



Alexander Yakovenko

«WHEN A COUNTRY GROWS STRONGER, ITS LANGUAGE  
BECOMES MORE POPULAR»

**Vladimir Orlov, Security Index Editor-in-Chief, interviews Alexander Yakovenko, First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia.<sup>1</sup>**

**SECURITY INDEX:** Even though bilateral relations between states are important, in the world of today, due to increasing interdependence, multilateral participation is becoming more relevant. What role does Russia see for multilateral diplomacy in general and the United Nations in particular?

**YAKOVENKO:** Be it multilateral or bilateral diplomacy, we see it as our main task to establish most favorable conditions for the development of our country: economic, socioeconomic, etc. For the country to develop more dynamically, good relations with other countries are required. Our citizens are supposed to feel secure in the outside world. In this respect, naturally, we should let multilateral tools play their role, the United Nations being one of them.

Today there seems to be two trends in international practices. The first one, to which we adhere, aims at strengthening by all means of international mechanisms, particularly multilateral diplomacy. Here we mean the United Nations. We support strengthening such mechanisms because the UN framework allows tackling a wide range of issues multilaterally, by broad coalitions, and, most importantly, based on international law. Hence, it has been a constant major line of Russian foreign policy we consistently follow.

Regretfully, not all countries like the approach. In this case, let's say, the United States takes an ambivalent approach towards the United Nations. On the one hand, it understands that it is impossible to tackle successfully issues of world politics without involvement of the Security Council. On the other hand, its work in the United Nations always shows something that if not undermines efficiency of the United Nations then at least impedes its activities. A vivid example here is the fact that the United States has the largest arrears in payment to the UN budget.

Life experience shows that it is very hard to deal with international affairs without the United Nations and its Security Council. This very idea is demonstrated by the outcome of the U.S. venture in Iraq, when in fact military activities were launched without endorsement of the Security Council. The result is well-known. After some time Americans had to go back to the Council for such an endorsement.

It indicates that the Security Council is equally needed today as a single working tool of decisionmaking in international politics that can invoke the use of force clause under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. We feel it important to strengthen the role of the United Nations as the latter has always relied on international law.

By the way, I should say that this line if followed by all CIS countries because they clearly understand it: for a country to be heard, it should have an equal opportunity to speak. Only the UN framework offers that.



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**SECURITY INDEX:** What role does Russia play in international development programs?

**YAKOVENKO:** Today, after the difficult times for Russia during the 1990s, we are developing a new approach to international involvement. Our participation in activities of this or that organization used to be active, but no more than that, while today we render significant support to them, funding included.

A new component of our policy towards multilateral diplomacy is represented by International Development Assistance Concept endorsed by the President of the Russian Federation. It means that we are intent to join other countries of the G8 to meet the level of financial support rendered to international projects with volunteer participation. Today we contribute about \$200 million to various projects. Hopefully, by 2009 we will reach the level of \$0.5 billion. It is real money allocated from the budget that we are going to expend. For instance, it implies increased contributions to the World Food Program, too. Nowadays our share is \$11 million, but we are going to raise it. Same can be said about our input for the Economic Commission for Europe: a few million today to become more in the future. The United Nations Industrial Development Organization will see the difference as well as many others. On the whole, it can be said that Russia is becoming one of the growing donor countries.

We are starting to render significant support under international law and UN programs to those countries that are close by, those are CIS countries. They are our priority. We feel it important that our closest neighbors should actively develop. And we are planning to assist them via various UN programs that have no politics behind them. This new trend, which you see starting today, I believe, is going to develop gradually to produce some tangible results in five or six years' time. We do so because relations with those states, with our closest neighbors, ensure stability and economic well-being in our own country.

**SECURITY INDEX:** Russia is more and more focused on establishing its positive image, also by promoting the Russian language abroad. Do you have any plans to open branches of Russian think tanks abroad so that they could deliver more competent information on Russia's foreign and security policies?

**YAKOVENKO:** The 1990s saw a colossal decline of interest in the Russian language. The country's economy was on its last legs. The Soviet Union had just collapsed. Many even thought Russia was heading for the cutting room floor together with CIS countries. Today the situation is different. The economy is growing at an exhilarating pace. Naturally, it adds to an increasing interest to the Russian language. Hence, there is interest in it, which was clearly shown during 2007, which had been declared Year of the Russian Language.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs arranged many events throughout that year – contests, quizzes, festivals. However, there are some things to do first. Firstly, more effort will be spent to expand the possibility to learn Russian in many countries of the world. We recently adopted the *Russian World* program, which means significant funds allocated to that end. More opportunities to study Russian will be created around the world, more books published in Russian. When a country grows stronger, looks more attractive, its language becomes more popular.

