

REPORT

By Member of the Dissertation Committee on the Dissertation of

Alexey V. YURK on the theme:

“U.S. Policy Towards the Syrian Conflict (2011-2022)”

**Submitted in conformity with the requirements for the Academic Degree of
Candidate in Historical Sciences**

Specialisation 5.6.7 – History of International Relations and Foreign Policy

Having read the doctoral dissertation of Alexey V. Yurk in the English-language version, I am ready to offer a series of observations and draw conclusions concerning the academic quality of the work. The thesis concerns the analysis of the theoretical and practical approaches and effects of a key geopolitical event of the Syrian Conflict and tracing the US policy through three presidential administrations towards the event. The topic is at the intersection of several different academic disciplines, which includes among others international relations, geopolitics, politics, national and transnational policymaking, public opinion and organised persuasive communication. This thesis is very informative, easy to follow and the text written in an easy to digest and yet engaging format. A very rich set of data from academic, mass media and other sources are used to illustrate the logic of the consistent and changing elements of US presidential policy on the Syrian conflict.

The thesis consists of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion and bibliography. The format and order of these various parts of the thesis is conducted in a clear, consistent and logical order. In the flow of the appearance of topics and subjects, knowledge and information are appearing in a progressive manner that is conducive for the reader in digesting the evaluations, observations and conclusions of the work in an gradual manner. The articulated academic and practical relevance of the topic are clear as are the purpose and objectives of the thesis and its originality. There is an excellent background and (geo)political context to the change and consistency in US policy towards the Syrian conflict through the period of 2011-2022 through a comprehensive literature overview of academic thinking, statements by politicians, mass media coverage and reports over time.

There is also evident, a highly consistent and systematic approach to ordering and presenting data, which facilitates enables a comparability of the US presidential administration policy change and consistency perspective for the reader. An impressive array of various kinds of literature has been consulted and worked into the framework of the thesis, which has been carefully selected and applied. The thesis work is very well researched, written and argued. Observations, interpretations, evaluations and conclusions are well justified and convincing. The selection, motivation and justification of the constituent parts of the scientific design (namely theory, method and approach) are appropriate and suited to the named aims and objectives of the research.

Despite the obvious various noted strengths and many merits of this thesis, there are several academic points that should have been considered for inclusion in the work to further strengthen it in terms of its academic and scientific robustness. These points vary in nature, where some are relatively minor and should be understood as being friendly advice on strengthening an already excellent academic work in addition to something to consider in your future research works. The various points to be raised fall into the following categories: greater integration of theory into empirics; missing literature and subject themes; typos and language errors; missing perspectives and assumptions.

On the first point, the issue of the necessity for greater integration of theory and method into the analysis and interpretation of the thesis. Certainly, it was possible and even desirable to make greater use of the chosen theory and method to yield even more results and conclusions to those currently reached. This could have been possible through the chapter summary (conclusion) of each individual chapter, which could have then been brought about as a collective lesson in the concluding chapter of the work.

There were some noticeable gaps in the literature used and, in the subjects/themes that were engaged in. For example, the book on an evaluation of the Arab Spring written by Evgeny Primakov shortly before his death. Furthermore, a section on the politics (especially in manufacturing consent) and communication (perception management) of US foreign policy related to armed conflicts would have been useful to contextualise the chapters devoted to the Syria conflict policy of the respective US presidential administrations. As such, authors as Waldman, Western, Di Maggio and others would be at the forefront.

Typos, errors and unclear language detract somewhat from the work. For example, on page 26, “the remaining three paragraphs of this chapter” makes no sense and supposedly sections or sub-sections was intended instead. A factual error on page 27 – “Libyan militant organisation and political party Hezbollah” – which is Lebanese and not Libyan. ISIS and not ISI. Defence Intelligence Agency is the full name of the DIA. There appears to be some confusion as a result of the US and UK rebranding of terrorist organisations – Al Qaeda became Al-Nusra and was changed yet again as part of the attempted perception management of radical terrorists as ‘moderate forces.’ Furthermore, the role of language in foreign policy is critical and especially the role of labels in how events are defined. The insistence on calling the Syrian conflict a “civil war” is not very honest given the role of foreign actors as the US, where the definition of a geopolitical shatterbelt would be more apt.

Assumptions of the author, which is exacerbated by missing perspectives and information, is also having an evident though minor impact. At times, the author seems to bestow too much credence to the word of the US government, which can produce problematic conclusions and results further down the track. The US employs vicarious warfare which is an often indirect and covert form of action, which draws its heritage and operational link to Marxist Revolutionary Warfare when US neo-cons coopted it and developed it in the 1980s. Misdirection and deception are key components of its operationalisation. The US has acted as a powerful broker in Syria, not an honest broker, their modus operandi (blueprint) is very evident in Libya and then in Syria. However, the Podesta emails (seemingly missing from the thesis) reveal the level of US complicity, especially Hillary Clinton in subverting the Syrian state and supporting radical jihadist elements including Al-Qaeda and ISIS (this is found in audits and reports from Pentagon and US Defence Department). Other evidence and materials available include the presentation on those countries to be targeted for regime change, including Syria, by General Wesley Clarke on YouTube. There is also evidence of ‘cyber-camps’ being run for activists just before Colour Revolutions and Arab Spring at US embassies in the countries targeted. More could have also been made of the alleged chemical weapons attacks, a tactic often used by the US to justify its wars of aggression as Iraq in 2003. There is a lot of literature that deconstructs this often used US narrative available, not to mention the scandal at the OPCW caused by whistleblowers, or the controversy of the alleged informer ‘Ceasar’ in allegedly taking 50,000 images of ‘Syrian prisons’ and smuggling them out that was latter laundered by the London law firm with connections to the Qatari government.

A final point relates to the necessity to expand the conclusion to situate your findings in the wider academic community, which is currently too focused upon the empirical and policy related dimensions of the research findings and not the scientific significance of those findings.

This should include analysis based on the theoretical interpretations of the key empirical findings and conclusions, which should be used to reveal the larger theoretical picture and your original contribution to developing the current state of literature and knowledge on not only the empirical topic of conflict studies, but its theoretical meaning and significance (have you built on existing theory or challenged its orthodoxy?) to the field of science.

In summary, the thesis covers a rapidly transforming field of academic study of geopolitics in the 21st century of communicated international relations with an emphasis on policy consistency and change across US presidential administrations, and how this topic is perceived and acted upon theoretically as an object of study and practically through the influence of domestic political and foreign policy discussions in the wake of mediated events as the deceptive alleged chemical weapons attacks by the Syrian Arab Army at a time of declining public trust and desire for US entanglement in further Endless Wars. The strengths of the work far outweigh the few minor weaknesses uncovered in the thesis. One of the consistent themes concerning policy choices in the Syrian conflict refers to the informational and cognitive facades faced by academics and policymakers that require critical examination and interpretation. This thesis work reveals and enables a deeper empirical understanding of the nature and practice of a mediated foreign policy agenda on international relations politics with its sets of interpretations and representations, the theoretical concepts, political processes and the resulting foreign policy outcomes to secure one's own interests and obstruct other actors from achieving or doing the same.

The dissertation meets the basic requirements established by Order No. 11181/1 of 19 November 2021, "On the Procedure for Awarding Academic Degrees at Saint Petersburg State University," the candidate Alexey Yurk deserves the award of the scientific degree of Candidate of Political Sciences in the speciality 5.6.7. – History of International Relations and Foreign Policy. Clause 11 of the aforementioned Order by the author of the thesis is not broken.



23.02.2024

Member of the Dissertation Council

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