil war; how do they differ and how are they similar?
* What aspects of the discourses led to cooperation and what issues led to conflict (vetoes) in the UNSC?
* What can the discursive struggle between the US and Russia over Syria reveal about possible future avenues for bilateral cooperation?

A discursive analysis of the Syrian case study thus sheds light on the US-Russia relationship in the time period as well as possible avenues of future cooperation in Syria and beyond. The research will answer the crucial question of why diplomatic efforts to bring peace to Syria failed.

**Literature review and Urgency of the Topic**

Despite the importance of the discursive struggle over Syria in the UNSC, serious studies of the US and Russian discourses about the civil war have been sparse. Most studies have compared the UNSC responses to the conflicts in Libya and Syria (Frantzen 2012), or focused on legitimization strategies used for vetoes in general in the UNSC (Warnersson 2016). Some researchers took the responsibility to protect imperative as the starting point to their research of UNSC action in Libya and Syria (Adams 2015, Leurs 2014). Other discourse analysis studies have examined Turkish foreign policy on Syria, including a comparative study of Turkish discourse about Libya and Syria (Erdogan 2017) [[4]](#footnote-4) and a study of Turkish legitimization strategies for intervention in Syria (Kucukali 2017) [[5]](#footnote-5).

In-depth studies that have specifically focused on a *comparison* of US and Russian discourses about Syria in the UNSC have not been attempted. The importance of such a clear angle is that it reveals which discursive aspects led to agreements between the US and Russia in the UNSC and which discursive aspects led to conflict, which potentially can lead to developing a discursive avenue for cooperation. As in the previously mentioned studies, an analysis of the discourses of the veto will be made in regard to Syria, however, this will be compared to the discussions behind passed resolutions as well. Given the newly elected presidential administration in the United States as of January 2017 and the potential for renewed efforts to end the Syrian civil war, now is a critical moment to understand the discursive battles, successes, and failures of the US and Russia over Syria.

**Thesis structure**

Following the introduction, Chapter 1 will explain the theoretical framework of constructivism and the discourse theory methodology that are used for conducting the research. The definitions of discourse and discourse analysis are provided, as well as an explanation for why this methodology was chosen. The chapter also presents the case material and an explanation of key aspects—like floating signifiers, story lines, and the discursive struggle for hegemony—that were used in the research.

Chapter 2 provides a chronological overview of the major events of the Syrian Civil War and the discourses that developed in parallel to the events. The 16 UNSC resolutions are situated in their chronological and situational context, and other major events, speeches, and terms are identified. The chapter concludes with a timeline of the 16 resolutions that serve as the case material for the research.

Chapter 3 provides the quantitative research, which identifies the most frequently found words in either country’s discourse about Syria, provides a comparison of these words and looks at their collocates, and identifies words that are unique to either discourse. These *floating signifiers* are identified and compared, answering the first research question: what issues defined each discourse and how do they compare?

Chapter 4 provides the qualitative research. Firstly, it presents the central story lines that were established by the US and Russian discourses during the first discussion in the UNSC in October 2011. Secondly, it compared the 6 vetoed resolutions with the 10 passed resolutions, to identify what commonalities exist within these groups, and how that may have impacted why they were passed or vetoed. Thirdly, a comparison of the speeches of the vetoed and passed resolutions is conducted, to identify which discursive aspects led to these outcomes.

The conclusion provides a summary of the findings, and answers the question of why US-Russia diplomatic efforts to bring peace to Syria failed. Additionally, possible future avenues for cooperation between the US and Russia on Syria and beyond are suggested.

**CHAPTER 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY**

This research is a study of US and Russian discourses regarding the Syrian Civil War. As such, it exists within the theoretical framework of constructivism and makes use of the discourse analysis methodology, which is presented below.

**1.1 Constructivist theoretical framework**

Constructivism, or social constructivism, is a theoretical framework that purports that knowledge of the world is socially constructed. One branch of constructivism studies language as a medium that shapes and conditions our view of the world and reality, instead of treating language as a neutral medium that mirrors reality.[[6]](#footnote-6) While physical and social objects exist in themselves, our access to them is always mediated by systems of meaning in the form of discourses, which will be explicated below.

Key constructivists in the field of International Relations include Nichalas Onuf, Emanuel Adler, and Alexander Wendt. The statement of Emanuel Adler, who studied discursive practices as the ontological unit of reality and analysis, sets the tone for this research: “constructivism sees the world as a project under construction, as becomingrather than being.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Thus, this paper is based on the two major assumptions of constructivism: that our access to reality is shaped through language, and that language structures (discourses) are constantly being changed and are not static.

**1.2 Discourse and Discourse Analysis**

The central focus for this research is discourse, which has a variety of definitions. In the broader sense, discourse can be defined as:

“a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world).”[[8]](#footnote-8)

A more thorough definition defines discourse as an:

“ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

For the purposes of this study, the second definition by Hajer is used. It emphasizes the fact that discourses give meaning to social and physical phenomena through an identifiable set of practices (institutions). The set of practices chosen for this study are the meetings of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). It talks about the modification (change) of identity through articulation, and about discourse as a structured totality—the subject to be studied.

The study of discourse, or *discourse analysis*, has also been defined in a number of ways, with a variety of attached methodologies. Maarten Hajer defines discourse analysis as:

“the examination of argumentative structure in documents and other written or spoken statements as well as the practices through which those utterances are made.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

According to Jorgensen and Phillips,

“what is to be analysed are the discursive processes through which discourses are constructed in ways that give the impression that they represent true or false pictures of reality.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Following from these definitions, the written and spoken statements at the United Nations Security Council are the material for the discourse analysis, and their discursive processes and truth claims are the focus.

**1.3 Why discourse analysis?**

Discourse analysis is used widely in social constructionism, though it is not the only approach in the field. It combines a series of interdisciplinary approaches, providing both a theory and a methodology, and has been successfully applied in the field of international relations.

One reason to use discourse analysis is because language has the power to shape social reality and is fundamentally related to politics, and international politics. In the words of Hajer, “language has the capacity to make politics, to create signs and symbols that can shift power-balances and that can impact on institutions and policy-making.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Following Michel Foucault’s work on the power-knowledge relationship and its influence on discourse studies, it can be said that “Power is responsible *both* for creating our social world *and* for the particular ways in which the world is formed and can be talked about, ruling out alternative ways of being and talking.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Institutions, policy-making, and power-balances are all aspects that exist and are impacted by discourse. For this reason, discourse analysis is an appropriate methodology to investigate the institution of the UNSC, its policy-making, and its power-balances.

The reason why discourse is so important to politics, and why it readily reflects politics, is that discourses have the power to change social reality and language because meaning is not fixed: “meaning can never be ultimately fixed and this opens up the way for constant social struggles about definitions of society and identity, with resulting social effects.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

**1.4 Theorists and Methodologies of Discourse Analysis**

Many researchers have developed methodologies that study political power made manifest in discourse. Because of the flexibility of discourse analysis, it is possible to combine elements of different methodologies in a *multiperspectival* work, which is the approach taken in this study.

Ertnesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s discourse theory, the basis for the research, focuses on discursive struggle and hegemony. For Laclau and Mouffe, discourses are in a constant struggle for hegemony, and attempt to impose themselves as universal. The researchers are interested in analyzing how the structure, in the form of discourses, is constituted and changed. They reintroduce Antonio Gramsci’s conception of hegemony into modern debates about political power and language. For the research, “Hegemony means nothing more than the *discursive struggle* between political actors over the assertion of their particular representations of the world as having a universal significance.”[[15]](#footnote-15) As part of this discursive struggle for hegemony, “One discourse is undermined from the discursive field from which another discourse overpowers it, or rather dissolves it, by rearticulating its elements. The hegemonic intervention has succeeded if one discourse comes to dominate alone, where before there was conflict, and the antagonism is dissolved.“[[16]](#footnote-16) Thus, the antagonism between discourses focuses on rearticulating the elements of the competing discourse in order to replace it.

The first step to analyzing discourse is to identify **floating signifiers**, which are empty signs that discourses struggle to invest with meaning in their own particular way. These signifiers are empty in themselves, but are filled with meaning in combination with other signs and context, and have social consequences when they are determined: “by examining the competing ascriptions of content to the floating signifiers, we can begin to identify the struggles taking place over meaning.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Signifiers like “freedom,” “self-determination,” and “human rights” are especially interesting for the research, because they have multiple meanings in themselves, but when used in a discourse, they make a universalistic ethical assertion.

The last scholar whose methodology will be employed in this work is the political scientist Maarten A. Hajer, whose definition for discourse was provided above. Hajer identifies **metaphors** and **story lines** as the main indicators of discursive constructions to be analyzed. Metaphors often focus on emblematic issues, which give a general understanding of a greater issue, while story lines are condensed statements summarizing complex narratives, “through which actors try to impose their view of reality on others, suggest certain social positions and practices, and criticize alternative social arrangements.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Story lines are essentially part of the discursive struggle.

Hajer calls the discursive struggle for hegemony **discourse structuration**. He specifically analyzes discourses in institutions and social units, such as political parties. According to Hajer, discourse structuration occurs when a discourse starts to dominate the way a given social unit conceptualizes the world, and when it solidifies in particular institutional arrangements. For a discourse to become dominant, the central actors should accept the rhetorical power of the new discourse, and, crucially, the new discourse should be reflected in the institutional practices of the political domain. The advantages of Hajer’s approach is that it “analyzes strategic action in the context of specific socio-historical discourses and institutional practices and provides the conceptual tools to analyze controversies over individual issues in their wider political context.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Attempts at discourse structuration will be evident in the discourse to be analyzed in the Security Council on the topic of the research.

**1.5 Methodology chosen**

The first step of the research is statistical in nature, and identifies the most commonly used floating signifiers in the chosen materials for analysis in a corpus linguistics approach, as proposed by Dirk Nabers.[[20]](#footnote-20) Following Laclau and Mouffe’s definition, these signifiers are empty in nature, in the sense that they can have different meanings attached to them depending on their context, and they can be taken as the main battlefield in the discursive struggle. The goal then ise to define which signifiers occur with a high frequency in the corpus, which will make it possible to analyze continuities and breaks in the discourse. According to Nabers, this is a default resource in contemporary linguistics, and presents an empirical approach that relies on real language data.[[21]](#footnote-21) The research employs the open sourse AntConc 3.4.4w program in order to conduct this statistical analysis. The texts are grouped and analyzed lexicometrically, including searches for concordance—to see which words are regularly used in the corpus, as well as collocates—to see which words they are used together with. Lastly, the context of the floating signifiers are analyzed in order to determine the specific meanings proposed by the actors in question. After the quantitative part, a qualitative analysis is made that draws on the theory identified above. Examples of hegemonic intervention, metaphors, and story lines are examined in the source material that complement the statistical information found using the AntConc program. The discourse employed during discussions of the 6 vetoed resolutions is compared to the discourse employed during discussions of the 10 passed resolution, to identify which floating signifiers were the most problematic to the two discourses. Additionally, a discourse analysis of the vetoed resolutions is employed to identify which signifiers triggered the Russian veto.

**1.6 Material chosen**

The material includes all the speeches of the Russian and US representatives to the UN Security Council (UNSC) in draft resolutions discussing Syria. This material is gathered from the official database of the UN, which compiles all meeting records conducted by the UNSC. 16 meetings about Syrian-focused resolutions were conducted in the Security Council between October 4, 2011, and December 21, 2016 (3 others did not involve discussions). 10 of these meetings resulted in passed resolutions, and 6 of them resulted in vetoes of draft resolutions (all of them were vetoed by Russia).

