

The Nuances of Diplomacy

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In the second U.S. presidential debate, we were treated to the ruminations of Senators John McCain and Barack Obama over whether it is accurate to describe Russia as an "evil empire."

In politics, words matter. But they can mean different things to different people, and such discrepancies can have a seriously impact on the relations between states. It is essential that political leaders, diplomats and journalists pay careful attention to what their foreign interlocutors are actually saying. It's one thing to argue about the interpretation of policy, but it is something else when the stated policy is inaccurately reported.

On Aug. 31 in Sochi, President Dmitry Medvedev gave an interview to three Russian television stations in which he laid out the five principles defining the country's foreign policy -- what some have been calling "The Medvedev Doctrine." This was reported in the next day's *New York Times* in a story titled, "Russia Claims Its Sphere of Influence in the World." Subsequent reporting in many media outlets reiterated the idea that Medvedev was claiming the Kremlin's "sphere of influence" in the former Soviet Union.

There is only one problem with this statement. Medvedev did not actually use the words "sphere of influence." What he did say was: "There are regions in which Russia has privileged interests."

There is an important difference between claiming "influence" and asserting "interests." It is perfectly legitimate for any state to express its "interests." And different states can share common "interests." In contrast, "influence" is a one-way street, the imposition of one state's will on another.

Medvedev himself is partly to blame for the confusion by using the word "privileged" -- a highly prejudicial term and one that is not part of the usual diplomatic vocabulary. This may be a sign of Medvedev's relative inexperience in the international arena. Despite his penchant for off-the-cuff earthy remarks, former President Vladimir Putin was much more careful in his use of diplomatic language.

It turns out that Medvedev had previously used the phrase "sphere of strategic interests" on only one occasion -- in a speech in Tajikistan on Aug. 29. But it appears that he has never used the phrase "sphere of influence" with respect to Russia's foreign policy.

Nor did Putin, during his eight years as president. For example, in a May 2005 interview, U.S. newsman Mike Wallace asked Putin: "President Bush is meeting with Baltic leaders before his trip here. He will also visit Georgia. You wouldn't want him to make such stops? You'd prefer to see him outside what is called the Russian sphere of influence?" Putin replied "Not in the least. The former republics of the Soviet Union are independent states."

Putin did use the phrase in a negative context -- to describe the actions of his domestic political opponents, and to characterize some Western actions. For example, he told a news conference on July 3, 2000, that "NATO continues to take on new member countries and expand its sphere of influence."

"Sphere of influence" is not the only contentious phrase in the Russian diplomatic lexicon. Equally vexatious is the use of the term "near abroad" to refer to the former Soviet republics. In fact, while "near abroad" was commonly used in the Russian media in the 1990s, Putin and Medvedev have been very sparing in the use of this term. It appears only three times in the presidential archives since 2000.

For example, in an interview with Japan's NHK on July 3, Medvedev said, "We constantly make decisions on providing assistance to various countries affected by drought and lack of food, both countries in the near abroad and further afield." Putin started to use the more friendly sounding "near neighbors" to refer to the Commonwealth of Independent States -- for example, in his May 2006 annual address, and in his call-in program in October 2007. In using this terminology, it appears that he is echoing European Union practice, since the EU has a "Neighborhood Policy" to govern its relations with adjacent states.

It's one thing when McCain and Obama discuss whether Russia is an "evil empire" based on their own analyses and interpretations of the country's actions. But we should not put words into Russian leaders' mouths based on our own preconceptions of their intentions.

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