The Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy

- The shift in Russian foreign policy after the dissolution of the Soviet Union was inherently a re-evaluation of Russia’s security outlook. The Russian state that emerged no longer saw itself in a situation of confrontation with the West and took steps to articulate a new policy that would address the changed circumstances.

- Obviously this involved a dramatic change from decades of proxy wars, an arms race and the prospect of nuclear confrontation. In this presentation I will look at the evolution of Russian foreign policy first in the Yeltsin era, followed by the Putin Presidency and finally a look at the situation under Medvedev.

- The policy shift began even before the dissolution of the USSR. Boris Yeltsin was elected as chairman of the Russian republic's new Supreme Soviet in May 1990. The following month, he passed legislation that effectively established Russia’s sovereignty within the Soviet Union. The legislation gave Russian laws priority over Soviet laws and withheld a large portion of the Soviet budget for Russian use.

- It was after this event and particularly after the election of Yeltsin to the Russian presidency that Russia began to develop a foreign policy different from that of the Soviet Union.

- Following the August 1991 coup, the Russia quickly absorbed most of the assets of the Soviet state. Internationally Russia was widely regarded as the Soviet Union’s successor state, took responsibility for its treaty obligations and assumed the Soviet Union’s permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

- The initial attempts at the development of a new Russian foreign policy were hobbled by ideological conflicts among policy makers. There was extensive disagreement on most issues including the important question of Western intentions towards Russia and whether Russia was still a superpower. Ultranationalists argued that the United States was still Russia’s chief concern, with its strong military position, history of opposition to the Soviet Union and its position with the NATO alliance on the borders of Eastern Europe.

- On the other hand many policy makers favoured a very pro-Western foreign policy in line with the new Russian commitment to democracy and capitalism, as presented by the Yeltzin government. In early 1992, Russian foreign minister Andrey Kozyrev described Russia’s new foreign policy as being derived from democratic principles and peaceful cooperation with other states.
Along the same line of thought, it followed that as Russia was now a democracy, the United States and its allies would welcome Russia into the community of democracies and would be unlikely to take an aggressive stance, as the ideological divisions had now been removed. [Slide]

Both sides battled to further their perspective on how Russian foreign policy would be charted. In the “Emergence of Russian Foreign Policy” article, the author characterizes the ideological divide as “indicating Russia's general search for a new identity to replace the accepted truths of Marxism-Leninism and the Cold War.”

I believe this to be a very apt manner of describing the situation as all parties were truly in ‘uncharted territory’ both in the foreign policy area, but also very importantly with regard to the difficult domestic situation and the privatization project. In comparison to the domestic issue, foreign policy took a subsidiary role, with the arguments over its implementation resulting in an overall pro-Western policy, with mixed signals based on the need to placate conservative elements in the state.

After a great deal of debate and a number of failed initiatives, in April 1993, the newly created Interdepartmental Foreign Policy Commission of the Security Council finalized a foreign policy concept that the parliament approved. [Slide]

Quoting from the article – “According to the concept, Russia is a great power with several foreign policy priorities: ensuring national security through diplomacy; protecting the sovereignty and unity of the state, with special emphasis on border stability; protecting the rights of Russians abroad; providing favourable external conditions for internal democratic reforms; mobilizing international assistance for the establishment of a Russian market economy and assisting Russian exporters; furthering integration of the Commonwealth of Independent States and pursuing beneficial relations with other nearby foreign states, including those in Central Europe; continuing to build relations with countries that have resolved problems similar to those that Russia faces; and ensuring Russia an active role as a great power.”

Clearly this marked a departure from the policy of the previous two years that featured indecision around whether Russia was a superpower and what its foreign policy outlook should be. While still committed to strong diplomatic relations with the West, the focus shifted to a policy of regaining Russia’s foreign policy clout, which had diminished following the fall of the USSR. [Slide]

Central to the policy was the reassertion of Russia’s role regarding the former Soviet republics through the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a new political,
economic and military organization. The organization was based around the shared military and economic situation, with the Rouble providing a common currency.

- The economies of the CIS states were still highly integrated based on the Soviet setup with critical industries residing outside of Russia, but being vital to Russian enterprises. These state felt more at ease with Russian influence, given their commitment to democracy, Yeltsin’s support for independence and the banning of the Communist Party.

- While nationalists pushed this policy aspect quite heavily, the policies stopped short of integration with the Russian state (as the Soviet Union had done), partly on the basis of the enormous financial cost such an undertaking would entail. Instead emphasis was placed on strong ties and the prevention of foreign influence in the former Soviet States, which was seen as the primary threat to Russian security.

- This outlook builds on the Russian historical experience as a plains state and the need to provide a buffer against foreign invaders. This is in contrast to the global nature of the security picture in the Soviet era, with Russia’s new area of influence being located primarily within the borders of the former Soviet Union.

- The 14 states in this area were dubbed the “near abroad”, and a key issue was the 25 million ethnic Russians in the CIS states and their security. The principle debate was the level of influence that Russia would exert over these states and no longer whether it was going to adopt such an approach in the first place.

