

*Sergei Karaganov
Honorary Chairman of the Presidium,
Council on Foreign and Defense Policy*

“Nuclear War Can Be Won”

We say Sergei Karaganov and imply a grandiose disturbance. We say a grandiose disturbance and mean Sergei Karaganov. The honorary chairman of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy is the flesh and blood of the Russian elite, a person whom the Russian President can publicly call by name, and who regularly sits next to Sergei Lavrov at various events. And this is also the man who has recently suggested the unthinkable—contemplating possible Russian nuclear strikes on NATO countries.

When I met Sergei Karaganov at the Valdai Forum, I, naturally, could not help asking him to clarify his position. And, oddly enough, we had a rather intellectual conversation.

“Minimal editing. It was interesting to talk to someone who disagrees with me. Everyone is afraid. Only the press berates me. Good luck!” This is a message I received from Sergei Karaganov to approve this interview. And good luck to you, too, Sergei Alexandrovich! I was not afraid of arguing with you at all. But, I admit, I was very surprised to see that you approved this text almost without corrections.

Q: Sergei Alexandrovich, one of your recent articles was titled “No Choice Left: Russia Will Have to Launch a Nuclear Strike on Europe.” Are you sure that Russia has no choice left?

A: This title was thought up for my article by the editors of the media outlet that published it. I hope there will be no Russian nuclear strike on Europe. But our American partners, who deliberately downplay the danger of nuclear war, should know that this is possible.

My position is that we have a careless or maybe even reckless nuclear doctrine. It allows the use of nuclear weapons only in the most improbable situations. This only gives the Americans the green light to use conventional forces against us.

This was impossible before, in principle. A big war in the underbelly of a great nuclear power was unthinkable. I am afraid this is also our fault to some extent. We relaxed and followed theories and ideas from the 1980s and 1990s.

Q: Two actual examples. America was waging a war in Vietnam, and the USSR, despite all the protests from Washington, supplied weapons to its enemies. Then the Soviet Union was fighting in Afghanistan, and the United States, despite all the protests from Moscow, supplied weapons to its adversaries. Is there any difference from the current situation in Ukraine?

A: The difference is quite obvious. Vietnam was God knows where—very far from the United States. It wasn’t Mexico. If the war against the United States were

fought by Mexico, and we supplied weapons there, this would be a completely different story, or if Canada started a war with the United States, and we supplied weapons there.

As for Afghanistan, the Americans shipped weapons there covertly, not openly. Besides, Afghanistan was also very far from the areas where the fundamental security interests of our country were really concentrated.

Now it's a matter of life and death, it's a fundamental question of our security. This is a totally different scenario than what you have just described. So I repeat: this was impossible to imagine before.

Q: Did you make any calculations as to how many people will die if, God forbid, Russia will have to attack some countries in Eastern Europe as you suggested?

A: I think this is the most extreme scenario. I hope to God it will never come true! This is a terrible moral choice, it's a sin! Nuclear weapons must be used as a last resort in order to prevent a really big war.

But a large-scale thermonuclear war is looming not only, and not even so much, because of the situation in Ukraine. There are much deeper reasons.

Now about what I wrote. I believe that, theoretically, we will have to threaten several European countries, not necessarily in Eastern Europe, with nuclear strikes as a last resort.

Q: And what countries are we talking about?

A: In one of my articles, I wrote that if the man in the White House in Washington is not a U.S.-loathing lunatic, the Americans will never put New York, Boston or Philadelphia at risk in order to avenge Frankfurt, Poznan or Bucharest.

Q: Still, did you calculate how many people could die as a result of such strikes?

A: I did not make such calculations. But this has been done many times before. However, the figures are either completely secret or extremely unreliable.

Q: But would you like to know these figures?

A: Of course, I would. But our Western partners and the whole world must understand: one must not play with nuclear weapons, or with any weapons for that matter, in the modern world. One must not start wars. We are entering a period when objective circumstances for unleashing wars will arise around the world. New continents and new giants are rising. Many sources of conflict are emerging and more will spring up in the future. This can lead to a series of large-scale wars and eventually to a new world war.

Towards the Apocalypse

Q: But why do you think that a new global war is looming?

A: It is looming primarily because the West has gone on a desperate counteroffensive, realizing that it is losing its military superiority on which its five-hundred-year-long dominance in economics politics culture has been based. The Soviet Union was a threat to its dominance. On the basis of this superiority, the United States and West as a whole built their political, economic, and cultural dominance that allowed them to rob the rest of the world and syphon off the gross world product, to put it nicely.

Due to the turmoil of the 1990s, Russia stopped its deterrent mission. So the West went wild and committed several acts of aggression. Russia has recovered now and is stopping the West's fierce counterattack.