The meetings of the Security Council were chosen for the discourse analysis because they are the location in which articulatory practice occurs and where discursive struggle for hegemony is employed and “reproduced through an identifiable set of practices.” The US and Russia were chosen because, as members of the P5 group with veto rights, they play key roles in the debates on Syria in the Council, and are the leaders of their respective discursive coalitions.

**CHAPTER 2. OVERVIEW OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR**

This section provides a brief chronological overview of the Syrian conflict from the international discourse perspective, with special emphasis on the statements and actions of the United States and Russia. The focus is on the international dimension of the Syrian conflict, rather than the domestic dimension, so most battles and other key events are not addressed. This section provides the context to the major votes undertaken in the framework of the UN, and serves as a backdrop to the discourse analysis of the UNSC speeches in the following chapter. Significant attention is given to detailed coverage of the first two years of the conflict, when the discourse coalitions were first formed. A short timeline for the UNSC resolutions is provided at the end of this chapter for reference.

**2.1 Syria: first months of protests: “Wait and See”**

In the international context, the beginning of the Syrian conflict has been linked to the anti-regime protests that occurred after March 15, 2011 in the city of Deraa. According to the most widespread accounts of the events, a group of teenage graffiti artists were arrested after writing anti-regime slogans on the walls of the city and were reportedly tortured. Protests for their release were then broken up by violence and shooting at the crowd by regime forces, who began a siege of the city after March 25.

One of the first responses was from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was asked about the events in Syria in London on March 29, following an international conference on the Libyan Crisis. In her responses, Clinton expressed her “strong condemnation of the Syrian Government’s brutal repression of demonstrators, in particular the violence and killing of civilians in the hands of security forces.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Despite the condemnation, Clinton stated that “we’re also going to continue to urge that the promise of reform… that we hear from the highest levels of leadership in Syria – will actually be turned into reality.” Clinton summarized the US response to the events in Syria as US as “waiting and watching.”

**2.2 The first meeting in the Security Council**

The first meeting of the Security Council on the Syrian conflict took place on April 27, 2011. While it was not preceded by a vote for any draft resolution, and will thus not be part of the later analysis, the kernels of the future discursive struggle were already set here, and they are telling. The US speech mostly focused on criticism of Syrian President al-Assad, calling him to “to change course now and heed the calls of his own people” and saying that “the United States has expressed its position to the Syrian Government, and we are considering a range of options, including targeted sanctions.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The speech was based on liberal rhetoric, highlighting the unacceptability of human rights violations, and saying that the “Syrian people’s cries for freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly and the ability to freely choose their leaders must be heeded.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

While Russia also criticized the human rights situation, it disagreed with the United States in terms of prescriptions, and expressed belief in the Syrian government’s capacity for reforms. Rather than calling for sanctions, Russia said that “the search for fair solutions to persistent problems must be carried out by the Government alongside all social, political and religious forces in a constitutional manner, and the sooner the better.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

Russia also warned of the danger of “outside interference in Syria’s domestic situation, including attempts to promote ready-made solutions or to take sides.” Russia also immediately stated that:

“some demonstrators, both in Syria and other countries, hope that the deteriorating situation could force the international community to help them and to take sides. Such approaches lead to an endless cycle of violence and represent an invitation to civil war. It is extremely important to focus all efforts on avoiding such a dangerous turn of events, especially as Syria is the cornerstone of the Middle East security architecture. Destabilizing that significant link in the chain will lead to complications throughout the region.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

In many ways, it could be said that the trajectory for future US and Russian discourse in the next 6 years was pre-set in the first month of the conflict. Whether or not this is an example of rhetorical consistency, or whether it was a premonition and even a determinitation of the future course of events is up for debate.

**2.3 US Sanctions, Russia calls for reform**

A month later, on April 29, as the escalation of the conflict continued, US President Obama signed executive order 13572 that imposed targeted sanctions on individuals deemed complicit in the killing in Syria, including Maher al-Assad and Iran’s IRGC Quds force. On May 18, Assad himself was targeted by US sanctions, and the US President warned that the Syrian president must “lead that transition, or get out of the way.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

July saw several important events that changed the international calculation regarding Syria. According to UN reports, up to 1,900 Syrians had been killed and up to 8,000 had been detained in the protests up to that point.[[28]](#footnote-28) In addition to the increasing government crackdown, the size of the demonstrating crowds had also increased, with the largest protest to that point occurring on July 8, involving 500,000 people. On July 11, pro-Assad crowds attacked the US embassy in Damascus, provoking an angry US response. Another crucial event of international significance was the founding of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in southern Turkey by former regime army officers. That organization would be seen as the focal point of the moderate organized opposition for many members of the international community as an alternative to the Assad regime.

Several statements in the month of July reflect the changing calculus of the US towards the Syrian regime. On July 1, Secretary Clinton said that the “Syrian Government is running out of time…we are looking for action, not words.”[[29]](#footnote-29) After the attacks on the US embassy on July 11, Clinton uttered a strong statement that said that Assad had lost legitimacy, and that "President Assad is not indispensable and we have absolutely nothing invested in him remaining in power.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Secretary Clinton reiterated the claim on July 15, saying “that Syria can’t go back to the way it was before” and that “we’ve made our views very clear.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Russia’s position in the first few months of the conflict was to emphasize the need for reform in Syria, such as during an April 24 call between Russian President Medvedev and Assad.[[32]](#footnote-32) Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other officials constantly urged caution and restraint in the first few months of the conflict, and expressed disapproval of towards a planned British and French draft resolution that would condemn Assad’s use of force. In large part, Russia’s position did not differ strongly from the rest of the international community in the first few months after the conflict. While rebuking the crackdown on protestors, most of the international community was not ready to call for Assad’s downfall, and most attention was tied to the NATO-led military intervention in Libya that was unfolding in the same time period.

**2.4 The first cracks: Assad must go?**

The first official UN Security Council action on the Syrian situation, which was also approved by Russia, was a Presidential Statement on August 3.The statement condemned “the widespread violations of human rights and the use of force against civilians by the Syrian authorities,” but at the same time reaffirmed the council’s “strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Syria,” in an apparent attempt to appease Russia’s concerns about a possible international intervention in Syria. The UNSC statement stressed “that the only solution to the current crisis in Syria is through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process.”[[33]](#footnote-33) The day after the UNSC statement, the Russian president gave his strongest public rebuke of the Syrian regime, saying that Assad would “face a sad fate” if he didn’t urgently carry out reforms and restore peace.[[34]](#footnote-34)

However, Western countries criticized the August 3 statement as being too lenient on the Syrian regime, and too late. On August 18, US President Barack Obama released a presidential statement saying that “the time has come for President Assad to step aside” because of his failure to heed earlier international calls for reforms and democratic transition. It was accompanied by an “unprecedented” executive order freezing all Syrian government assets. The statement went on to state that “It is time for the Syrian people to determine their own destiny, and we will continue to stand firmly on their side,” seeming to imply that the US would stand by Syrians seeking to overthrow Assad. It also, prophetically stated that “we recognize that it will take time for the Syrian people to achieve the justice they deserve. There will be more struggle and sacrifice.”

Obama’s August 18 announcement, coordinated with statements by Britain, France, Germany and Canada, laid bare the fundamental differences in the US and Russian positions towards Syria. The official US policy was now taken to be regime change, while the Russians believed that this action would be a violation of Syrian sovereignty. Some analysts claim that the US announcement hardened Russian and Iranian resolve to stand by Assad, acting as a conflict escalator.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The disconnect between US and Russian policy became more evident in the weeks following Obama’s announcement. Not only did Russia (and China) release statements urging the international community to stay out of Syria’s affairs, but Medvedev sent Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov to Syria on August 29 to emphasize Russia’s support for Assad’s reforms.[[36]](#footnote-36) At this time, the Russian ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin said that Russia would be against any resolution in the Security Council that would pressure Assad because of fears that it “could push the most radical Syrian opposition forces to more active operations to topple the government.”[[37]](#footnote-37) This juxtaposition between Assad on the one hand and radical opposition forces on the other became a common rhetorical device used by Russia in regards to the Syrian conflict. In keeping with its promise, Russia vetoed draft resolution S/2011/612 in the Security Council on October 4. It was the first resolution of many that would be proposed in that chamber, and it in large part set the stage for the two discursive coalitions that would battle for hegemony over Syria in the coming years.

**2.5 One year after the protests, no end in sight**

After the disagreements in the UNSC at the end of 2011, several more initiatives were made by the different parties to come to an agreement, one year after the protests in Syria began. In the first months of the new year, several Russian peace initiatives were said to have been rejected regarding the future of Syria.[[38]](#footnote-38)[[39]](#footnote-39) On top of this, a new UNSC resolution about Syria was again vetoed by Russia and China on February 4, 2012. Secretary Clinton called the veto “despicable,” while Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov criticized the resolution[[40]](#footnote-40), saying that it made too few demands on anti-government armed groups, and would prejudge the outcome of a dialogue among political forces in the country—largely repeating the same discursive clash that had occurred in October of the previous year.

Several events occurred in February 2012 that were indicative of the course of events in Syria. The Syrian army conducted a heavy assault on Baba Amr, a neighborhood in Homs, in a further escalation of the war, and a new phase of violence. However, on February 12, US State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland stated that the US continued “to believe that further arms into Syria is not the answer.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Meanwhile, the UNHCR commission of inquiry reported that “Anti-Government groups have also committed abuses, although not comparable in scale and organization to those carried out by the State.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Thus, the conflict was escalating on all sides, though the US was not willing to commit to provide the opposition with military aid. On February 23, a initiative was launched when Kofi Annan was appointed as the joint Arab-League UN envoy to Syria, and was tasked with drawing up a peace plan that would become the focal point for the resolution of the conflict in the coming months. On February 24, the first meeting of the Friends of Syria Group took place in Tunis, an informal group outside of the framework of the UN comprising more than 60 countries. The group “recognized the Syrian National Council as a legitimate representative of Syrians” and called for a national unity government: the strongest and most practical move yet in envisioning a Syria without Assad.[[43]](#footnote-43) The group criticized the UNSC for not taking effective action against the Syrian regimes’ human rights violations. Meanwhile, on February 26, a referendum for a new Syrian constitution was conducted by the Syrian government, though the action did little to appease Assad’s critics or help end the war.

**2.6 Kofi Annan’s 6-point plan and the Geneva Communique**

In March, after months of international disagreement, a solution seemed to have been reached that united the different actors. The UNSC unanimously agreed to release a Presidential Statement on March 21 that supported Kofi Annan’s proposed 6-point plan for ending the violence in Syria.[[44]](#footnote-44) On March 25, the Syrian government announced that it too was accepting the plan, and agreed to the beginning of ceasefire on April 12. On March 26, Obama and Medvedev met in Seoul and also expressed their support for Annan’s plan and desire to cooperate to avoid civil war in Syria, seemingly overcoming the acrimony of the previous months.[[45]](#footnote-45) Sergey Lavrov then publicly stated Russia’s demands on Syria to strictly fulfill their commitments under the new plan.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Further proof of the agreement among the actors was provided by the successful passage of two resolutions in the UNSC, the first resolutions that were not brought down in a veto. These were resolutions 2042 and 2043, which deployed and extended the mandate of the UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) a group of observers that would see out the ceasefire and the implementation of the 6-point plan. The successful passing of the resolutions may have been the result of their practical and instrumental, rather than symbolic or ideological, nature.