- This approach was further developed in Yeltsin’s 1994 address to the parliament. In the speech he both presented Russia’s goal of a collective security zone with the CIS and Russian opposition to NATO expansion into central Europe, while at the same time supporting NATO’s Partnership for Peace program and the reduction of nuclear arms and military reforms.

- Like the previous foreign policy works, Yeltsin’s address continued to display the ideological conflict that existed and the resultant often conflicting concessions that were required to placate both sides.

- In response to accusations by Western states that Russia was attempting to rebuild the Soviet Union, Yeltsin’s speech the following year took a much more cooperative tone, including integration into the G-7, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and greater cooperation with NATO.
• Key to this shift was the War in Chechnya, which was widely condemned and the establishment of the CIS. In such difficult economic times and with mounting internal problems, Yeltsin’s government adopted a necessary conciliatory approach to the West, which it was more and more looking to for loans and economic investment. Later that year Yeltsin cemented Russia’s policy as a non-confrontational “balance of interests” and partnership with the United States.

• Relations with the former Soviet Republics remained a persistent issue, particularly the strained relations between Russia and the Ukraine, regarding the division of military property and other issues, including fears of re-absorption into Russia. Overall, after Yeltsin committed Russia to a non-confrontational approach, from most of the remainder of his presidency, Russian foreign policy remained pro-Western (while continuing lip service opposition to NATO expansion). [Slide]

• Yeltsin had bigger issues, primarily economic, to deal with at home as well as his difficult re-election campaign in 1996. Work continued on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START II), which Yeltsin argued reinforced that there was no real military or nuclear threat from the West – instead that focus must continue to be on the development of the “near abroad”. [Slide]

Putin Years

• Following Yeltsin’s resignation in 1999, Vladimir Putin moved quickly after the 2000 elections to adopt a new foreign policy concept. The new foreign policy concept provided a new comprehensive presentation of Russia’s new official foreign policy goals.  

• The document has several primary areas of focus:

• 1) To reinforce Russia’s position as a great power with global influence. The document explicitly describes Russia as a great power and continuously emphasizes the importance of sovereignty and close regional ties. “To form a good-neighbour belt along the perimeter of Russia’s borders, to promote elimination of the existing and prevent the emergence of potential hotbeds of tension and conflicts in regions adjacent to the Russian Federation.” Obviously this is an affirmation of Russia’s policies involving integration with the CIS and a Russian declaration of regional authority. A great deal of emphasis is put on the reciprocal nature of this relationship. Both parties will benefit. At the same time Russia’s opposition to NATO expansion is reiterated, “Substantive and constructive cooperation between Russia and NATO is only possible if it is based on the foundation of a due respect for the interests of the sides and an unconditional fulfillment of mutual obligations assumed.” Hands off – obey treaties.
• 2) Russia’s support for a “just and democratic world order” is articulated as being based on international law in general and the UN Charter in particular. The document denounces the establishment of a unipolar world and a perceived weakening of the UN Security Council in favour of unilateral action. “The strategy of unilateral actions can destabilize the international situation, provoke tensions and the arms race, aggravate interstate contradictions, national and religious strife. The use of power methods bypassing existing international legal mechanisms cannot remove the deep socio-economic, inter-ethnic and other contradictions that underlie conflicts, and can only undermine the foundations of law and order.” “Russia proceeds from the premise that the use of force in violation of the U.N. Charter is unlawful and poses a threat to the stabilization of the entire system of international relations. Attempts to introduce into the international parlance such concepts as "humanitarian intervention" and "limited sovereignty" in order to justify unilateral power actions bypassing the U.N. Security Council are not acceptable.” [Slide]

• Instead the document looks to a multi-polar system with Russia in a prominent role, a role that should be acknowledged by other world powers. Keep in mind that this is a 2000 document and precedes both the 9/11 attacks and most importantly the War in Iraq – a conflict which Russia opposed in large part based on this commitment to multi-polar international decision making. “The world order of the XXI century must be based on mechanisms of collective resolution of key problems, on the priority of law and broad democratization of international relations.”

• 3) In terms of foreign policy tools the document argues that while military power remains a critical component of foreign policy and national security, that the Cold War is over and there are opportunities for cooperation in all avenues. “The threat of a global nuclear conflict has been reduced to a minimum.” Bilateral and multi-lateral measures are necessary and Russia intends to focus both on a regional level and on a global level through multilateralism. “Russia is interested in a stable system of international relations based on principles of justice, mutual respect and mutually advantageous cooperation. Such a system is called upon to ensure reliable security for each member of the world community in political, military, economic, humanitarian and other areas.” An example in this area is the affirmation of Russia’s commitment to the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty as the “cornerstone of strategic stability.” In 2002 the United States unilaterally withdrew from the ABM treaty to pursue its missile defence program. [Slide]

• 4) That the foremost goal of Russian foreign policy within this multi-lateral framework must me the combating of international terrorism “which is capable of destabilizing the situation not only in individual states, but in entire regions.” Obviously this relates to the
situation in Chechnya and becomes even more important following the Moscow Theatre Attack and Beslan school hostage crisis in the following years. But also a nexus of cooperation with the United States on a perceived common issue – as the US was already fighting Al Qaeda at this point following the embassy bombings in Tanziniya and Kenya and later the attack on the USS Cole and 9/11.