This problem will be solved. But the problem of new imperialist rivalry, to use the old language, will not be solved. New great powers and new "imperialist" countries will emerge. We should start placing fuses right away so that these inevitable frictions that already occur—for example, between China and India over a tiny patch of uninhabited land in the mountains—do not lead to irreparable consequences.

There will be a lot of conflicts like that. They are inevitable simply because the world is changing in such a way. A new Israeli-Palestinian conflict is flaring up before our eyes. It is also from this predictable series.

Q: Let's assume that Russia launches a nuclear strike on NATO countries as you suggest...

A: I did not suggest delivering a nuclear strike on NATO countries. I suggested forcing NATO to back down. NATO countries should mind their own business and deal with their own problems, not try to unleash external conflicts in order to distract attention from their internal failures.

Q: Suppose Russia launches a nuclear strike on NATO countries. You said before how, in your opinion, the United States will not respond to it. But can you say now how it will respond?

A: I don't know. And I don't even want to speculate on that. The only thing I know and even wrote about this in my article is that some American—and at their prompting, Russian—experts claimed that there would allegedly be a non-nuclear attack on the Russian armed forces, on our territory.

But then there will be another round of Russian nuclear strikes on Europe. And if the Americans still persist after that, then there will be a strike on American military bases. Tens of thousands of American military personnel will die. Americans are qualitatively more vulnerable than us because of their military bases around the world. And they must remember this. I don't think the Americans want tens of thousands of their troops to perish.

But I say over and over again: God forbid. I keep repeating that this is a terrible scenario. I talk about it so that people woke up, stepped away from strategic parasitism, and got out of their lethargic sleep that has lasted thirty or forty years. We have forgotten what peace is and what war is.

Q: Do you think that Russia is so weak in terms of conventional weapons that it is unable to cope with the Zelensky regime without nuclear weapons?

A: Russia is able to cope with the Kiev regime without nuclear weapons. But firstly, I feel sorry for our men. Even if we are talking about people who go to fight for money, these are still brave and courageous people, the cream of the nation.

Secondly, even if we win but do not stave the West most decisively, the slow war will continue. And we will not solve the problem of peace in Europe. We must force the West to back down radically, negotiate a new status quo, sign a peace treaty, create a demilitarized zone in what remains of Ukraine, reduce the level of military confrontation in the center of Europe, and thus solve its problem. Europe is the source of all the main troubles for humankind. We must get rid of this problem.

But we will not solve this problem by simply winning a victory in Ukraine; or rather we will solve it partly and put it off. This problem may arise again in a different form. It will arise in other regions. Conflicts will break out around the world, including around Russia.

Q: Do you have grandchildren and great-grandchildren?

A: I do.

Q: How old are they, if it is not a secret?

A: They are still very young.

Q: Do you think it will be comfortable for them to live in a world where Russia has used nuclear weapons?

A: No. But that's why I say that this is a terrible moral choice, terrible moral damage Russia will inflict upon itself. But if it is not able to effectively *threaten* those who have lost their minds, we will act carelessly and inhumanly towards ourselves and the rest of the world.

As a matter of fact, by raising this banner, I have caused a colossal attack of criticism and hatred. But I did it consciously; I drew fire to myself intentionally. I do this because I consider myself a patriot of my country and a responsible citizen of the world.

Q: Now that you raised the topic of your motives, there is a very cynical but widespread opinion that you just wanted to create some hype and get into the limelight. What would you say to that?

A: Listen, I am quite eminent and well known as it is, and I have already achieved everything that can be achieved in this world, many, many times. I do this because I consider myself morally obliged to do it.

Q: Chekhov once famously remarked that if in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Maybe we should not bring the nuclear "pistol" to the stage, let alone swinging it around?

A: It already hangs, everywhere. There are dozens of "pistols" that are either already starting to fire or will definitely do so. We must make people be much more

careful. As I have already said, people have fallen into strategic parasitism and lost the fear of war. This paves the way for new world wars that can destroy the whole of humanity in the current circumstances.

Q: You say that nuclear deterrence no longer works. But is this true? After all, if nuclear deterrence did not really work, NATO countries would have sent their troops to Ukraine long ago.

A: Nuclear deterrence has many functions. One, even the main, of them is to prevent a nuclear attack.

The second function is to prevent a direct non-nuclear attack. But it is already happening. NATO is not sending its own soldiers, but it is throwing our Ukrainian neighbors—our brothers in the past and in the future—into the meat grinder, destroying them as cheap cannon fodder.

No doubt, the war is already under way. As I say, such a war was considered absolutely unthinkable before. But the boundaries of the unthinkable will have to be compressed further.

Nuclear weapons are designed—and once worked quite effectively—as a civilizing factor that washes reckless and witless adventurers out of the elites. It worked in America. I can give a lot of such examples. It worked for us too. There are fewer examples here. But one of them is Nikita Khrushchev. He was removed largely because he started the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Now we have seen that nuclear weapons no longer play their civilizing role. U.S. Secretary of State Blinken recently said that nuclear war is no worse than global warming. This is said by man number four in the U.S. presidential line of succession!