However, in the following weeks, violations of the ceasefire by both the Syrian government and the opposition forces were reported by the UN.[[47]](#footnote-47) In a further blow, on May 15, there were reports of a massacre in Houla that was perpetrated by pro-regime Shabiha groups, in which 108 were reportedly killed. Despite the fact that Assad denied complicity in the event, international and domestic opinion was strongly impacted.[[48]](#footnote-48) On June 4, the rebels of the FSA announced that they would no longer be committed to the ceasefire because of government violations.[[49]](#footnote-49) In a further deterioration, on June 12, UNSMIS vehicles were attacked in al-Heffeh by crowds, leading to UNSMIS announcing a suspension of its operations on June 16 because of fears for the safety of the observers. The breakdown of the ceasefire was also followed by the US and Russia accusing each other of supplying arms that would fuel the conflict, thus breaking the illusion that the two sides were committed to peace. Russia accused the US of providing covert military support to the opposition, amidst reports of CIA operations in southern Turkey[[50]](#footnote-50), while Secretary Clinton accused Russia of supplying the regime with helicopters.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Despite the accusations and the breakdown of the ceasefire, a major agreement was signed later that month by all of the major international actors (except Iran) on June 30 at the UN Action Group on Syria in Geneva. The agreement would be subsequently called the Geneva Communique, and the document would serve as a template for all future peace initiatives.[[52]](#footnote-52) The agreement in Geneva again focused on the instrumental aspects of a political transition, and bypassed the touchy subject of Assad’s future. It called for a transitional body to be appointed, without specifying whether or not Assad or his allies could have a role in that body. During the negotiations, “Russia continued to oppose language in the statement calling for a political transition under which Bashar al-Assad would be required to leave power. But Clinton insisted the edits agreed on at the meeting convened by UN Syria envoy Kofi Annan Saturday did not alter that key demand.” As previously, the battle lines were drawn along issues of language.

The ongoing discursive struggle was immediately confirmed after the signing of the agreement, when statements issued by Russian and US officials seemed to directly contradict each other in relation to the future of Assad. In the days after the agreement, Secretary Clinton claimed that “Assad will still have to go” because "He will never pass the mutual-consent test, given the blood on his hands.” Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Lavrov said that Assad’s future had not been determined by the agreement. The contradictions between the two interpretations of the agreement clearly spelled out the major difference in the US and Russian position: the future of Assad.

Some observers have claimed that the decision of the US to publicly call for Assad’s ouster in the aftermath of the agreement derailed the process of political transition. Calls by the US and Britain for Assad’s ouster, coupled with US Ambassador Susan Rice’s proposal for a Chapter 7 resolution that would open the door to use force against Assad, were said to have undermined Kofi Annan’s efforts, which had reportedly secured Russia’s support to quietly push Assad out.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Nevertheless, the discursive struggle over Assad’s future led to another Russian veto in the UNSC over draft resolution 538 on July 19, 2012, which threatened non-violent sanctions against the Syrian regime under article 41. Kofi Annan subsequently resigned from his post as envoy on August 2, and the last real chance for international agreement in Syria seemed to be over. Starting from this point, the civil war in Syria became entrenched, weapons poured in from across the world, and the discourse coalitions became locked into place in the UNSC.

**2.7 Escalation, radicalization, and chemical weapons attacks**

2013 saw a further escalation of the civil war, the rise of extremists, and a major deterioration in the humanitarian situation in Syria. US involvement in the war steadily increased, with the deployment of elements of the 1st Armored Division in a newly established headquarters in Jordan in April. Additionally, the rise of extremist organization like the al-Nusra Front was noted; they were labeled a terrorist organization by the US State Department.[[54]](#footnote-54) An agreement between Minister Lavrov and Secretary John Kerry in May 2013 to seek a peaceful solution of the war was derailed by the alleged use of chemical weapons by Assad’s forces in June 2013. This was followed by an announcement that the US would increase its weapons transfers to the rebels on June 13.[[55]](#footnote-55) Support for increasing military aid to Syrian rebels had been growing in the United States throughout the year, including a US Senate push for a resolution to arm rebels on May 21.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Another chemical attack occurred on August 21 outside of Damascus, shaking the international community. Initial statements by the US Administration called for a strong response and the accountability of the Syrian regime, as well as the need to uphold international norms. Russian officials expressed caution and skepticism regarding the perpetrators of the attack. A speech by Secretary Kerry on August 30 seemed to have set the ground for a US intervention, however, on August 31, US President Barack Obama announced that he would defer the approval for a possible intervention to the U.S. Congress.[[57]](#footnote-57) Before the issue was received in Congress, Secretary Kerry mentioned that a chemical disarmament of the Syrian regime could be a possible solution to the crisis on September 9. This was picked up by Russian Minister Lavrov, who suggested a cooperation framework between the US and Russia to disarm Syria’s chemical weapons on September 14. The actions resulted in the successful passage of resolution 2013 in the UNSC on September 27, 2013, that would see the elimination of Syria’s chemical weapons.

**2.8 The US and Russia enter the War**

In 2014, the ISIS terrorist organization began to make its first gains in Syria, bringing a new dimension to the conflict, while the humanitarian situation in the country continued to deteriorate. International cooperation was reached in the UNSC by the unanimous adoption of Resolution 2139 to allow for the provision of humanitarian aid to civilians in Syria on February 22. A second, humanitarian-based resolution (2165) was approved on July 14, establishing a monitoring mechanism. As before, the passage of these resolutions was largely predicated on the fact that they had a practical and instrumental focus. However, a UNSC draft resolution 348, which called for the referral of the Syrian regime to the International Criminal Court (ICC) was vetoed by Russia and China on May 22, 2014. It seemed that not much had changed in the dynamics of international cooperation in the walls of the UNSC: resolutions with humanitarian concerns were adopted, whilst those with political ramifications were vetoed.

Meanwhile, the rise in the activities of ISIS led to the US announcement that it would enter the Syrian conflict in an attempt to destroy and degrade the terrorist organization on September 3.[[58]](#footnote-58) This followed a public outcry over the beheading videos of two US journalists imprisoned by ISIS: James Foley on August 18 and Steven Sotloff on September 2. On September 10, Obama read a speech that announced the plan to attack ISIS, and launched the Operation Inherent Resolve.[[59]](#footnote-59) However, “Obama’s declared goal of destroying the Caliphate proved difficult” and “In the first year of the operation it actually thrived, pushing deeper into western Syria to capture Palmyra from the regime and east into Iraq to gain Ramadi, both in May 2015.”[[60]](#footnote-60) Another setback experienced by the US in Syria was the failure of the program for training Syrian opposition troops: only 60 were ready by July 2015.

In an unprecedented turn of events, a UNSC resolution (2209) was passed on March 6, 2015 that condemned any use of chemical weapons in Syria and threatened Chapter VII measures in any case of future use. It was the first time that Russia had accepted military intervention as a possibility in Syria in the UNSC.

In September 2015, Russia itself decided to intervene in the war. On September 10, the Federation Council gave the president approval to conduct military operations in Syria. On September 28, Putin gave an address at the UN General Assembly in which he called for an international coalition against the Islamic State.[[61]](#footnote-61) His speech indirectly criticized the US’s role in the international geopolitical confrontation with Russia, and defended Russia’s use of its veto power. Two days later, the first Russian airstrikes were launched on September 30. The Russian Chief of Staff Sergei Ivanov claimed that ‘the military goal of this operation is exclusively to provide air support to the Syrian government forces in their fight against ISIS.’[[62]](#footnote-62) He also said that Russia was acting in Syria on the request of President Assad, and thus that the intervention was legal. Many in the international media claimed that this was evidence of the escalation of the competition between the US and Russia for influence in the Middle East. Some called Russia’s actions a “holy war” to protect Christians in Syria.[[63]](#footnote-63) However, others in the international community criticized Russia’s new campaign as being aimed at non-ISIS rebels. Indeed, soon after the strikes, the regime launched a campaign against rebel forces in northern Hama province, Latakia, Idlib, Homs and Deraa.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Soon after Russia’s strikes, another multilateral round of negotiations was launched with the aim of finding a solution for Syria. The discussions were called the International Syria Support Group (ISSG). It was co-chaired by the US and Russia, and included 20 participants. The talks resulted in the ‘Vienna statements’ of October 30 and November 14, which were later endorsed by the UNSC in Resolution 2254 on December 18, 2015, and reiterated in Resolution 2268 on February 26, 2016. The Vienna process resulted in a peace plan for Syria which called for the formation of a transition government before July 2016, and elections and a new constitution by July 2017. The Vienna talks also identified ISIS and the Nusra Front as terrorist organizations that must be defeated. [[65]](#footnote-65) As in the Geneva talks, the future role of Assad was sidelined in the discussions. In March, Putin announced that the military goals of Russia’s operations had been accomplished, and he was withdrawing “the main part of our military group from the Syrian Arab Republic beginning tomorrow.”[[66]](#footnote-66)

Throughout 2016, the ravages of the Syrian conflict continued. The summer saw the intensification of the Syrian government campaign to recapture Aleppo from rebels. An international outcry followed the assault, particularly in regard to the humanitarian situation. This was another setback to international efforts to mediate the conflict and the successes of the past year. A UN draft resolution 846 seeking to halt the battle in Aleppo was vetoed on October 8, 2016, as was draft resolution 1026 on December 5, 2016, which sought to end the assault on Aleppo for 7 days. At the same time, the extension of the OPCW-UN mandate was extended and renewed during UNSC meetings on October 31 resolution 2314) and November 17 (resolution 2319). The city was eventually conquered on December 13, 2016.

**2.9 Timeline of UNSC Resolutions on the Syrian Civil War**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Date | Name | Subject | Status |
| 2011, October 4 | S/2011/612 | End to violence | Vetoed |
| 2012, February 4 | S/2012/77 | End to violence | Vetoed |
| 2012, April 14 | Resolution 2042 | Adopt 6-point plan | Passed |
| 2012, April 21 | Resolution 2043 | Establish UNSMIS | Passed |
| 2012, July 19 | S/2012/538 | Geneva communique | Vetoed |
| 2013, September 27 | Resolution 2118 | Eliminate chemical weapons | Passed |
| 2014, February 22 | Resolution 2139 | Access to Humanitarian Aid | Passed |
| 2014, May 22 | S/2014/348 | Refer to ICC | Vetoed |
| 2014, July 14 | Resolution 2165 | Monitoring mechanism | Passed |
| 2015, March 6 | Resolution 2209 | Condemning chemical attacks | Passed |
| 2015, December 18 | Resolution 2254 | Adopt Vienna Statements | Passed |
| 2016, February 26 | Resolution 2268 | Cease-fire | Passed |
| 2016, October 8 | S/2016/846 | End to Aleppo offensive | Vetoed |
| 2016, October 31 | Resolution 2314 | Extend OPCW-UN | Passed |
| 2016, November 17 | Resolution 2319 | Renew OPCW-UN | Passed |
| 2016, December 5 | S/2016/1026 | End to Aleppo offensive | Vetoed |

**CHAPTER 3. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS**

The quantitative research focuses on identifying the most prevalent floating signifiers used in the US and Russian discourses by utilizing statistical methods in the AntConc program. Identifying the floating signifiers and conducting a statistical analysis will be important before further in-depth textual analysis because it will help determine the empty signs around which the discourses invest the most meaning. The most common signifiers for each country will be compared to determine the differences in emphasis between the discourses. Additionally, words exclusive to either discourse will be identified. Afterwards, the statistical probability of these signifiers will be computed in the discussions on the vetoed and passed resolutions, to identify which signifiers were most likely to occur when the discourses agreed, and which were most likely to occur when they conflicted. This part of the research answers the research question: What issues define US and Russian discourses about the Syrian civil war, and how do they compare?

