During the very short period of its existence, the foreign policy of the new Russia, which emerged as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has passed through several very distinct phases. True, it was preceded by the millennial tradition of Muscovy, Imperial Russia, and the authoritarian Soviet Union.

However persistently the new Russia’s foreign policy establishment tried to get rid of this tradition, it penetrated into Russian external posture in various ways or at least influenced it. Not only this influence, but foremost the four years in which the creation of a new foreign policy for the hesitantly emerging Russian democracy was attempted, are of major analytical interest.

Among the characteristic features of this new foreign policy, its origin and development, it is essential to single out the one which is fundamentally different from the foreign policy of the Soviet Union as well as - though to a lesser degree - from the foreign policy of Imperial Russia.

This specific feature is growing out of the environment in which the foreign policy is formed. In the new Russia, from the very beginning this foreign policy was and continues to be the object of a sharp domestic political struggle. It is something which neither Russian society, nor the foreign policy itself, had ever experienced before. The struggle is evolving in a number of dimensions.

In the first place, it is evolving in society’s conscience. Its most vivid manifestation took place in the general elections which reflected the nationalist shift in the public mind. The authorities are obliged to take this reality into consideration in their attempts to widen the social base of their rule.

Secondly, naturally different, often diametrically opposite attitudes are preached and practised by political parties. It is generally a healthy phenomenon of political life in a stable democratic society. In unstable conditions, which currently prevail in Russia, some kind of foreign policy consensus is required for the present period of transition to democracy; however, this political disarray is often destroying stability and predictability of the federation’s course in international relations.
Third, the above-mentioned disarray is especially evident in legislative bodies, in particular in the lower chamber, the Duma. Populist and unrealistic decisions are adopted far too frequently. It is true that, according to the 1993 Russian Constitution, the executive power can practise foreign policy quite independently (though this does not always mean wisely, as wrong decisions are quite abundant). Still the Duma, by appealing to the public, is occasionally able to force the executive to take account of its positions.

Fourth, the relations between the centre and the periphery have proven to be quite complex. These complexities appear exceptionally vividly in faraway areas, like the Pacific Far East. There, local administrations are actively trying to influence Russia’s relations with China and Japan.

In the centre itself, the bureaucratic infighting between various agencies of the executive is adding uncertainties to an already quite confusing situation. These rivalries existed in Soviet, as well as, earlier, in Imperial Russia. But then it was the only or at least the major confusing factor.

The final result of this complicated knot of influences is frequent change of the course of foreign policy, vacillations and unpredictability. This knot is imposed on an abundance of realistic and objective problems which overburden the making of the foreign policy of a new Russia that is trying to dismantle the heritage of her authoritarian past. As a result, one can define at least three phases of new Russia’s foreign policy in such a short period, each of these phases having clear, distinct features.

The first phase was evolving as Russia was obtaining her sovereignty within the USSR, before the dissolution of the Soviet Union on 8 December 1991. It was the period when Russia was not yet exercising the foreign policy of a truly sovereign state but was actively contributing to her future, completely independent stance. But even at that stage, Russia was taking positions on human rights, arms control and disarmament, and international security, that were much more democratic than the positions of the Soviet Union of which Russia was still a part.

After 8 December 1991, the situation changed dramatically. Russia quickly entered the second cycle of her foreign policy, this time as a completely independent state. This second phase continued about one and a half years and ended in the spring and early summer of 1993. The overwhelming desire of the Russian leadership, at this stage, was to establish itself as a new state in the international arena, to ensure its international legitimacy and its role of natural heir to the Soviet Union and all its predecessors.

There was only one reasonable course of behaviour to achieve these ends - to establish stable working relations with major industrial
democracies. A serious moral-political reason also pushed Russia in that direction. Western democracies are the most successful personifications of the values and phenomena towards which the new Russia turned, i.e. the market economy, democracy, civil society, political pluralism, protection of human rights, etc.

To sum up the results of the second phase, one should recognise that the practical political goals of this orientation toward the West were generally achieved. The major Western powers quickly recognised and supported Russia, President Yeltsin, and his team. Russia occupied all the positions of the Former Soviet Union in international organisations and became party to all the treaties of the FSU. The fears which existed in Moscow in December 1991 - January 1992 (that Russia would be underrated relatively to its size in the CIS) quickly evaporated.

