

# Explaining Russia's Intervention in Syria in September 2015

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SIMON ALLCOCK, FEB 28 2016

On 30 September 2015, Russia began a military campaign in Syria which has continued to escalate up to the time of writing in January 2016.[1] While surprising to many observers, the intervention reflected a deeper bilateral relationship. Since the outbreak of anti-government protests in March 2011, Russia has supported President Bashar Al-Assad's Syrian regime both militarily and diplomatically.[2] Over the summer of 2015, Assad conceded his regime was facing severe difficulties, and it appeared close to collapse.[3] After a short military build-up in September, Russia began airstrikes on the 30th.[4] Despite intimating a willingness to interact with moderate opposition groups, President Putin has unambiguously declared the intervention's purpose is to prevent Assad's deposal.[5] Following terrorist attacks targeted at both the West and Russia, there were tentative signs of greater cooperation between the two.[6] One continued stumbling block is Russia's unwavering support for Assad; Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reaffirmed on 20 November that 'no peaceful solution can be found without his participation'.[7] Signifying Russia's first Middle East military campaign post-1989, various analysts have highlighted its potentially extensive impact. Some claim it signifies the decline of the United States' regional pre-eminence and marks a new Middle East 'great game'.[8] Given its conceivable regional and international political fallout, it is important to understand in greater depth the reasons behind Russia's intervention.

Rather than providing an empirical account of all of the factors that led to Russia's intervention, this essay is instead focused more on theory testing. It tests the extent to which two distinct international relations theories can explain Russia's intervention in Syria. Such an undertaking might mean some factors that led to Russia's intervention are overlooked. This is an inherent result of engaging with IR theory because theories act as 'lenses' which naturally consider some data and factors less important than others.[9] The first theory is neorealism, whose founding father is Waltz.[10] The second is Tsygankov's constructivist theory of Russian foreign policy.[11] This essay finds that while neorealism usefully draws attention to Russia's various strategic and material motivations, its explanatory capability is low. The constructivist explanatory capability is far greater, but the case study highlights two theoretical deficiencies. Firstly, it partially depends on an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of the Russian foreign policy establishment, henceforth referred to as the 'other minds problem'.[12] Secondly, the theory's variables which explain change in Russian foreign policy are loosely defined. This means it is challenging to decide which Russian foreign policy actions are explained by the theory, reducing its testability.[13] Nonetheless, the substantial evidence that supports the constructivist theory suggests it has a significant explanatory capacity but that its components should be defined more specifically. The remainder of the essay is structured as follows: firstly, each theory's broad arguments are outlined. Secondly, their explanatory power is tested by the case of Russia's intervention in Syria. The concluding section considers the findings' implications.

### Theories

This essay compares constructivism and neorealism's capacity to explain Russia's intervention in Syria. These theories were partly chosen because the decline of neorealism and rise of constructivism in prominence in IR were to some extent caused by the former's failure to explain the Soviet Union's foreign policy at the end of the Cold War.[14] The case study reflects on the theories' capability to explain contemporary Russia's foreign policy.

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## *Neorealism*

Neorealism assumes nation-states are the most important actors in the international system. Some of this parsimonious theory's key proposals are that states are rational, unitary, and that their action is shaped by the structure of the international system, not by domestic or ideational factors. Waltz for instance claimed the US' invasion of Vietnam could 'be understood *only* in terms of the world's structure'.<sup>[15]</sup> Irrespective of regime type, structural pressures force all states to seek the same selfish ends. In the more 'defensive' strand of neorealism I test, states rationally seek to preserve their position (relative to other states) in the international structure. For neorealists, this structure is comprehended materially; states are as such ranked by their level of material (military/economic) capabilities.<sup>[16]</sup> Neorealism has a materialist and objectivist ontology, arguing the world is made up of a concrete reality existing outside our perception or interpretation.<sup>[17]</sup> States act to rationally preserve their relative position (based on material capabilities) in the international system. Therefore, if neorealism satisfactorily explains Russia's intervention, there should be evidence that this intervention was an attempt to preserve its relative structural position in the (material) international order.