**3.1 Quantitative methodology**

In order to identify the floating signifiers in the case material, the AntConc program was used to find the most prevalent lemmas in the speeches of the American and Russian representatives at the UNSC using the ‘word list’ and ‘concordance’ features. The word list feature finds the most prevalent terms in the selected texts, while the concordance feature lists all of the instances in which a given term is found in the texts. Afterwards, the ‘collocates’ feature is used to statistically analyze the context in which the most common lemma are found—it computes the words found adjacent to any searched term.

The US and Russian speeches from the 16 selected meetings were compiled into separate folders by country, before being entered into the AntConc program. In total, the US representative uttered 15,803 words while the Russian representative uttered 12,465 words. Stop-words like ‘the’ and ‘of’ were excluded from the search, as well as procedural words such as ‘draft’, ‘resolution’, ‘Security Council’, ‘United States’, ‘Russia’, ‘Syria’/’Syrian’, and ‘international’. These terms were used in the speeches in a neutral bureaucratic sense, thus having negligible impact on the discursive struggles in the UNSC. The program was set to search for the most prevalent lemma—the base forms of the word, which include all of the word’s different possible inflections. For example, ‘terror’ includes ‘terrorism’, ‘terrorist’, ‘terror’, etc.

**3.2 The most frequently used terms in both discourse**s

In an analysis of the discourse of the U.S. representative, the following lemmas were identified as the most prevalent: ‘regime’, ‘weapon’, ‘people’, ‘Assad’, and ‘chemical’. In the Russian discourse, the most common lemmas were: ‘humanitarian’, ‘terror’, ‘political’, ‘chemical’, and ‘opposition’. The frequencies of the lemmas are presented in the two tables below.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Top U.S. Lemma | Frequency |
| Regime | 92 |
| Weapon\* | 86 |
| People | 78 |
| Assad | 71 |
| Chemical | 68 |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Top Russian lemma | Frequency |
| Humanitarian\* | 51 |
| Terror\* | 49 |
| Political | 45 |
| Chemical | 37 |
| Opposition | 36 |

The first finding is that the top 5 most prevalent lemmas in the two country’s discourses greatly differ. Other than the word ‘chemical,’ the rest of the most frequently found words are different. Thus, the words that are most accentuated in the two discourses imply two different discursive approaches to the same events.

To better understanding the importance of each of these signifiers to the two discourses, a comparison of the number of times each word shows up in either country’s discourse will be given. This will help determine the relative importance of the signifiers to the discourses of the two countries. Thus, the number of times that the signifiers identified above are used in either country’s discourse will be compared to determine their relative importance as signifiers. The findings are presented in the two charts in the following pages with an explanation of the data.

**3.3 The most frequently used US lemmas**

The data shows that the most frequently used lemmas in the US discourse are much less frequent in the Russian discourse: the difference is at least two times for each word. The most dramatic differences in relative importance were found with the words ‘Assad’ and ‘regime’: Russia gave almost no emphasis to these two words, while for the US, they were some of the most prevalent words used. A similar tendency can be observed with the terms ‘people’ and ‘weapons,’ which Russia used much less prominently than the US.

If we look deeper at the types of words that came up in the findings, we can see that the US gave a high importance to words referring to political actors, with 3 of the 5 most prevalent words referring to actors. These included ‘regime’, ‘people’, and ‘Assad’. Other than political actors, the second major theme in the US discourse centered on ‘chemical’ and ‘weapons’. The two terms had a very high statistical chance of being used together (73% of the time) according to the collocate feature.

Taken together, the chief US concern expressed in its discourse revolved around the different political actors of the Syrian conflict, with emphasis on the dichotomy between the Assad regime and the people, as well as the issue of chemical weapons. These signifiers will be examined in greater depth in the qualitative analysis of the next chapter. Based on the findings, the greatest divergence of emphasis and thus meaning occurred with the words ‘Assad’, ‘people’ and ‘regime’ while the lease amount of divergence occurred with the words ‘chemical’ and ‘weapons.’

**3.4 The most frequently used Russian lemmas**

In the opposite direction, the Russian discourse used the terms ‘humanitarian’, ‘political’, and ‘opposition’ twice as often as the US discourse. ‘Terror’ was also used more often in the Russian speeches (49 vs. 36 times), though almost always as part of the word ‘terrorist’ or ‘terrorism’ in both the US and Russian usage. As identified before, though ‘chemical’ was one of the most frequently used words in the Russian speeches, it was numerically used less frequently than in the US speeches (68 vs. 37). In all, ‘terror’ and ‘chemical’ showed the least amount of divergence between the two discourses, while ‘opposition,’ ‘political,’ and ‘humanitarian’ showed the greatest amount of divergence.

When comparing the number of times ‘humanitarian’ was used in the Russian speeches (51) with the number of times it was used in the US speeches (22), it may appear that the Russian position expressed much greater concern for humanitarian issues. However, when examining the data further, it can be seen that if the lemma ‘human’ is used, the differences between the two discourses will not be as stark: 53 usages in the Russian discourse and 45 times in the US discourse. Thus, in the Russian context, the lemma ‘human’ is almost always used as part of the word ‘humanitarian’; it is only used once in the phrase ‘human rights’ and never in ‘humanity’. In the US context, apart from 22 mentions of ‘humanitarian’, there are 7 mentions of ‘humanity’ and 8 mentions of ‘human rights’.

Overall, the conclusion from a statistical analysis of the Russian discourse is that it was largely concerned with ‘humanitarian’ issues, ‘political’ issues, and with the opposition. The first two point to an emphasis on instrumental and formal mechanisms, while the latter shows that the chief political actor for the Russian discursive struggle was the opposition, compared to the US emphasis on the regime and the people.

**3.5 Words unique to either discourse**

Apart from examining the most commonly found words, a few more observations were made regarding the data. These include words used by one side that were notably absent from the speeches of the other side. As mentioned, humanity and human rights were practically absent from the Russian discourse. The term ‘democracy’ was also only found in the US speeches; though it only occurred 4 times, and only at the beginning of the conflict (2011-2013), ceasing afterwards. Conversely, the words ‘sovereign’ and ‘extremist’ were entirely absent from the US speeches, though they cropped up in the Russian speeches 10 and 7 times respectively. ‘Brutal’ and ‘victims’ were also exclusively found in the US discourse. We will add these terms to the 9 terms we have already found as floating signifiers using the statistical analysis above. Additionally, we can use the statistical program to examine the context of the terms through the collocate tool, to gain a better understanding of the meanings attached to these terms.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Words unique to US discourse** | **Words unique to Russian discourse** |
| **Humanity Victims**  **Human rights**  **Democracy Brutal** | **Sovereign**  **Extremist**  **Regime change** |

**3.6 Context and collocates**

The collocate tool allows us to search the words that are adjacent to any given search term, thus finding the statistical significance with which they are found next to each other. For example, the collocate tool can help determine the context in which frequently used signifiers such as ‘political’ and terror’ are found, thus helping to understand the meanings attached to them. The questions chosen here are: What is the ‘political’ referring to and what kind of ‘terror’ is described?

The most common collocate to ‘political’ in the Russian speeches is ‘process’ (10); while the most common collocate to ‘political’ in the US speeches is ‘transition’ (7). Conversely, the term ‘political transition’ is not found once in the Russian speeches, and, similarly, the term ‘political process’ is only found once in the US speeches. This is a clear example of two different meanings being attached to the same signifier: political. A clear understanding of ‘terror’ through statistical methods was not found, thus, the term will be examined further in the qualitative textual analysis in the next chapter, to determine what meaning the qualifier is given, and what political actor the terror is being attributed to.

In a summary of the statistical analysis above, we have identified the most frequent and characteristic terms used in the discursive space of the UNSC by the Russian and US representatives. These will be chosen as the floating signifiers for the subsequent analysis. They are listed in the following chart for reference.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Signifiers of US discourse | Signifiers of Russian discourse |
| Regime, Assad, Chemical, Weapon, People,  Humanity, Human, Democracy, Terror, Political (Transition) | Humanitarian, Opposition, Political (Process), Sovereign, Extremist, Chemical, Terror |

**3.7 Signifiers found most often in vetoed resolutions vs. passed resolutions**

Given the statistical findings in sections 4.7 and 4.8, we have determined that the greatest quantitative divergence of the most important signifiers of US and Russian discourses are ‘Assad’, ‘regime’, ‘political’, ‘opposition’, and ‘humanitarian’, while the least divergence occurrence with the words ‘chemical’, ‘weapon’, and ‘terror’. The US and Russian speeches will now be combined and then divided into two groups: those that led to passed resolutions and those that led to vetoed resolutions. The signifiers identified above will be searched for in the program to determine which were most prevalent in the passed resolutions and which were most prevalent in the vetoed resolutions, to see where the discourses overlap and diverge. The following chart shows the average number of times that each signifier occurred in any one given meeting of the UNSC about Syria.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Signifier** | **Occurrence in veto discussions** | **Occurrence in passed discussions** |
| Regime | 4.41 | 2.5 |
| Assad | 3.83 | 1.6 |
| Chemical | 0.42 | 5 |
| Weapon | 1 | 5.3 |
| Political | 2 | 1.95 |
| Opposition | 1.33 | 1.75 |
| Humanitarian | 1.42 | 2.8 |
| Terror | 2.83 | 2.55 |
| People | 3.33 | 2.9 |

Based on the statistical analysis, the signifiers ‘regime’ and Assad’ were the best in predicting that a resolution was vetoed. Conversely, the signifiers ‘chemical’, ‘weapon’ and ‘humanitarian’ were the best in predicting that a resolution would pass. The signifiers ‘political’, ‘opposition’, ‘people’, and ‘terror’ were not significantly able to predict one or the other outcome, despite the fact that the first three exhibited significant divergences in usage between the two discourses, while ‘terror’ exhibited little divergence.

**3.8 Conclusion of Quantitative Research**

The quantitative analysis helped identify the issues that defined the US and Russian discourses about the Syrian Civil War, as well as identify the issues that were most correlated to the passage and veto of resolutions in the UNSC.

The words that most frequently occurred in the US discourse were ‘Assad’, ‘regime’, and ‘people’. These three words occurred 4-5 times more often in the US discourse than in the Russian discourse. Interestingly, they all related to political actors within Syria. Additionally, they represent two sides that are often contrasted in the US discourse on Syria: the Assad regime vs. the people, suggesting that this is the key story line employed in the US discourse.

The words that most frequently occurred in the Russian discourse were ‘humanitarian’, ‘political’, and ‘opposition’. These words occurred at least twice as often in the Russian discourse as in the US discourse. These findings suggest that Russian discourse focused on the opposition as the main political actor to be discursively constructed, (as opposed to Assad or the regime as in the US discourse). The other two frequently found terms suggest that Russia focused on instrumental approaches to discussions in the UNSC, seeking to find political solutions and solve humanitarian questions.

The first conclusion from the statistical analysis is that the US and Russian discourses were defined by very different signifiers, despite the fact that they addressed the same events. This shows a high likelihood that a discursive struggle occurred between two very different discourses. There was little in common between the two discourses in terms of their key floating signifiers, and the most common words found in one discourse were sparsely used in the other. The only signifier that overlapped was the term ‘chemical’, which was the only prominent signifier that the two discourses shared.