- 5) International economic relations as a main priority. The policy concept links economic security very clearly as a foreign policy objective. It is addressed both as an opportunity for engagement with international organizations, AND as a push for a “fair” international trade system to minimize any negative effects of globalization through the “utilization of all available economic levers and resources for upholding its national interests.” Referring particularly to the method of economic development Russia embarked on during the Putin years including projects of nationalization. [Slide]

- 6) Finally that Russia should reach out and “develop mutually advantageous cooperation with China in all areas.” This statement was to become a key element of Russian foreign policy and a mechanism to further Russia’s goal of a multi-polar international structure. In 2001 Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan joined together to form the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that was based on previous multi-lateral treaties. The group would further this foreign policy objective through economic, cultural and military cooperation. Although its stated mission is not that of a military nature as is NATO’s it is more and more seen as a regional equivalent to the European security pact.

- In 2002, the goals present in the foreign policy concept were reiterated in "Foreign and Security Policy of the Russian Federation at the Beginning of the 21st Century" in a Statement by Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexei Meshkov (part of the assigned readings), particularly in light of the apparent success at the time of a UN formulated multi-lateral response in the invasion of Afghanistan. One aspect that also received added attention was a greater focus on European cooperation, largely to be achieved through the OSCE in both security and economic matters.

- In 2008, President Medvedev produced a further Foreign Policy Concept designed to serve as a supplement to the 2000 document. In it the developments of the intervening years are taken into account, in particular the success of the Russian economy and its increased regional and global role, developed partially through its various oppositions to US policy.
The core theme is that Russia has recovered and now plays a vital role in international affairs. Further that the rise of Russia and other states (and implicitly the events in Iraq) have led to a multi-polar world. The goal is no longer the re-establishment of great power status, or for the international community to take Russia seriously, but Russia’s new strength and how it can be based utilized to improve its position. “A new Russia, basing on a solid foundation of its national interests, has now acquired a full-fledged role in global affairs.”

It directly explains the basis for the supposition: “The Russian Federation possesses real capacity to play a well deserved role globally. In this respect, of fundamental importance are the following factors: strengthened Russian statehood, stable economic growth, further political and economic reforms, resolution of social problems, overcoming of the resource-based economy and its transition to innovations, as well as improved demographic situation.”

It explains that the West’s resistance to the confident advance of Moscow’s new policy is due to its weakness. “The reaction to the prospective loss by the historic West of its monopoly on globalization processes find expression, in particular, in the inertia of the political and psychological attitude of “containing Russia”. Referring to the Western response to Russian reactions on issues Russia has expressed in the previous Policy Concept.

In addition to restating the importance of multi-polarity and law in international relations, the new policy extols the virtues of expansion of the CIS military cooperation and further coordination with groups like the SCO. It proposes further cooperation with NATO, the EU, and the Arab world, commensurate with its new global stature – including its strong position in the natural resource sector.

A key caveat is the new line: “If partners are not prepared for joint action, Russia will be forced to act independently for the protection of national interests, but always based on international law.” Echoing directly statements by the Bush Administration prior to the invasion of Iraq.

Now that we have a grasp on what constitutes official Russian foreign policy the question becomes: to what extent does this official rhetoric mirror reality? In many ways the positions espoused in the 2000 Security concept have followed the objectives of the Putin Presidency in the foreign policy area. Russia has continuously sought to reassert its authority both regionally and globally. While some may argue, particularly Washington policy makers, that this has involved a newfound bellicose attitude on
Russia’s behalf – I see the situation as much more complex. Before 9/11 and before Iraq, Putin outlined his vision for a multi-polar world, not with Russia as a global military superpower like the Soviet Union, but as a key player at the table of world affairs.

- Over the eight years of the Bush Administration, every tenant of Russia’s official foreign policy was directly challenged – through unilateral action in Iraq and the resultant weakening of the role of the security council, the US pullout of ABM treaty (seen as a strategic cornerstone), the rapid expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe (now on Russia’s doorstep), support of the regime in Georgia, the potential Anti-Ballistic Missile system deployments in border countries and finally the economic impact of the global financial crisis.

- Russia’s response to each of these actions has been consistent with its stated objectives. [Slide]

- The Medvedev security concept reflects the actions of the United States and its disregard for multi-polar decision making in favour of containment and unilateral action. The US policy was crafted on the belief that Russian strength is incompatible with US security objectives.

- Only through a re-examination of these policies, particularly in light of the diminished capacity of US power, since Iraq, but particularly over the last year or so with the Financial Crisis, can a mutually acceptable foreign policy arrangement be reached. Such a policy, by necessity must recognize Russia’s regional role.

- Russia not perfect – done what it has said it will do. Instead of treating this as the first steps in a new Cold War, instead an opportunity for new methods of interaction.