## *Constructivism and Honour Theory*

Although now established within the discipline, early constructivists including Onuf and Wendt aimed to challenge mainstream IR theories like neorealism.<sup>[18]</sup> Constructivism differs ontologically from neorealism; it claims material forces have no intrinsic meaning but that actors understand them intersubjectively. States' national interests are socially constructed (not structurally determined), shaped by their history and social interactions with other states.<sup>[19]</sup> While neorealists consider ideational factors insignificant and epiphenomenal, constructivists argue states' identities and interests are dependent variables that influence state action.<sup>[20]</sup> Instead of acting rationally, states act according to what they believe to be suitable to their own identity and role, in line with what is termed the 'logic of appropriateness'.<sup>[21]</sup>

Unlike neorealism, constructivism is not a specific theory of state action but is instead a broad approach to IR.<sup>[22]</sup> Because constructivists disagree in some respects about why states act as they do, one must identify a specific constructivist theory in order to test it.<sup>[23]</sup> The chosen theory is Tsygankov's constructivist honour theory.<sup>[24]</sup> Tsygankov's central thesis is that Russian foreign policy is driven by both an external and internal sense of honour, defined as what Russia believes 'is a good and virtuous course of action in international society'.<sup>[25]</sup> This sense of honour is socially constructed through Russia's interaction with other states and its historical experiences. Tsygankov's illustrative case studies are limited to Europe, so focusing on Syria tests the theory beyond this geographic scope.

Externally, Russia's sense of honour is a desire to be viewed as an important part of the Western world. Internally, its honour is based on spiritual freedom (a Christian identity), a belief Russia should aid cultural allies, a strong state, and a desire to be perceived as a great power. If there is contradiction between these external and internal aspects of its honour, Russia will be less likely to cooperate with the West; specifically, Tsygankov argues Russia will act assertively toward the West (exemplified by its intervention in Syria) if the West fails to recognise Russia's internal honour commitments, and if Russia has confidence in its own capabilities. In summary, Tsygankov's theory would explain Russia's intervention in Syria if: Russian motivations appear to be driven by its external and internal sense of honour; the West does not recognise these honour commitments; and Russia has confidence in its own capabilities.<sup>[26]</sup>

## *Neorealist Explanations*

If neorealism is an adequate explanation of Russia's intervention in Syria, there should be evidence Russia intervened in order to preserve its (material) structural position in the international system. I identify two mechanisms through which neorealism might apply (although I recognise this does not necessarily encompass all possible neorealist explanations): firstly, that Russia believed its material interests in preserving Assad's survival influenced its structural position, and hence his rule required protecting; secondly Russia viewed the threat of Islamist terrorism as a threat to its structural position, requiring intervention to protect against. Although neorealist theory usefully

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highlights the material and security/strategic interests extant in Syria, Russia does not appear to have viewed these interests as important to its structural position, meaning neorealism is ultimately a weak explanation of Russian intervention.

Neorealism argues states sometimes attempt to preserve their structural position by protecting their allies, particularly those that might provide a counter-veiling coalition against rivals (in Russia's case, the US).[27] Some analysts have applied this logic to Russia's Syria intervention. Kozak described Russia's protection of Assad as an attempt to keep Syria 'in their axis of power'.[28] This argument is reinforced by Bourman who claims that Russia-Syria ties are bound together by a shared opposition to US hegemony.[29] Hence, the protection of Assad could be viewed as an attempt to preserve Russia's structural position by ensuring the continued existence of a regional pro-Russian bloc.

Russia has strategic motivations in keeping Assad in power, and may perceive a threat to these interests as a threat to its structural international position. Various analysts have argued that Russia's intervention is driven by its aim of retaining its only Mediterranean naval base in the Syrian city of Tartus, as possession of this base likely depends on a pro-Russian regime.[30] Certainly, in congruence with neorealism, Russia considers the Tartus naval base an important component of its material capabilities. The Kremlin's *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2020* recommended 'a permanent Russian Navy presence in the Mediterranean'.[31] Tartus is a receiving point for Russian weapon shipments and capable of docking nuclear submarines. Russia's naval commander-in-chief unambiguously called the base 'essential'.[32]

Similarly, Moscow has economic interests in preserving Assad's rule, and may correspondingly view any threat to his regime threatening to its own structural position. Russia is an important supplier of arms to Syria. By 2012 Syrian contracts with the Russian defence industry exceeded \$4 billion.[33] Russia also has energy interests in Syria. In particular, it is opposed to a new pipeline through Syrian territory which would allow a greater volume of Qatari gas on to the European market, undermining Russia's monopolistic dominance. Russia may fear Assad's overthrow will lead to this pipeline being built.[34]

Thus Russia does appear to have material interests in preserving the Assad regime. But in reality these interests are limited (suggesting they do not influence its structural position) and the intervention's scale and timing do not indicate Russia sought solely to protect these interests. This challenges the neorealist claim that Russia aimed to preserve its material structural position.