The diversity and difference of the two discourses was further confirmed in a number of words that were exclusive to one discourse or the other. In the US discourse, these words included humanity, human rights, democracy, brutal, and victims, suggesting a humanitarian-based approach. For the Russian discourse, the exclusive words were sovereign, extremist, and regime change, suggesting a state-centric approach and a concern over extremism and regime change. Additionally, an analysis of the collocates to the word ‘political’ found that the US discourse most often attached it to the word ‘transition’, while the Russian discourse most often attached it to the word ‘process’, betraying two very different approaches.

The most interesting findings were discovered in a comparison of the discourses used following resolutions that were vetoed and the resolutions that were passed. This showed that the signifiers ‘regime’ and ‘Assad’ occurred twice as much in the combined US and Russian discourse following resolutions that were vetoed. Conversely, the signifiers ‘chemical’, ‘weapon’ and ‘humanitarian’ occurred twice as much about passed resolutions. These findings will be further analyzed qualitatively in the next chapter.

**CHAPTER 4. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS**

The quantitative analysis of the previous chapter helped determine which signifiers characterized the US and Russian discourses, and how the attention given to each signifier differed between the two discourses. Additionally, the quantitative analysis identified the terms that were most prevalent in discussions on passed and vetoed resolutions: giving a preliminary understanding of the issues that divided and united the US and Russian positions: ‘Assad’ and ‘regime’ were found to be divisive, while ‘humanitarian’, ‘chemical’, and ‘weapons’ seemed to lead to common ground. These findings will be tested qualitatively in this chapter, with an in-depth textual analysis of the 16 UNSC speeches.

Firstly, the chapter will give an overview of the US and Russian positions on the Syrian conflict based on the discussion of the first Syria-related draft resolution on October 4, 2011. The central story lines of the two discourses will be presented and compared, as well as their positions towards the Assad regime, the opposition, the necessary UNSC action, and their discursive opponent. Secondly, the chapter dissects the 16 draft resolutions themselves, to understand what differed between the 10 passed resolutions and the 6 vetoed draft resolutions. Lastly, the discussions about the 10 passed resolutions will be compared to the discussions of the 6 vetoed resolutions, to determine which aspects of the discourses led to cooperation and which led to conflict.

**4.1 Setting the tone: the first draft resolution on Syria**

The first vote in the UNSC on a Syria-related draft resolution took place on October 4, 2011. This discussion over draft resolution S/2011/612 set the central story lines, positions, and discourses of the US and Russia about the Syrian conflict, which set the tone of all subsequent discussions. The first draft resolution on Syria also became the first Syria-related draft resolution to be vetoed—by Russia and China. The discussion that developed was acrimonious, as the US and Russian representatives traded accusations, proposing vastly different world views and calls for action in regard to the Syrian conflict, thus proposing different sets of discourses--“ensemble[s] of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices.”

The Russian representative rejected the draft resolution’s condemnation of the Syrian regime as a one-sided approach that risked further escalating the conflict. He suggested that the draft resolution was intended to later be used to inspire regime change in Syria, citing the scenario that had enveloped in Libya in 2011. The US representative, meanwhile, stressed the urgency of the situation and argued that the atrocities occurring in Syria demanded a strong response from the UNSC. Generally, Russia based its discourse on a state-centric view of the world, emphasizing sovereignty, while the US based its discourse on the humanitarian imperative, emphasizing democracy. Both discourses were based on vastly different assumptions about the events in Syria, and both envisioned vastly different ideal outcomes.

The context behind the vote on the draft resolution could have predicted the way in which the discursive struggle would develop between the US and Russia. Preceding the vote, both countries had publicly expressed different positions regarding their vision of Syria. As mentioned in the historical context chapter, the US and its allies had publicly called for the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down in August. Russia, meanwhile, had sent an envoy to Syria and expressed confidence in the ability of the Assad regime to reform. In the backdrop, international media attention and pressure had been growing for the UNSC to take some sort of action in response to the escalating situation in Syria.

The examined draft resolution was sponsored by France, Germany, Portugal, and the UK—all strong US allies. Its major component was a list of 5 demands on the Syrian authorities, ranging from a demand to cease violations of human rights to a demand to ensure the safe return of those who had fled violence. Additionally, it demanded that all of sides reject violence and extremism, and it called for an inclusive Syrian-led political process[[67]](#footnote-67). Lastly, it said that the UNSC would review Syria’s implementation of the resolution within 30 days, after which it would consider measures under Article 41 of the UN Charter, which allows for non-military responses, such as economic sanctions.[[68]](#footnote-68)

**4.1.1 Setting the discursive struggle**

In his opening line, the Russian representative Vitaly Churkin stated that the “vote reflects not so much a question of acceptability of wording as a conflict of political approaches.”[[69]](#footnote-69) In essence, his statement identified the vote as a discursive struggle in which arguments over wording belied contrasting understandings of the world. In the Russian speech, the draft resolution was seen as an attempt to break Syrian sovereignty and encourage international intervention. For the US, the draft resolution was framed as being about humanitarian concerns and helping the Syrian people—who had expressed a demand for democracy. In this way, the discursive struggle that developed centered around the Assad regime, the opposition, and the necessary action to be taken by the UNSC. The first critical divergence between the two discourses were their different story lines-- condensed statements summarizing complex narratives, “through which actors try to impose their view of reality on others, suggest certain social positions and practices, and criticize alternative social arrangements.” [[70]](#footnote-70)

**4.1.2 Different story lines**

The central story line employed in the US speech is revealed in the following statement: “This is about whether the Council… will stand with peaceful protesters crying out for freedom or with a regime of thugs with guns that tramples human dignity and human rights.”[[71]](#footnote-71) The story line proposed by the US is of a battle between protesters demanding freedom and an evil regime that is against freedom. Thus, the choice of either/or is presented: the UNSC must choose either the regime or the protestors. A second layer is added to the story in that the events in Syria are framed in the US discourse as being in the context of a regional movement with a sense of inevitability— “a time of sweeping change in the Middle East” in which “people across the region…are pursuing the same universal aspirations.”[[72]](#footnote-72) This story lines assumes that people have universal aspirations—human rights—which draws from the concepts of liberal ideology and democratic theory. It also assumes that there is an inevitability to the historical moment. These two powerful assumptions are central elements of all subsequent US discourse about Syria.

In contrast to this, Russia’s story line claimed that the events in Syria cannot be blamed on the regime but on the opposition, which is not peacefully pursuing freedom. Thus, the Russian storyline represents the polar opposite of the US story line: “the continuation of this tragedy cannot be blamed only on the harsh actions of the authorities. Recent events convincingly show that the radical opposition no longer hides its extremist bent and is relying on terrorist tactics, hoping for foreign sponsors and acting outside of the law.”[[73]](#footnote-73) Thus, the Russian discourse focuses on the vilification of the opposition, rather than the regime. Despite the switch in the object of vilification, the structure of the conflict remains the same as in the US discourse: between the regime and the opposition, though now the latter is seen as the problem rather than the former. Nonetheless, the central floating signifiers in both discourses are the Syrian government, the Syrian opposition, and thus the necessary UNSC response. In the end, the discursive struggle over the meanings of the regime and the opposition is waged in order to affect the UNSC response. A more thorough look at the meanings invested in these signs will be made in the following sections.

**4.1.3 Government**

A textual analysis shows that the most common signifier attached to the term ‘regime’ in the US speech is ‘brutal’. In the US discourse, the Assad regime “deliberately unleashed violence, torture and persecution,” “knows no limits,” “refuses to meet its international obligations,” and its “promises of reform are empty.”[[74]](#footnote-74) The regime is characterized by the metaphor “killing machine,” and the allegation is made that “the Syrian Government’s appalling actions might amount to crimes against humanity”—a powerful metaphor for intolerable crimes in the international context[[75]](#footnote-75). Thus, the signifier ‘regime’ is painted in a wholly negative light.

Russia, which gives much less prominence to the regime in its speech, also condemns the regime’s use of force as “unacceptable.” However, Russia qualifies this by saying: “we are not advocates of the Al-Assad regime.” Meanwhile, the metaphors used in reference to the regime are much less striking or negative. The government’s actions are called “repression of protests by peaceful demonstrators” and “the harsh actions of the authorities.” This is a far cry from the vivid vilifications present in the US discourse about the Assad government.

**4.1.4 Opposition**

The US discourse identifies the opposition as “peaceful protesters, human rights defenders and their families” and “courageous people” that are “crying out for freedom” and “yearning for liberty and universal human rights.”[[76]](#footnote-76) Taking into account the previously mentioned characterization of the regime and the central story line of the regime against the protesters, it is clear which side the US is supporting in the conflict. Overall, there is a strong dualism present in the US discourse, contrasting the brutal regime and peaceful protesters.

Russia places greater emphasis on the ‘opposition’ signifier in its discourse, and the word comes up more often, as identified in the quantitative chapter. In contrast to the US presentation of the Syrian opposition as one block with universal aspirations, Russia divides the opposition into three blocks: those who seek foreign intervention, the patriotic opposition that is against foreign intervention, and extremists.

The first block is presented in the following statement: “a significant number of Syrians do not agree with the demand for a quick regime change and would rather see gradual changes.” This statement does four critical things: 1) it introduces the term ‘regime change’ into the discourse, 2) it contrasts regime change with ‘gradual changes,’ 3) it implies that there are those in the opposition that seek regime change (rather than peace), 4) and it also states that many Syrians don’t want regime change. Points 1 and 3 are designed to discredit the opposition by questioning their democratic credentials, while points 2 and 4 are designed to increase the credibility of the regime, and paint it as the only vehicle for genuine ‘democratic’ change.

The Russian discourse further divides the opposition in the discourse, by saying that there are: “constructive patriotic groups of the Syrian opposition who are concerned about the fate of their country and who have said that they want no foreign interference in their internal affairs.” Thus, Russia contrasts those in the opposition who seek foreign interference with those in the opposition who are ‘patriotic’ and concerned about the fate of their country.

Lastly, the Russian discourse adds a third layer of meaning to the ‘opposition’ signifier, saying that: “the radical opposition no longer hides its extremist bent and is relying on terrorist tactics, hoping for foreign sponsors and acting outside of the law.” This statement collates ‘radical’ and ‘opposition.’ Thus, in the Russian discourse, there is a patriotic opposition, a radical opposition, and a (presumably) an unpatriotic but unradical opposition. The latter assumption can be made based on the postructuralist theory—all signs are defined by their opposite; thus, by dividing out a ‘patriotic’ group, it is assumed that an ‘unpatriotic’ group remains. The same can be said of radical. This discursive complexity dilutes the universality applied to the opposition in the US discourse.

**4.1.5 Necessity for action**

Ultimately, the discursive struggle over the signs ‘regime’ and ‘opposition’ is waged in order to impact the action that the UNSC will take on the Syrian conflict. Just as the discourses differ about these key terms, they also present two very different policy prescriptions.

The US clearly states that its goal is to “impose tough, *targeted sanctions and an arms embargo*.” It uses liberal rhetoric by stating that the conflict is an “urgent moral challenge” but also realist rhetoric to say that it’s a “growing threat to regional peace and security.” The US uses the metaphor that there is a “chorus of condemnation” in the international community that necessitates action, and urges the “Council to assume its responsibilities…to the Syrian people” to defend “the lives of innocent civilians.”