But the second phase did not solely consist of achievements. While solving one set of vital problems, this massive alignment with the West created other problems. As it often happens in Russian history, the generally reasonable course was too heavily emphasised and implemented at the expense of many other problems which also demanded attention. In the process, the extremely important web of relations with the CIS members was neglected. The same happened with the relations with, on the one hand, nations of Central and Eastern Europe and, on the other, with such vital partners as China, India, and with nations of the Pacific-Asian area in general. The ‘Third World’ - Latin-American, Asian, and African countries - seemed for a while non-existent on Russia’s international agenda.

The second cycle created domestic difficulties as well. The mistakes and miscalculations were - sometimes rather effectively - seized upon by the opposition against the president and his team. The reaction of the domestic opinion to this criticism was mixed. One part of the opposition attacked the Russian leadership’s foreign policy for domestic political purposes, though the general public easily recognised the self-seeking motives of these attacks. But at the same time, quite serious and substantial criticism emerged from within the ranks of the reformers themselves.

The administration could not easily dismiss this criticism. As a result, since the spring of 1993, it started to turn from a uniformly pro-Western stance to a more diversified course, thus opening the third phase of its foreign policy. The tendency toward more political realism based on Russia’s national interests was proclaimed constantly from the beginning. The diversification and emphasis on national interests presupposes a formulation of priorities, and it has quickly become a favourite game for politicians and experts. To a certain extent, it introduced more balance into
the implementation of foreign policy. On the domestic scene, it helped attempts to widen public support for foreign policy objectives.

Still, this turn to more realism was uncertain and erratic. For one thing, the inertia of the previous cycle continued to influence the foreign policy machinery. Proclaimed priorities often remained hollow. At the same time, the apparently more reasonable proclaimed trends in the third phase were not free from overzealousness and exalted exaggerations in words and sometimes in deeds. Since the proclaimed greater attention to national interests (which in reality was not often practised) was now and then accompanied by noisy pronouncements of a rather egoistic nature, this fuelled complaints in the outside world about what was perceived as Russia’s imperial tendencies. All in all, the policy lacked stability and created an impression of vagueness and vacillation, resulting in a growing dissatisfaction within Russian society, both simulated and real.

New conditions for a more stable and realistic fourth phase emerged at the beginning of 1996 with the widely-welcomed changes in the Russian foreign policy establishment. Despite internal economic and political difficulties, which do not create the best background for an effective foreign policy, there are serious reasons to believe that the fourth cycle will comprise all the major features which are needed for a coherent foreign policy: strategic vision, stability, predictability, a clearly defined set of priorities, and determination in their implementation.

All these and other positive features are forming the really new foreign policy of modern Russia based on her national interests and the international responsibilities of a great power. Like any other great power, Russia has her own national interests which she is protecting and pursuing within the world community, naturally in a prudent, responsible, and constructive way.

Obviously, the experience of the first three cycles should be carefully analysed and taken into consideration, especially the positive aspects, although it is more of a negative experience. For any country, and in particular for a great power, stability in pursuing its foreign policy is exceptionally important. Zigzags and warps, which repeatedly occurred in the first four years of Russia’s independent foreign policy, frequently harmed her national interests. Undoubtedly, the stable strategy should be coupled with flexible tactics which take into consideration all realities and possibilities. But there is no place for the uncertainties and wavering in the functioning of foreign policy which regrettably occurred frequently in the first years. The fourth cycle of Russia’s foreign policy which started emerging early in 1996 is quickly eliminating the mistakes and inefficiencies of the past.
Quite clearly, major criteria and priorities are steadily being formulated. Among them, the creation of external conditions for reforming Russia and for favourable economic and political development and, as one of the most important priorities, the protection of her territorial integrity; encouragement of centripetal tendencies in the CIS; support for international stability, both global and regional; prevention of the emergence of new hotbeds of tension and peaceful settlement of the existing conflict situations, combating terrorism, prevention of the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

Careful analysis of Russia’s interests and the experience of the first years of her independent foreign policy led to the considered and practical conclusion that external relations should be pursued along all azimuths. Proper relations should be developed with the CIS countries, the US, Europe, whether Western or Central and Eastern Europe, China, India, Japan, the whole Asian-Pacific area, Canada, the Middle East, and, in general, the developing world. But such an approach evidently does not rule out priorities.