Although Russian intervention has sought to solidify the regime's rule, it is unlikely that protecting a pro-Russian bloc (thus maintaining its structural position) was the reason for doing so. If this was the aim, it is difficult to explain why Russia waited for Assad's power to be severely debilitated by five years of conflict (losing 80% of his territory) before intervening.[35] It is likewise improbable Moscow would consider a weakened pro-Russian Syria a valuable component of its 'axis of power'.[36] A 2014 UN report indicated that Syria's economy would take at least thirty years to recover to 2010 levels.[37] Moreover, Russia's support for Syria has alienated key regional partners including Turkey and the Gulf states. Were the Assad regime to survive, it would face a number of hostile regimes nearby, most prominently Saudi Arabia.[38] In neorealist terms, a scenario in which more states balanced against an ally would damage Russia's structural position, and possibly draw her into harmful conflict through the 'chain-gang' effect.[39]

Equally, Russia's limited material interests are unlikely to impact its structural position and do not warrant its substantial intervention. Tartus houses only fifty Russian servicemen and has outdated facilities, leading some authors to question its strategic relevance.[40] Given that Russia views a naval presence in the Mediterranean important to its future military posture, Allison's argument that Tartus merely represents 'strategic nostalgia' probably goes too far.[41] But the base's historically limited nature makes it difficult to argue that Russia perceived the base to be so immediately vital its protection required a large-scale intervention. Russia likewise has limited economic interests in Syria. Syria amounted to only 0.1% of total Russian trade in 2011[42] and currently only 5% of arms exports.[43] Whereas Russia has abundant domestic reserves of energy, Syria's reserves are rapidly declining. The reason a new pipeline has not been opened through Syria has less to do with Assad, and is better explained by

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Qatar's ambivalence toward the project.[44]

There is another plausible mechanism through which neorealism could explain Russia's intervention. The Syrian conflict has increased the capabilities of Islamist terror groups, which Russia might view as a threat to its structural position. But while Russia has concerns over terrorism, it is doubtful it considers the menace large enough to detriment its structural position.

The Russian regime undoubtedly believes Islamist terror groups based in Syria, most prominently Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), pose a national security threat. Russians make up the fourth largest contingent of Syria's foreign fighters (many affiliated to extremist groups) and they may be a security problem if they return home.[45] Islamist groups could destabilise Russia's North Caucasus region. In June 2015 ISIS declared the region a 'province' of its caliphate.[46] This development might be of particular importance, because Putin has previously described the North Caucasus issue in existential terms. In an interview in 2000 he claimed its loss would mean 'Russia as a state in its current form would cease to exist'.[47] Such statements reinforce the neorealist explanation, as they suggest the Russian regime believes its very survival (and hence its structural position) is threatened by Islamist terror groups.

The Kremlin has highlighted the threat of Islamist terrorism and used it as a justification for Russian intervention. Lavrov has labelled ISIS the region's 'primary threat'.[48] Putin declared Russian intervention would 'fight and destroy militants and terrorists' in Syria.[49] He has also explained his support for Assad is partly premised on the latter's opposition to these groups.[50] The evidence shows the Russian regime believes Islamist terror groups pose a national security threat and has used this as a reason for intervention.

Although these security factors are undoubtedly important to Moscow's intervention, neorealism would go further and claim that Russia acted because it believed the terrorist threat could impact its structural position. But it seems improbable Russia perceives the danger to be so extensive. Souleimanov and Petrylova find 'Russian political elites have expressed fairly diverse opinions' on the nature and extent of ISIS's threat.[51] Even in April 2015 when the group's destabilising effect in North Caucasus was palpable, Putin remarked that ISIS 'still presents no direct threat to Russia'.[52] Some elites may even believe that by draining North Caucasus of potential fighters, the Syrian conflict benefits Russia's national security.[53] This might help explain various reports of regional Russian officials turning a blind eye to individuals leaving for Syria.[54]

Furthermore, the timing and nature of the Russian intervention does not correspond with the neorealist explanation. If the Russian regime truly saw the threat of terror groups as so grave, it might have been expected to support (or bandwagon with) the US-led coalition's airstrikes against ISIS which began in August 2014. But Russia instead opposed the campaign.[55] Russia targeted more moderate opposition groups over ISIS in its intervention's initial weeks (although this has partially changed since the Sinai plane attack).[56] The US State Department's claim on 7 October that 90% of Russian airstrikes had hit non-ISIS or Al-Qaeda affiliated targets is reaffirmed by more independent sources.[57] Although Russia attacked other Islamist terror groups such as al-Nusra Front[58], the fact that it did not initially target ISIS (the most powerful such group) indicates fighting Islamist terrorism was not Russia's priority, suggesting terrorism is not viewed to have structural consequences.