Russia claims that its goal is to promote an “even-handed and comprehensive dialogue aimed at achieving *civil peace and national agreement* by reforming the socioeconomic and political life of the country.” This goal is preceded with the qualification that at the heart of Russia’s rival draft resolution is “the logic of respect for the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria as well as the principle of non-intervention, including military, in its affairs.” These are two terms that are not found in the US discourse. At the same time, the moral imperative is non-existent in the Russian discourse. Interestingly, the stated goal of the US is punitive: to impose sanctions and an arms embargo, while the Russian goal is supportive: to achieve civil peace and national agreement.

**4.1.6 Attacking the other discourse**

The discursive struggle for hegemony is evident in the attacks and conscious juxtaposition of the two discourses in relation to one another. Both discourses claim exclusive access to the truth, and question the fundamental assumptions of the other discourse.

The US representative makes several criticisms of Russia’s veto, both on moral and reputational grounds. The story line provided for Russia’s actions is that it is one of the “Council members [that] have chosen to look the other way” and “sought…to weaken and strip bare any texts that would have defended the lives of innocent civilians.”[[77]](#footnote-77) In this story line, Russia is said to have chosen to ignore “calls for democracy and instead prop up desperate, cruel dictators.”[[78]](#footnote-78) Russia’s arguments for vetoing the draft resolution are said to be a “cheap ruse by those who would rather sell arms to the Syrian regime than stand with the Syrian people.”[[79]](#footnote-79) Russia is threatened with reputational damage, as “those who oppose this draft resolution and give cover to a brutal regime will have to answer to the Syrian people.”[[80]](#footnote-80) The US rejects Russia’s discursive story line about the draft resolution by expressly saying that “this is not about military intervention; this is not about Libya.”[[81]](#footnote-81)

Russia attacks the proposed draft resolution as being based on the “philosophy of confrontation” and claims that “the situation in Syria cannot be considered in the Council separately from the Libyan experience.”[[82]](#footnote-82) Russia constantly cites the “well-known events in North Africa, that can only put us on our guard” and “how a Security Council resolution turned into its opposite,” in which the “demand for a quick ceasefire turned into a full-fledged civil war, the humanitarian, social, economic and military consequences of which transcend Libyan borders.”[[83]](#footnote-83) It calls this approach “violent regime change,” that is masked under the “responsibility to protect.”[[84]](#footnote-84) Lastly, it uses a threat image in regard to what could happen to Syria: “The collapse of Syria as a result of a civil war would have a very destructive impact on the situation in the entire Middle East.”[[85]](#footnote-85)

**4.1.7 Conclusion based on the first resolution**

Based on an analysis of the first draft resolution, a discursive struggle clearly developed between the US and Russia over Syria, in which opposing story lines, assumptions, and prescriptions were proposed on the Syrian Civil War. Both discourses claimed exclusive access to the truth, and questioned the fundamental assumptions of the other discourse—leading to conflict. Meanwhile, the structures of the story lines and the central floating signifiers remained the same in both discourses: the regime, the opposition, and the necessary action.

The story line proposed by the US suggested a conflict between peaceful protesters and a brutal regime, on top of the assumption of a regional democratic wave that would inevitably bring change—strongly influencing the US position. Russia presented a similar structure for the central story line—the regime vs. the protesters—but attached very different meanings to the regime and the protesters, which inverted the narrative, placing blame away from the regime to the protesters. Thus, the two discourses presented similar story line structure, but totally opposite views of the opposition and the regime, leading to different policy prescriptions.

In the US discourse, blame was entirely placed on the regime, which was presented in a wholly negative light. For Russia, the regime was not entirely to blame for the violence. The US discourse contrasted the brutal regime with a wholly benevolent opposition, providing a dualistic either/or choice between the two. Russia’s discourse did not view the Syrian opposition as one block, as in the US discourse, rather, it divided the opposition into three groups: the patriotic opposition, the radical opposition, and the unpatriotic but unradical opposition.

Ultimately, the discursive struggle over meanings attached to the regime and the opposition was waged in order to affect the UNSC response. For the US, the stated goal was punitive—to impose sanctions and an arms embargo, for Russia, the stated goal is supportive—to achieve civil peace and national agreement. These polar opposite goals proved impossible to reconcile, because their integrative parts—assumptions over the key floating signifiers—were fundamentally different. Judging from the first UNSC debate, there was nothing for the US and Russia on which to compromise. Moreover, the spirit of cooperation was dampened by vitriolic attacks between the representative of the two countries, which questioned the motivations of the other and suggest ulterior motives, thus betraying the complete absence of trust. The US claimed Russia’s actions were explained by a desire to sell arms to the regime, while Russia claimed that the US was seeking regime change. Interestingly, Russia’s expressed support for Assad and the US’s expressed criticism of Assad played a role in entrenching the grounds to believe in the ulterior motives of the other. Ultimately, the first discussion proves that the US and Russian discourses were irreconcilable.

**4.2 A comparison of vetoed and passed resolutions**

This section will analyze the 6 vetoed UNSC resolutions to establish the commonalities between them. Afterwards, the commonalities found in the 6 vetoed resolutions will be compared to the 10 passed resolutions. What discursive aspects of the resolutions led to a Russian veto, and which led to mutual acceptance by Russia and the US? This section will attempt to find the overlap between the two positions. The findings will be the basis for analysis of the rest of the discussions about Syria in the UNSC.

**4.2.1 Vetoed resolutions**

**S/2011/612, October 4, 2011**

The defining feature of the first resolution is that it almost wholly condemns the Syrian authorities for the violence, which corresponds to the US story line identified above and counteracts the Russian storyline. It issues 5 demands on the Syrian authorities, and strongly condemns their human rights violations. One point of the resolution “urges all sides to reject violence and extremism,” but in neither mentions the opposition by name, nor is it receive significant attention compared to the rest of the resolution.

The second defining feature of the draft resolution is that it promises to “to review Syria’s implementation of this resolution within 30 days and to consider its options, including measures under Article 41 of the Charter of the United Nations.”[[86]](#footnote-86) This article lists UNSC measures not involving the use of armed force that can be employed in the event of a breach of peace.

**S/2012/77, February 4, 2011**

The second draft resolution exhibited similar intentions as the first, though some of its more divisive rhetoric seemed to have been toned down to secure Russia’s acquiescence. This resolution also largely condemns the Syrian authorities and directs most of its demands on them. At the same time, it gives attention to violence perpetrated by non-state actors—moving closer to the Russian discourse:

*“Condemns all violence, irrespective of where it comes from, and in this regard demands that all parties in Syria, including armed groups, immediately stop all violence or reprisals, including attacks against State institutions”[[87]](#footnote-87)*

Furthermore, it does not mention Article 41 by name as a possible reaction to non-compliance. It merely decides that “in the event of non-compliance, to consider further measures.”[[88]](#footnote-88) Despite the weakening of the language of the resolution, it was still vetoed by Russia.

**S/2012/538, July 19, 2012**

This resolution was intended to pressure the immediate implementation of the six-point plan and endorse the Final Communique from Geneva, both of which were strongly supported by Russia. Despite this, the resolution was also vetoed. One point that stands out as a possible reason is the provision of automatic steps to implement Article 41:

“Decides that, if the Syrian authorities have not fully complied with paragraph 4 above within ten days, then it shall impose immediately measures under Article 41 of the UN Charter**.**”[[89]](#footnote-89)

**S/2014/348, May 22, 2014**

The next vetoed resolution took two years to occur, with two successfully passed resolutions in between. This resolution was intended to refer the Syrian conflict to the International Criminal Court. Interestingly, it condemns and mentions human rights abuses both by the Syrian authorities and by non-State armed groups, and it also issues a separate point making a demand on these groups to cooperate with investigations.[[90]](#footnote-90) This seems to be another example of a slide towards accepting the tenets of the Russian discourse, though it may also be the consequence of changing realities on the ground and the rise of extremism in the ranks of the Syrian opposition as the war progressed.

**S/2016/846, October 8, 2016**

Another two-year gap occurred until the next vetoed resolution, with 4 passed resolutions in between. It was intended to secure a cease-fire in the battle for Aleppo. Unlike previous resolutions, it did nothing to single out the Syrian regime, and ubiquitously referred to “all parties of the conflict.” This may reflect the fact that the war was more symmetrical than in the first two years, and thus that there were two parties that could be condemned.

The resolution also expressed the intent to “to take further measures under the Charter of the United Nations in the event of non-compliance with this resolution by any party to the Syrian domestic conflict,” though it did not specify what exact actions.

**S/2016/1026, December 5, 2016**

The last veto examined in this research was another attempt to secure a cease-fire in Aleppo. As in the previous resolution, it condemns and makes demands on all parties. Additionally, it calls for all parties to comply to a key Russian demand:

“cease all collaboration with ISIL, Al-Nusra Front (ANF), and other terrorist groups, as designated by the Security Council; and further demands that all combatants not designated by the Security Council take steps to separate expeditiously from terrorists designated by the Security Council, and also demands members of the International Syria Support Group to dissuade any party from fighting in collaboration with terrorists designated by the Security Council.”[[91]](#footnote-91)

Unlike previous resolutions, it makes no mention of possible UNSC actions under the charter. Despite these concessions to the Russian position, the resolution was also vetoed.

**4.2.2 Passed resolutions**

An analysis of the 10 passed resolutions shows that they mostly focused on instrumental concerns. These included establishing the UN observer mission in Syria (Resolution 2043), adopting the 6-point plan for peace (2042) and the Vienna statements (2254), ensuring humanitarian aid (2139) and a temporary ceasefire (2268), establishing a monitoring mechanism (2165) and extending and renewing the OPCW mandate (2314, 2319). However, two passed resolutions break from the trend, because they condemn the Syrian authorities and threaten UNSC sanctions against the regime.

This includes Resolution 2118 on September 27, 2013, which led to a US-Russia agreement to dismantle Syria’s chemical weapons, and Resolution 2209 on March 6, 2015, which condemned apparent chemical weapons attacks in Syria. Both resolutions threatened that in the event of non-compliance, measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter would be imposed by the UNSC. Apart from non-military sanctions under Article 41, this also includes Article 42, which includes military actions by air, sea, or land forces to restore peace. This shows that despite Russia’s relative rhetorical consistency in defense of the Syrian regime, international norms such as the use of chemical weapons were nonetheless important for the Russian side.

**4.2.3 Conclusion**

Judging exclusively from the wording of the vetoed resolutions by Russia, several common characteristics are found. Resolutions referring to automatic UN sanctions, any mentions of Article 41 of the UN charter, or resolutions that wholly placed blame on the Syrian authorities, were all red flags for the Russian veto. Additionally, resolutions that threatened the Syrian regime, such as the resolution referring Syria to the International Criminal Court, seemed to be a cause for the veto.

Over time, however, there was an apparent shift in the wording of the resolutions. Firstly, the Syrian regime was singled out increasingly less for blame, and secondly, threats of UNSC sanctions were toned down and became practically non-existent. This was most evident in the last two resolutions, which attempted to obtain a cease-fire in Aleppo, without either blaming the Syrian regime or threatening sanctions. An analysis of the vetoed resolutions thus suggests that apart from wording, the context or events on the ground may have been stronger contributing factors behind the Russian veto as the conflict progressed. Additionally, the only examples in which Russia was willing to consider shifting its position and condemning the Syrian regime were in events of chemical attacks. Thus, the only overlap between the very different discourses of the United States and Russia is chemical weapons: which allow for Russia to compromise on its staunch defense of the sovereignty of Syria.