Look, Russian is the language of communication in space. An astronaut entering the International Space Station should know Russian, it's a must. Hopefully, the Russian language will regain its place. We are working on that through our embassies, and will do everything to help, also financially.

However, there are problems in promoting Russian, as well as the country's image. First thing, practically all of the media have been monopolized by large English-language companies. It includes TV, newspapers, and the rest of the media world: major newspapers and all Internet news sites, in fact, target a specific group and have a very specific owner. However saturated the media space is, everyone tracks literally just a dozen of largest news agencies. Historically, those are Reuters, Associated Press, *CNN*. It is extremely hard to join in as it requires money and influence. *CNN* was started as a large U.S. public-private project to increase influence in the media.

We now have *Russia Today* TV channel. A very interesting one, I think. During the past year it has improved significantly. But it isn't let to be heard. It's very hard to promote it as an alterna-

tive outlook. I think, as we regain weight, economically and politically, those largest news sources will more actively present viewpoints from our country.

And one last thing: the media component is no less important here than smart ideas. One may have plenty of clever ideas that no one will ever hear about. Here's exactly where multilateral diplomacy demonstrates its importance, that's why many countries stick to the United Nations and bodies within its system. It's a place for their voices to be heard. It's a possibility to deliver a certain position to a significant number of states without any extra financial investments.

**SECURITY INDEX:** How can you comment on the climate change issues?

**YAKOVENKO:** Frankly speaking, the U.S. approach looks more appealing to me, which can be summarized as follows: national legislation should incorporate very serious commitments, though deliberate ones, as to how certain industries would be developed, including energy-saving and environmentally-friendly technologies, that would tangibly cut down emissions.

When my EU colleagues and I have a debate on that issue, I tell them: you want limited emissions, but do you know the efficiency of those technologies that you consign to developing countries? Just how efficient are they, what is the outcome, how much of the emissions have they helped to cut? I should say, no answer so far.

I have an ambivalent feeling towards the issue of climate change. On the one hand, no one understands the processes caused by our industrial activities. Obviously, there is an impact. Obviously, I agree, new technologies need to be there. However, issues related to climate change have a false bottom behind them. Let me remind you of the situation around combating those ozone holes by abolishing Freon gases used in fridges. Back during the Soviet period the country had to switch to new types of cooling agents. No one ever proved it later that the holes had been caused by Freon gases. It was a world-wide venture, when a company supplying those other types of technology used the international framework to expand into all countries.

I believe, a similar thing may occur with climate change. In this case large companies might want to use it to promote their technologies. They will be transferred to developing countries, maybe even imposed. It is a large commercial undertaking. We wish to see as little as possible of a commercial undertaking, but rather a real discussion of problems we are facing.

Any benefit for us? I believe, there is and there isn't. On the one hand, there is an understanding that good agreements, reached sooner or later, will mean cutting down on carbon dioxide emissions. I think our country needs that. I believe that in this respect international commitments will bring a positive effect. On the other hand, it may slow down economic growth. Look, Russian economy is growing and I think the growth will be even greater. We need a very close analysis. And I believe it's wrong if some countries decide to stay away from that effort.

**SECURITY INDEX:** When describing relations between NATO members and Russia we now more and more often hear the word *new cold war*..

**YAKOVENKO:** To begin with, there is no *new cold war*. I would call that striving to promote own interests. Not everyone is ready to have good respect for our interests because the 1990s added significantly to Russia losing its influence over world affairs. Today it is a little bit different. The Russian society would have its interests protected. If we don't like something, today we say that out loud. And opinion polls in countries of Western Europe indicate that 60 percent agree with what we say. President Putin's speech in Munich in February 2007 was believed by many to be the start of a cold war. Far from that. He just voiced some important things to unburden the mind, to raise our concerns. What he said in Munich was an invitation to a dialogue, to discuss issues that there are today between us.

If we take the Russia-U.S. agenda, there are two major issues, of which only one affects stability of the bilateral relations: it's GMD deployment in Poland and the Czech Republic. The other issue is Kosovo, which is broader in its nature. But its tension is no less than that over the missile defense.