Overall, attempting to explain Russia's intervention with neorealism highlights the economic, strategic and security concerns that have motivated Russian intervention in Syria. However, it was shown that these concerns were limited (making it unlikely Russia considered them important to its structural position) and relatedly that the scale and timing of its intervention does not indicate Russia solely sought to protect these interests. Neorealism was therefore an incomplete explanation of Russia's intervention.

Why does neorealism explain so little? Waltz argued neorealism is an IR theory and cannot explain a singular state's foreign policy, though he frequently applies it for this purpose (see above explanation of the US invasion of Vietnam).[59] Many theorists consider Waltz's division between IR and foreign policy theory non-existent and neorealism has, in line with this essay, been frequently applied to explain states' foreign policy decisions.[60] Perhaps more importantly, this case study might exemplify the common critique of neorealism, which is its

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inapplicability to non-state actors. Neorealism was developed to parsimoniously explain relations between states, not their complex interactions with terrorist groups.[61]

## *Constructivism – Russia's 'Honour' as an Explanation*

If Tsygankov's constructivist honour theory adequately explains Russia's intervention, there should be evidence that Russia is acting on its sense of honour both externally (a desire to be part of the West) and internally (spiritual freedom, aiding cultural allies, strong state and an aspiration to be seen as a great power). Further, an explanation of Russia's assertive action would require evidence that the West did not recognise Russia's internal honour commitments, and that Russia had confidence in its own capabilities. Although there is considerable supporting evidence, the case study demonstrates two problems with the theory. Firstly, in contrast to neorealism, it suffers from the 'other minds problem'. Secondly, Russia's honour commitments are too loosely defined, meaning they could be stretched conceptually to include a whole variety of different actions. If too many foreign policy actions can be subsumed under the banner of 'honour' then the theory's testability is reduced. The theory thus has significant explanatory capacity but its mechanisms need to be more specifically defined.

As Tsygankov's honour theory would predict, there is some evidence that Russian intervention reflects its external honour commitment to be part of the Western world. Echoing its stance following 9/11, Russia wants to act as the protector of European civilisation.[62] Putin has described the fight against ISIS in such terms, calling the group 'an enemy of civilisation' subscribing to 'an ideology of...barbarity'.[63] Because European identity was partly formed on this dichotomy between 'civilised' and 'barbarian'[64], by identifying with the former, Putin seemingly aligned himself with the European world. The Russian press has taken a similar line, with one prominent news anchor claiming 'Russia is saving Europe from barbarism'.[65]

However, although Tsygankov is partially correct to claim Russia seeks to be part of the Western world, he goes too far by suggesting its sense of external honour ultimately is a 'general aspiration to be "like the West"'.[66] While Tsygankov recognises Russia does not always act like the West, he claims diversions from this position derive from incompatible internal conceptions of honour.[67] The Syria intervention however suggests Russia wants to deliberately appear different from the West externally. Russian officials have highlighted how their intervention is distinct from the West's approach. As one put it, 'we do not want the US and the West to cheer for us in Syria'.[68] Russia's deputy Prime Minister unfavourably compared the West's handling of the Syria crisis to 'the way a monkey handles a grenade'.[69] The intervention in Syria therefore only gives partial support for this aspect of Tsygankov's theory, suggesting Russia's external honour commitments are more complex than an inherent desire to mirror the West. Such a finding does not wholly undermine Tsygankov's theory but does suggest his description of external honour needs to be more nuanced.

The motivations behind Russia's intervention can be shown to be substantially rooted in its internal honour commitments. Tsygankov argues Russia's spiritual freedom and Christian identity have shaped its foreign policy. In Syria, Christian communities have been severely persecuted but are reportedly safer under regime control.[70] Shoring up Assad's regime would therefore help to protect Syria's Christian community. The Russian Orthodox Church, closely aligned with the Kremlin, described the campaign as a 'holy war', and declared that protecting Christians is a major justification for intervening.[71] Christians have been persecuted throughout the conflict, indicating their protection was not a sufficient cause for intervening. But the fact the Assad regime appeared close to collapse likely meant Russia's Christian identity helped to motivate a campaign that secured his rule.