**4.3 The battle for hegemony, discourse structuration, and cooperation**

The discussion over the first draft resolution on Syria clearly established the fact that the US and Russia proposed two competing narratives on the events in Syria, based on opposing assumptions, and thus suggesting different prescriptions for the necessary UNSC action. The battle for hegemony in the UNSC was thus set, and subsequent discussions show that either side stressed their narrative and attempted to persuade the rest of the UNSC members to accept their particular course of action. These were attempts at discourse structuration--to dominate the way a given social unit conceptualizes the world and to solidify this in particular institutional arrangements. This discourse structuration was most evident in the attempts to alter the meanings attached to key floating signifiers, such as the opposition and the Assad regime, by both sides.

Overall, the dynamic demonstrated was one of ebbs and flows in cooperation and disagreement. The chart at the end of Chapter 3 shows the following sequence: 2 vetoed resolutions, 2 passed, 1 vetoed, 2 passed, 1 vetoed, 4 passed, 1 vetoed, 2 passed, 1 vetoed. The dynamic shows that despite the many differences between the US and Russian positions, points of compromise were frequent, and despite cooperation being routinely derailed, this did not prevent the two sides from continuing to find points of agreement. In fact, compromise was achieved more often than not, with 10 resolutions passing versus 6 resolutions being vetoed. This may partly be explained by an institutional propensity towards not proposing resolutions that will fail in the Security Council, but in terms of the discursive struggle, it is significant.

At times, the discursive struggle resulted in stalemate, as the analysis of the 6 vetoed resolutions above demonstrated. The analysis shows that the key point of difference was the Assad regime: Russia clearly demonstrated that it was unwilling to allow any serious criticism or international sanctions to occur, fearing regime change. The US exhibited frustration over this, accusing Russia of condoning human rights violations and a bloody dictatorship. However, points of cooperation also emerged between the two sides, despite the fundamental differences in the positions. The following section will examine the discourses behind these two outcomes, to illustrate what aspects of the discourses led to cooperation, and what aspects led to conflict.

**4.3.1 The discourse of disagreement: Libya**

As mentioned in the analysis of the vetoed draft resolutions, the key issues that led to Russia’s veto were the provision of automatic sanctions following non-compliance of resolutions, and a disproportionate critique of the Assad government compared to the opposition. Because the Russian side was the only one that utilized the veto, these arguments will be examined in the Russian discourse. The substantive issues of disagreement were accompanied by rhetorical strategies that illustrated this disagreement. Most importantly, Russia consistently raised its objections about US attempts to institutionalize sanctions against human rights violations occurring within a sovereign state. Russia’s discourse constantly raised the example of Libya, and its fears that NATO’s intervention in Libya under UN approval could be used in Syria and thus set an institutional precedent. In essence, Russia was resisting the discourse structuration of the responsibility to protect. Russia mentioned the Libya scenario 4 times, 3 of which coincided with a veto. Russia’s speech on the first draft resolution most fully expressed its argument:

*“The situation in Syria cannot be considered in the Council separately from the Libyan experience. The international community is alarmed by statements that compliance with Security Council resolutions on Libya in the NATO interpretation is a model for the future actions of NATO in implementing the responsibility to protect. It is easy to see that todays Unified Protector model could happen in Syria […] For us, Members of the United Nations, including in terms of a precedent, it is very important to know how the resolution was implemented and how a Security Council resolution turned into its opposite. The demand for a quick ceasefire turned into a full-fledged civil war, the humanitarian, social, economic and military consequences of which transcend Libyan borders. The situation in connection with the no-fly zone has morphed into the bombing of oil refineries, television stations and other civilian sites. The arms embargo has morphed into a naval blockade in western Libya, including a blockade of humanitarian goods…These types of models should be excluded from global practices once and for all.”[[92]](#footnote-92)*

Thus, Russia establishes that in its understanding, demands for a quick ceasefire, a no-fly zone, or an arms embargo are red flags that have the potential to lead to military intervention and civil war. In the resolution that endorsed the 6-point plan and initiated the UNSMIS, Russia qualified its approval of the resolution by again citing the Libya example:

*“Any deviation, whether from the resolutions provisions or in their interpretation, will be unacceptable. The Libyan model should remain forever in the past.”[[93]](#footnote-93)*

Russia’s veto of the draft resolution on May 22, 2014, which called to refer the Syrian civil war to the International Criminal Court, was again based on the Libya example:

*“One cannot ignore the fact that the last time the Security Council referred a case to the International Criminal Court (ICC) the Libyan dossier, through resolution 1970 (2011) it did not help resolve the crisis, but instead added fuel to the flames of conflict. After the cessation of hostilities, the ICC did not exactly rise to the occasion, to put it mildly. It did not contribute to a return of normalcy or justice in Libya, and instead evaded the most pressing issues.”[[94]](#footnote-94)*

Russia’s veto of the draft resolution on October 8, 2016, again returned to the same argument:

*“We all know the background to the Syrian crisis. After destroying Libya and considering that a great success, the troika of the three Western permanent members of the Security Council turned on Syria.”[[95]](#footnote-95)*

Thus, in the Russian discourse, the responsibility to protect, referral to the ICC, demands for a cease-fire, and an arms embargo, are all seen as malevolent attempts at regime change. The US representative replied to the charge once, during the discussions of the first draft resolution.

*“Let there be no doubt: this is not about military intervention; this is not about Libya. That is a cheap ruse by those who would rather sell arms to the Syrian regime than stand with the Syrian people.”[[96]](#footnote-96)*

Discussions of the Libya precedent are thus seen as one fundamental point of divergence between the US and Russian discourse. It exemplified the atmosphere of distrust between the two countries, and revealed mutual accusations of ulterior motives. In essence, Russia’s citing of the Libya example was an attempt to cut off any attempt of the institutionalization of interventionism in the UNSC. The fight in the institution was over discourse structuration.

**4.3.1.1 Taking the Russian position into account**

One argument that frequently came up in the Russian discourse was a demand to have its position be “taken into account”. Apart from the substantive issues that Russia raised over Assad and its nonacceptance of intervention, this phrase was used in four speeches. Twice it was used to justify a veto, when Russia claimed its position had not been taken into account, and twice it was used to qualify Russia’s approval for a resolution. In this way, it can be seen that Russia was vying to have a seat at the table when it comes to taking decisions in Syria.

Russia’s first veto was justified using this argument:

*“Our proposals for wording on the non-acceptability of foreign military intervention were not taken into account, and, based on the well-known events in North Africa, that can only put us on our guard.”[[97]](#footnote-97)*

It was also used as an argument in Russia’s veto of the second draft resolution:

*“The sponsors of the draft resolution did not take into account our proposed amendments to the draft resolution to the effect that the Syrian opposition must distance itself from extremist groups that are committing acts of violence, and calling on States and all those with any relevant opportunity to use their influence to stop those groups committing acts of violence.”*

In the opposite direction, on February 22, 2014:

*“The Russian Federation supported the resolution just adopted (resolution 2139 (2014)) because, in the process of negotiating its text, many Russian considerations were taken into account, and the resulting document was thus of a balanced nature.”[[98]](#footnote-98)*

And on July 14, 2014:

*“We were able to support the resolution after sponsors took into account our key priorities.”[[99]](#footnote-99)*

**4.3.1.2. Summary of Russia’s vetoes**

Russia’s primary motivation behind vetoing resolutions rested on the following factors: a substantive motivation to prevent the weakening of the Assad regime, a symbolic motivation to prevent the institutionalization of regime change and the discursive structuration of humanitarian intervention in the Security Council, and the symbolic motivation to make sure that its position was taken into account as an integral power-broker at the Security Council. Given the consensus-based nature of decision making in the Security Council and Russia’s right to a veto as a permanent member, the country was able to ensure that its demands were met. Ultimately, this strategy was able to successfully resist the attempts of institutionalizing human rights-based discourse in the institution.

**4.3.2 Discourse of agreement**

Despite the acrimonious rhetoric and discursive struggles that led to vetoed resolutions and conflict, the US and Russia reached periods of cooperation in which significant attempts were made to resolve the civil war. Several waves of peace initiatives gave hopes for US-Russia cooperation that would lead to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Among these were Kofi Annan’s 6-point plan and the establishment of the UNSMIS monitors, the Geneva Communique, the resolution to eliminate chemical weapons in Syria based on Resolution 2118, and a 1.5 year period in which 4 resolutions were successfully agreed, which established a monitoring mechanism, condemned chemical attacks, adopted the Vienna statements (a US-Russia initiative), and secured a cease-fire. Sadly, the hopes raised by these initiatives were followed by a breakdown in negotiations as the two sides returned to their differences. This was often precipitated by escalations in violence—either by the regime or by the rebels. At other times, agreements between the two countries were reached by ignoring divisive issues like the future of Assad. One telling example was the signing of the Geneva Communique. Just days after the agreement, statements by US and Russian representatives revealed that they had very different understandings of how it would apply to Assad’s future. Nevertheless, objective factors outside of the control of the US and Russia also played a role in derailing negotiation efforts.

As the conflict progressed, several circumstances brought the US and Russian positions closer. The biggest agreement may have been the September 2013 deal on the dismantling of Syria’s chemical weapons—which came at the 11th hour following off-the-cuff remarks by Secretary Kerry that dismantling the weapons could stave a US intervention. In this instance, the two countries overcame their differences and asserted the international norm that banned the use of chemical weapons. This became the first time that Russia accepted the inclusion of Chapter VII provisions into a resolution. Though the agreement did not entirely erase instances of chemical weapons usage in Syria, it nevertheless showed that the two countries were united in their resolve to prohibit chemical weapons usage despite their differences. This showed that despite its discourse in support of the Assad regime, Russia was willing to lessen its support in the face of certain international norms.

**4.3.2.1 Rise in extremism brings discourses closer together**

As has been noted, the dynamics within the Security Council changed as the conflict in Syria progressed. New circumstances were able to bring about slight adjustments in the meanings assigned by the two countries to the key floating signifiers. One such circumstance was the increasing number of Islamic militants fighting in Syria—including the newly emerged ISIS and the al-Nusra Front. A discourse analysis of the discussions in the UNSC shows that while the early resolutions attempted to largely blame the Assad regime for the violence in Syria, the later resolutions began to condemn and make demands on “all parties” involved in the conflict, including “non-State armed groups” and even “terrorists.” On this front, it seems that Russia’s early insistence to include a condemnation of extremists in resolutions had succeeded in changing the UNSC institution’s approach to the Syrian civil war. While the Russian discourse consistently mentioned “terrorists” beginning in 2011, continuing in 2012-2016, the US discourse only began to mention terrorists in 2014. The chart below shows the increasing number of usages of the lemma ‘terrorist’ as the conflict progressed.

**4.3.2.2 Overcoming the discursive divide**

On several occasions, the US and Russian representatives called for constructive solutions to solve specific problems in the Syrian civil war, outside of ideological divides or political differences. This occurred during discussions for the provision of humanitarian aid, establishing a cease-fire, setting up the UNSMIS, and extending the mandate of the OPCW. These moments showed that the two countries could overcome their differences in discourse and achieve results.

In the resolution on humanitarian aid on February 22, 2014, the US representative expresses this sentiment:

*“The resolution adopted today and the day-to-day reality in Syria are not about politics or ideology. We came here as representatives from around the world to do what we could to try to help people who are in desperate need of help to live and breathe as we do. That is all.”[[100]](#footnote-100)*

The Russian representative also appealed to this logic in the meeting on November 17, 2016:

*“We once again call on Council members to set aside our political differences and join forces as part of a broad counter-terrorist coalition in order to eradicate this devastating phenomenon.”[[101]](#footnote-101)*

**4.3.2.3 Spirit of Cooperation**

Despite the mutual recriminations, there were moments in which the US and Russian representatives expressed thanks for the efforts of their partner. This shows that the spirit of international cooperation survived in the institution.