In the fourth cycle of Russia’s foreign policy it was finally realised, not only in words, but what is extremely important, also in deeds, that the first priority is to develop relations with the CIS countries, in particular in the economic sphere, where integrationist tendencies are rapidly and widely expressing themselves from all sides.

The above does not mean that these tendencies are evolving at the same speed and depth everywhere. There are different levels. Some of the CIS states are more advanced in the direction of integration and merging of their economies and the creation of Commonwealth structures which will naturally not limit the national sovereignty of member states. Some progress was already achieved at the beginning of the fourth phase in integration between Russia and Belarus and to a lesser extent between them both and Kazakhstan and Kirghizia.

Unfortunately, the healthy integration processes which are developing in the CIS on the basis of equality of the member states are questioned in the USA, and often in Western Europe and even opposed in some Western quarters as signs of the restoration of the Soviet Union. But the integration which is gathering strength has nothing to do with attempts directed at such a restoration, first and foremost because revival of the USSR is objectively impossible. It would not make sense to try to turn backwards the development of the sovereignty which was achieved by the former Soviet republics, whatever hardships this development encounters.

Another important factor is that, in at least some of the CIS states, more and more integration tendencies are evolving better than in Russia herself.
There exists a clear ambivalence in Moscow as to what is preferable: integration with one or more of the CIS member states, which will put a noticeable economic burden on Russia or doing the economic reforms and development alone, thus eliminating such a burden. This ambivalence itself exonerates Russia from accusations of supposed imperial tendencies.

And finally, it is widely recognised that any integration can take place only on the basis of equality of the integrating partners, respect for their sovereignty and freedom to take decisions. In other words, exactly as it was done in Europe, though analogies can only be approximate here. The early experience of the European Communities may be of particular interest. So far as the CIS space is concerned, it should be unequivocally stated that no real integration is possible, no centripetal forces will work, if it is done under pressure and with infringement of the sovereign rights of the states. It is impossible in essence, and more than that, any such attempts would be counterproductive.

The fresh attention of Russia’s foreign policy to the CIS area is expanding by itself and not at the expense of other crucial directions. Relations with the United States, Western Europe, the West as a whole have always been of great importance. In the fourth cycle steady efforts are undertaken by Russian diplomacy to put these relations on a stable, constructive, predictable, and reliable foundation which takes account of the national interests of the partners.

The goal of relations with the West in this fourth phase of Russia’s foreign policy is civilised partnership and in a preferably increasing number of cases a privileged partnership, with the clear understanding that this should be a partnership of equals and not a partnership of leaders and followers.

Relations between partners who have different and sometimes contradictory national interests may not always be rosy. The sharp disagreement over NATO’s enlargement despite Russia’s objections and opposition is one example where they are not. This opposition is based on the consensus of practically all the political forces in Russian society, which shows how seriously Russia’s interests are infringed.

This partnership should develop on the ground of equality, mutual interests and in particular of taking each other’s interests into account. Russia is bound to protect her interests more actively and more effectively. At the same time, international events should be prevented from sliding down to confrontation and resurgence of the Cold War. Such a rationale is extremely important for all.

In the fourth cycle of foreign policy, Russia is definitely aiming at consolidating relations with Europe. Cooperation and partnership with the
European Union and Western Europe as a whole continues to be very high on Russia’s list of priorities. At the same time, Russia aims at normal, good and stable relations with these nations, in particular in the economic sphere. The OSCE will naturally continue to be the object of Russia’s attention.

In sum, it seems that at last the new Russia is straightening the course of her foreign policy and external relations. Russian foreign policy promises to become increasingly stable and effective and it is naturally based on compliance with Russia’s international obligations and international law in the interest of international cooperation and security.

(Paper updated in February 1996)