Russia's intervention can also be interpreted as a desire to protect its cultural allies, although the vague nature of this phrase demonstrates the difficulty of testing Tsygankov's theory. Tsygankov defines contemporary Russia's cultural allies as ethnic Russians and 'those who have historically gravitated toward Russia'.[72] It could certainly be argued that Moscow intervened to protect such cultural allies. The protection of both Christians and the thousands of Russians who live in Syria (whose wellbeing likely relies on Assad's rule) could come under this label, and might have been a further reason for intervention.[73] Other analysts identify a shared affinity between the Russian and Syrian regimes premised on their ideological alliance through the Cold War and their continued opposition to US hegemony.[74] Based on these cross-regime ties, Moscow's internal honour commitment to protecting cultural allies

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was one motivation for its campaign to protect the regime.

However, Tsygankov's vague definition of cultural allies makes the explanatory capacity of this honour commitment difficult to test. For example, although some authors identify a cultural and ideological affinity between the two regimes, Allison argues that the relationship is grounded on realpolitik considerations.[75] The Russian media frequently criticises Assad[76], and he has been described by former Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov as 'a difficult partner'.[77] Consequently, it seems debatable whether the Syrian regime truly represents a Russian cultural ally, but it is also difficult to make such a judgement absent a clear definition. This partially inhibits an assessment of whether Russian action is driven by its internal honour commitment to cultural allies.

Moscow's internal honour commitment to a strong internal state can also be seen as an underlying reason for its intervention. Numerous analysts have argued that Russia has prevented Assad from being deposed by Western backed opposition because it worries the resulting precedent might lead to its own regime being overthrown.[78] These analysts frequently point to the existence of political unrest in Russia, which supposedly causes the Kremlin to draw parallels between Assad's survival and its own. There is some evidence this challenge to its own strong state pushed Russia into intervening. The language used by the Russian Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman possibly indicates this worry; she warned on 3 November that Syrian regime change would create a 'large black hole', perhaps implying Russia could be sucked in to a similar process.[79] Nonetheless, in general the problem with this argument is that it does not present comprehensive evidence the Russian regime substantively fears for its own survival through this process (a fear it is unlikely to frequently air in public). Testing the theory is thus inhibited by the 'other minds problem'. That is not to say Russia did not act on its internal honour commitment to a strong state by intervening in Syria, as *some* evidence supports this argument. Nonetheless, the evidence for this honour commitment is limited where it relies heavily on the perceptions of Russian leaders.

Finally, if Tsygankov's theory is accurate, Russia's desire to be viewed as a great power should be one of the reasons for its intervention. While one can find evidence to support this argument, Tsygankov does not define which actions Russia considers appropriate to its role as a great power. Absent a definition, it is hard to assess whether intervention in Syria correlates with this honour commitment.

One role Russia appears to believe important to its identity as a great power is a belief it should be a major stakeholder in international diplomacy.[80] Lavrov alluded to this self-conception in explaining Russia's 'Foreign Policy Philosophy': Russia 'as a global player...by right has the role as one of the key experts'.[81] Various analysts have correspondingly claimed Russia intervened in order to place itself at the centre of diplomatic efforts.[82] This aim likely explains Putin's preference for an international anti-ISIS coalition (presumably with Russia at the centre) over bandwagoning on the US-led coalition.[83] Russia seems intent on increasing its diplomatic role to a level equivalent to the US, and Russians keenly tout their influential position.[84] One prominent Russian politician claimed Russia's diplomacy means 'the U.S. will find itself playing second fiddle' losing 'the battle for global opinion'.[85] Therefore Russia's intervention, which has secured it as a crucial diplomatic player, appears to reflect its sense of internal honour as an aim to be perceived as a great power.

However, Tsygankov never clearly delineates which actions Russia considers to be appropriate to its great power image aspirations. The preceding paragraph made a credible case that being at the centre of world diplomacy reflects what Russia considers important to its great power role and that its actions in Syria reflect this honour commitment. But describing Russia's self-conception of great power status may be less straightforward. For instance, some analysts have argued its great power status is predicated on its consistent opposition to NATO.[86] Without closely defining what actions Russia sees as appropriate to its great power image, it is difficult to evaluate whether it is acting in concert with this honour commitment. For example, if Russia sees diplomatic centrality as crucial to its great power role, its possible moves toward cooperating with the West over Syria would be compatible with such a role, but less compatible if Russia considers its great power status to be derived from consistent opposition to NATO. As with the concept of cultural allies, without knowing which actions are congruent with this honour commitment, it is difficult to comprehensively test the theory.