There are a few things that spoil our relations. But they are caused by the increasing competition. I think it is going to increase even further. However, today our countries have so many common tasks that a new stage of the cold war is hardly possible.

**SECURITY INDEX:** You mentioned GMD in Europe and the status of Kosovo as major controversies between Russia and the United States. Do you mean to say that the issue of Iran is no longer among the rocks on which we split?

**YAKOVENKO:** We don't have any major controversy with the United States over Iran. We are on the same track. The only thing that we view differently is how to move along that track. Americans proceed from a very simplistic idea that right now we all should press on Iran, squeeze it with sanctions. For an unknown reason no one proposes sanctions against the country's oil industry, which would be the most tangible blow for Iran. It's beating about the bush. No one says a word about oil, keeping dead silence.

That's the philosophy behind the U.S. approach. With us it's different. We think we should negotiate with Iran. There's no military solution. And we should build up pressure. We shouldn't feel that desperate about the nuclear program of Iran. It's very hard to develop a bomb that could be used as a weapon in just a few years. And even if a nuclear device is created, it would not necessarily mean it is a warhead: testing is needed for that. Hence, we do have some time.

I think, our approach is important because on the one hand, it increases pressure against Iran so that it complies with our demands, and on the other hand, we don't make any sort of crisis in the region, with all the consequences that could follow. America is far away, while we aren't. Hence, any military venture, causing extra problems, would further destabilize the situation.

Americans are now in Iraq. Look what has happened. The country is torn apart by internal conflicts. It has become more radical. They used to have no terrorists, and now they do. If Iran is now made into a similar loophole, then we'll see history repeating itself.

We fully share the concerns Americans have expressed. We too don't want Iran to take hold of nuclear weapons. The question is how to ensure it. Hence, Europeans and we try to prevent Americans from taking such inconsiderate steps. And, doing justice to them, they do listen. The fact that the six nations are working at that track, generally, demonstrates that our line in these issues is quite popular.

**SECURITY INDEX:** Today the European Union is developing a new strategy towards Central Asia. How does Russia see it?

**YAKOVENKO:** Naturally, we think that all countries can cooperate with anyone they like. I heard something about that strategy. It has two elements. One is strengthening political influence. Today EU countries have a very weak influence over Central Asia mainly because until a few years ago there was strong criticism of human rights violations followed by certain sanctions. It particularly concerns Uzbekistan, where there was a bandit coup attempt they tried to present as a human rights-related affair. That indeed estranged Central Asian countries from Western European states. However, the latter take interest in the former.


Look, for one thing, they want to strengthen their political influence, which is, generally, fine, and, again show economic interest in the capacity of those countries. Everyone clearly understands that they are very rich in mineral and other primary resources. Obviously, the EU has a strong incentive to promote its economic interests in the region. And to do this, it needs to develop a certain policy line.

**SECURITY INDEX:** If we speak about Russia's closest neighbors, it's common knowledge now that within the post-Soviet space there are many frozen conflicts. In this respect, how does Russia view the issue of Transnistria today? Does Russia want to keep the *status quo*?

**YAKOVENKO:** By no means would we want to keep the *status quo*. We look at it in a very simple way. It's Chisinau and Tiraspol which are to come to an agreement. And we are constantly pushing them towards it. For us, there is only one problem with Transnistria: we have to evacuate an immense arsenal remaining from the Soviet troops. Now it is guarded by 150 people. The Transnistrian side does not let us evacuate it. And we are often accused of keeping our

troops in the area. How can we possibly leave the arsenal there? If we just leave it there, it is not going to stay there, it will stream into our country and to other neighbors, Ukraine to name one, and Western Europe. That's why we are sitting there and guard these weapons – and cannot even withdraw them.

There is no agreement between Chisinau and Tiraspol. Frankly speaking, it doesn't matter to us what terms they decide to agree upon. The main thing is that they do agree at all. As soon as such an accord is in place, it will be there for a long haul. Hence, our main effort today is to get them at the table so that they could agree. That's, basically, it.

We don't have any special interests in that area. We are ready to develop purely economic relations with Moldova, naturally, on an equal basis. This is a typical policy towards all CIS countries. Our main aim is to minimize the potential for a conflict. And have no lop-sided agreements. 

### Note

<sup>1</sup> The interview is based on a public lecture that Alexander Yakovenko delivered at the International Summer School on Global Security held on July 9, 2007 by the PIR Center.



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