On December 18, 2015, in a discussion of the ceasefire achieved by the passed resolution, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov praised his vis-à-vis:

*“At the outset, I wish to thank John Kerry for his initiative to convene the third meeting of the International Syria Support Group today in New York, which has brought us together here in this Chamber.”[[102]](#footnote-102)*

On September 27, 2013, upon the signing of resolution dismantling Syria’s chemical weapons, US Secretary John Kerry expressed a similar sentiment:

*“I want to thank Foreign Minister Lavrov for his personal efforts and cooperation beginning before Geneva and continuing through this week so that we could find common ground […] the Council has shown that when we put aside politics for the common good, we are still capable of doing big things.”[[103]](#footnote-103)*

Samantha Power offered a similar message upon the renewal of the OPCW mandate in November 2016:

*“I offer my sincere thanks for the spirit in which Russia carried out these negotiations.”[[104]](#footnote-104)*

**4.3.3 Conclusion**

The dynamics of the US-Russia relationship in the UNSC on Syria was largely characterized by a discursive struggle for hegemony. The root cause for this struggle were two competing discourses with differing story lines and prescriptions for the conflict in Syria. Each discourse presented universal assertions about the conflict in an attempt at discourse structuration that would enshrine their understandings of the Syrian conflict in the institutional arrangements of the UNSC. The US attempted to institutionalize humanitarian intervention, while Russia attempted to institutionalize the sanctity of sovereignty. The key points of difference were attitudes towards the Assad regime and the proper course of UNSC action in Syria. Ultimately, both sides failed to either dissolve the antagonism or solidify their discourse in the institutional arrangements of the Security Council.

The main reason for this was Russia’s use of the veto in an institutional setting that requires consensus for passing a resolution. Russia consistently resisted US attempts of discourse structuration in the UNSC, and demanded that its position was “taken into account” in all passed resolutions. Ultimately, Russia succeeded with its main goal of preventing a resolution that would authorize an international intervention in Syria. Russia achieved 3 things: a substantive goal of prevent the weakening of the Assad regime, an institutional goal of preventing the acceptance of regime change, and a symbolic goal of making sure that its position was taken into account as an integral power-broker at the Security Council. However, this dynamic also led to the inability of the UNSC to reach a peaceful settlement to the Syrian Civil War and the disjointed nature of cooperation and disagreement that characterized resolutions on Syria.

Despite the acrimonious discursive battle and the fact that the central story lines of both the US and Russia remained largely consistent in opposition to one another, periods of cooperation emerged which led to significant UNSC resolutions on the Syrian Civil War. These moments were most likely to occur when the two countries resolved to put aside their political and ideological differences and achieve constructive results. In these instances, the sense of common purpose between the US and Russian representatives in the UNSC was evident. This was exemplified in thanks given by the two sides to each other when reaching important resolutions. One example of the common purpose was a resolve to prevent the violation of the international norm prohibiting the use of chemical weapons. The September 2013 agreement to dismantle Syria’s chemical weapons may have been the greatest example of US-Russia cooperation in the duration of the war. Apart from chemical weapons, other points of agreement included a condemnation of terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al-Nusra, which became enshrined in all of the later resolutions about the Syrian conflict. Apart from this, other points of agreement included humanitarian aid, the provision UN monitors, and securing a ceasefire. Thus, it was seen that the US and Russian discourses could be adjusted for cooperation: Russia was able to change US perceptions of the opposition, adding a ‘terrorist’ qualifier to future UNSC resolutions, while the US was able to secure Russia’s condemnation of the chemical attacks of the Assad regime, and the provision of an article threatening Chapter VII sanctions. It was at these points of compromise over signifiers that cooperation was most likely to occur. However, ultimately, every period of cooperation were derailed and the relationship returned to its normal phase of conflict. The latest example of this was the siege of Aleppo at the end of 2016, which exposed the fundamental interests and differences between the US and Russia.

**CONCLUSION**

The theory of discursive struggle best exemplifies why US-Russia diplomatic efforts in the Security Council failed to bring peace to Syria. The analysis showed that the discourses of the two countries were involved in a struggle for hegemony in the UNSC institution. They identified different key floating signifiers, displaying very different understandings of what was important about the conflict in Syria. Within these floating signifiers, they attached different meanings that precipitated the difficulty of coming to a common position. Their central story lines and metaphors revealed different discourses, which were employed consistently throughout the conflict.

The main cause for the failure of the US and Russia to find a diplomatic solution to the Syrian Civil War was thus the consistency with which the two sides stuck to their initial assessments of the situation in the early days of the conflict. The discourses that the two sides established during the first UNSC discussion on a draft resolution in October 2011 revealed fundamentally different story lines that set the stage for a discursive struggle over the meanings of the key signifiers: the Assad regime, the opposition, and the necessary UNSC action. Subsequent analysis showed that these elements changed little as the conflict progressed; rather, the struggle to influence UNSC action on Syria drove the wedge between the countries further, as the two countries vied for hegemony in the institution. While brief periods of cooperation saw the two discourses compromise on certain signifiers, these were non-essential signifiers like terrorism and chemical weapons, and they were brought about by sudden changes in circumstances that receded over time, leaving the two discourses to return to their base state of confrontation based on the key signifiers. The assessment shows that unless the US and Russian discourses are willing to compromise on the base meanings that they assign to their central signifiers on the situation in Syria, long-lasting cooperation will be impossible. The specific findings of the research are outlined below.

**Quantitative findings**

The statistical analysis of the most frequent lemmas in the AntConc program showed that each discourse emphasized completely different floating signifiers, thus defining the situation in Syria in significantly different ways and making a discursive struggle over meaning likely. The most frequently used terms (signifiers) in the US discourse were ‘people’, ‘Assad’, and ‘regime’, as well as ‘chemical’ and ‘weapons’. The most frequently used terms in the Russian discourse were ‘opposition’ and ‘terror’, as well as ‘humanitarian’ and ‘political’. The only term that overlapped in the two discourses was ‘chemical’. These terms defined the two positions and were used in a consistent way throughout the time period (explicated below).

A number of important terms that were exclusively used in one discourse or the other were also identified. For the US these were ‘humanity’, ‘human rights’, ‘democracy’, ‘brutal’, and ‘victims’, while for Russia they were ‘sovereign’, ‘extremist’, and ‘regime change’. Collocates to the word ‘political’ showed that the US used it most often in the phrase ‘political transition’, while Russia used it most often in the phrase ‘political process’—in a clear example of how two different meanings were attached to the same signifier.

Additionally, a comparative analysis of the discussions showed that the terms ‘Assad’ and ‘regime’ had the highest statistical correlation to a vetoed resolution, while the terms ‘chemical’, ‘weapon’, and ‘humanitarian’ had the highest statistical correlation to a passed resolution. These findings were corroborated by the qualitative analysis, which gave context to the terms and helped identify and comprehend the discursive struggle between the US and Russia.

**Qualitative findings**

A discourse analysis of the first discussion in October 2011 showed that the US and Russia proposed significantly different discourses regarding the situation in Syria, with different central story lines, metaphors, and prescriptions. The three signifiers that showed the greatest divergence and exemplified the discursive struggle were the regime, the opposition, and the necessary course of action for the UNSC—which subsequently became the battleground for all future discussions about Syria. The US proposed punitive measures on the Assad regime based on the logic of human rights, while Russia called for support of the regime’s reforms based on the logic of a respect for sovereignty. Following from the findings of the quantitative analysis, the US set the central story line as being a battle between the ‘people’ and the ‘Assad’ ‘regime’ (the most frequent US terms), employing the terms ‘victims’, ‘human rights’, and ‘democracy’—all terms which were exclusive to the US discourse. Meanwhile, Russia set its central story line around blaming the ‘opposition’ for ‘terror’ (the most frequent Russian terms) and was most wary of ‘regime change’, Syria’s ‘sovereignty’, and combating ‘extremist’ (the terms exclusive to the Russian discourse). Furthermore, the first resolution identified the discursive struggle between the two sides in verbal recriminations between the US and Russian representatives, who questioned the key story lines of their opponent. Russia claimed that the discourse of the US masked a desire for regime change, while the US claimed the Russia’s discourse masked a desire to supply the Assad regime with weapons. These fundamental differences in discourse set the stage for the difficulties in agreeing a common UNSC position on Syria in the subsequent discussions.

A study of the vetoed and passed resolutions confirmed the statistical findings that disagreement was most likely to occur over a resolution focusing blame on the Assad regime, and cooperation was most likely to occur on resolutions focusing on humanitarian solutions and chemical weapons. Russia’s veto was consistent in cases when: resolutions referred to automatic UN sanctions, mentioned Article 41 of the UN charter, or placed the blame for the violence largely on the Syrian authorities.

Subsequent discourse analysis of the rest of the discussions showed that the identified signifiers and story lines remained relatively consistent in the US and Russian discourses—thus being the main cause for the failure of the US and Russia to find a diplomatic solution to the war in Syria. Russia’s goals in vetoing were identified as a desire to prevent a repetition of the scenario of humanitarian intervention that had occurred in Libya, and a desire to have its position “taken into account” in the wording of resolutions.

Despite the discursive struggle, periods of cooperation occurred in which political and ideological divides were put aside in favor of constructive agreements. There were more passed resolutions (10) than vetoed resolutions (6), and the two sides displayed rhetoric that emphasized cooperation and common goals in the UN when they thanked each other’s representative for their initiatives. These periods of cooperation usually related to non-essential signifiers that often occurred because of unpredicted events that were outside of the main story lines, such as chemical attacks or the rise of ISIS These periods led to small shifts towards cooperation between the two discourses—the US increasingly acknowledged the presence of terrorists in the ranks of the opposition, while Russia acknowledged that chemical weapons violations were a justifiable reason for threatening Syria’s sovereignty with measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. However, cooperation was always followed by a return to discursive struggle as the essential question about the future Assad regime and the necessary UNSC action on Syria returned. The US and Russia ultimately stuck to their central arguments on Syria, thus leading to their failure to resolve the Syrian Civil War.

Given the consensus-based nature of decision making in the Security Council and Russia’s willingness to use its veto, the country was able to more fully achieve its goals in the institution. These goals were to: prevent the weakening of the Assad regime by UNSC sanctions, prevent the institutionalization of regime change and the discursive structuration of humanitarian intervention in the UNSC, and ensure that its position was taken into account as an integral power-broker at the Security Council. Whether or not this development was positive or negative for the UNSC as a body will be determined in future research. One negative side-effect is that because of Russian and US discursive consistency, the two sides failed to end the Syrian Civil War. At the same time, the institution showed that it was a forum for real international debate over fundamental issues.

Any future possibility of cooperation between the two sides in the UNSC will require significant shifts in the discourses of Russia and the US, which appears unlikely. For the two sides to come to an agreement, either Russia will need to accept a UNSC resolution that targets Assad with sanctions or intervention, or the US will need to accept Russia’s stance on the non-negotiable character of Syria’s sovereignty. The only other scenario that could resolve the discursive struggle and the situation in Syria would be an unpredictable event that changes the variables within the country. However, given the serious shifts in US discourse that have occurred since the inauguration of US President Donald Trump in 2017, and a move away from a humanitarian-based foreign policy, the chances for agreement today are closer than ever. Whether or not this new US discourse will be implemented in foreign policy will be evident with time. Needless to say, this is what Russia will be hoping for.

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