Nevertheless, temporarily leaving aside the theory's conceptual shortcomings, there is evidence that Russia's

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internal honour commitments underlay its decision to intervene. But Tsygankov contends Russia only acts assertively when: (1) the West does not recognise Russia's internal honour commitments and (2) when Russia has confidence in its own capabilities. Below I show both processes were likely present, reinforcing Tsygankov's theory.

Throughout its consistent opposition to Russia's position on Syria, the West has not recognised Russia's internal honour commitments. The West has portrayed Russia's stance as immoral, insinuating it acts outside of any honour-based 'good and virtuous course of action'. For example, in 2012 British Prime Minister David Cameron lambasted Moscow's diplomatic support for Assad claiming 'no one of conscience' could act in such a way.[87] Russia's role has also been characterised as self-interested and antithetical to international obligations, which fails to recognise its self-image as a great power central to world diplomacy. In 2013, the US' ambassador to the UN attacked Russia for shirking 'its international responsibilities' with regard to Syria.[88] Hence, as honour theory would predict, the West does not appear to have recognised and accepted Russia's honour commitments.

Russia might well possess high confidence in its own capabilities, though making conclusive judgement again runs into the 'other minds problem'. Putin's rhetoric appears to reflect confidence. His recent speeches have criticised US unilateralism and called for Russia to 'strive to be leaders' internationally.[89] Putin's regime may well have a large degree of confidence in their foreign policy decisions given Russia's annexation of Crimea, and their strong domestic support (particularly in foreign affairs).[90] But once again, assessing the authenticity of Russia's confident tones relies on overcoming the 'other minds problem'. One could convincingly argue that because of Russia's extensive economic problems, the Kremlin's internal confidence might be minimal.[91] Thus unlike using a neorealist account which would objectively measure material capabilities, absent insider access to the Kremlin it is challenging to measure the extent of confidence Russia has in its own capabilities, posing a further constraint on testing Tsygankov's theory.

Overall, there was considerable evidence to reinforce Tsygankov's honour-based theory. Although I argued elements of the theory may require refining—particularly that Russia wholly aspires to be like the West—I showed that one could make a credible case this theory explained Russia's intervention in Syria. However, I demonstrated the theory suffered from two other shortcomings. Firstly, it was constrained by the 'other minds problem'. Secondly, although any definition of Russia's honour commitments should account for change over time[92], Tsygankov defines the elements of the theory (particularly the components of Russia's honour) too loosely, making empirical testing challenging. Nonetheless, the substantial evidence accumulated to support the honour theory suggested it has a considerable degree of explanatory capacity. In future, Tsygankov could enhance his honour based explanation by providing more specific definitions, which would allow scholars to test his theory more comprehensively.

## Conclusions

Rather than providing a review of all the reasons behind Russia's intervention in Syria, this essay used the intervention as a case study to compare the explanatory capacity of neorealism and constructivism. Having outlined each theory's main arguments, I considered the extent to which each accounted for the intervention. Neorealism usefully highlighted the material motivations behind Russia's intervention in Syria. But its central argument – that Russia acted in order to preserve its structural position in the international system—was not supported, and neorealism therefore had a limited explanatory capacity.

The study presented a more positive picture for Tsygankov's honour theory. There was substantial evidence to reinforce its central thesis that Russia's actions were driven by its socially constructed conception of honour, suggesting the theory potentially has a large amount of explanatory power. The case study also highlighted two problems. Firstly, the theory suffers from the 'other minds problem', and secondly, empirical testing was inhibited by its tendency to loosely define terms. However, neither problem wholly diminished its explanatory capacity and it was suggested the theory's utility could be enhanced with more specific definitions.

In light of the West's ostensible ambition to further cooperate with Russia over Syria, what are these findings' implications?[93] Neorealism's limited capacity to explain the intervention cautions that Western observers should be wary of wholly characterising Russia's behaviour in self-interested, zero-sum terms. On the contrary, the

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considerable explanatory power of Tsygankov's honour theory indicated that representing Russia in this way will make her more assertive and less amenable to cooperation. Honour theory contends that meaningful cooperation will only be achieved with Western recognition that Russia's intervention is driven less by selfish motivations and more by its own conception of honourable international behaviour.

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