President Biden himself declares that global warming of 1.5 degrees is worse than nuclear war. What he says is scary. These people must be pushed out. Although we do not interfere in the internal life of other states, I say straightforwardly in my article that the American deep state and the American oligarchy must understand whom they have brought to power and replace them.

The Core of the Idea

Q: What, in your opinion, military gains will Russia get if nuclear weapons are used? It is believed that this will make the military situation for Russia even worse.

A: I believe we should not use nuclear weapons. But we must force the West to retreat. Nuclear war can be won. But it will be an enormous moral loss—moral, but also political and psychological. In any case, this will largely be a pyrrhic victory. But, if we do not take decisive action, our defeat of the whole humanity will be even more disastrous.

Q: And yet: if Russia uses nuclear weapons, what will be its military gain?

A: I don't know that exactly. And nobody knows. But I think NATO will fall apart and they will all run every which way.

Q: Are you sure this is normal? A bit earlier in our conversation, you admitted the high probability of a retaliatory—albeit not necessarily nuclear, and not necessarily from the United States—strike on Russia.

A: They are just threatening, no more than that. I think they are brazenly bluffing.

Q: But can you guarantee that there will be no such strike?

A: Nothing can be guaranteed. I would like to avoid such a scenario. But strikes are already happening. They already come and hit.

For all the fierce hostility towards the DPRK, I have not heard anything about drones hitting Pyongyang. Do you know why they don't attack? Because they know in Seoul and some other neighboring countries that the retaliation will be monstrous.

The idea is to restore the effectiveness and credibility of deterrence, not to use nuclear weapons. But in order for this deterrence, and the prevention of war, attacks, and provocations to work (there can definitely be more provocations, because new types of weapons have appeared, for example, swarms of drones), it should not look like a bluff. We must be really ready to deliver on our promises. In this case, deterrence should work, and the enemy should sober up.

Q: But if Russia uses nuclear weapons, the response will definitely not involve individual drones or even a swarm of drones. Have you thought about how many people in Russia could die as a result of such a retaliatory strike?

A: I think there will be no such strike. But we should not tempt fate, of course. I know American strategy. I know their experience. I have studied it. I know that the Americans want to sit it out beyond the ocean. But they can sacrifice Europeans, of course, just as they are sacrificing Ukrainians now.

This is why I suggest that they consider a theoretical option whereby a retaliatory Russian strike will target hundreds of their military bases overseas.

Q: The fate of American bases abroad somehow worries me much less than the number of potential victims in Russia.

A: You see, if we do not stop this madness now, something will keep hitting us all the time. This terrible scenario is not the only thing to discuss. We were several years late in demanding that NATO stop its expansion to Ukraine. I kept saying for twenty-five years that this expansion would inevitably lead to war. I don't want my predictions to come true again. In fact, we and the world have a few more years, maximum, to prevent us from sliding into a global war.

Q: The use of nuclear weapons is probably the main political taboo in the world. If we break it, will we not turn into a global pariah even for those countries with which we now want to become even closer friends?

A: Maybe. Perhaps we will suffer moral losses. But what worries me most of all right now is that we will feel our guilt, of course, before ourselves and before God, but, if we do not do this, or if we are not ready to do it, then we will commit an even greater sin, even a crime against ourselves and humanity.

Q: Will the “boundless friendship” between Russia and China withstand such a blow? What do you think?

A: I hope our friendship will not be put to such a test. But I am quite aware of how the strategic thought of our Chinese colleagues goes. They certainly are lagging behind in this area. They are ahead in many other areas, but they are falling behind in this one. We must discuss this issue in depth with them. And this is already happening, including here, at the Valdai Forum.

Q: Recently, I witnessed how you managed to do almost the impossible: you united representatives of India and Pakistan, India and China in unanimous opposition to your ideas. Didn't it bother you?

A: No, it doesn't bother me at all. Everything goes according to plan. Things are very different behinds the scenes.

Q: Whose plan is it, by the way? Why did you come up with the idea of lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons now? Is this your own initiative or were you prompted by one of your numerous acquaintances and friends in the Russian elite?

A: I never do anything by order.

Q: In other words, this is solely your own initiative?

A: I never do anything by order. And in any case, I consider myself a responsible member of the Russian elite and must act in a way that is in line with the interests of our country. But I do not express any official position.

Who Has Gone Mad?

Q: You say that the West has gone mad in hating Russia. But maybe this is not madness but tough and rationally calculated competition?

A: There is an element of competition here. But the West has simply gone mad, because it is losing moral ground, it is losing economic ground, it is losing every ground in the world after its five-hundred-year dominance and after a fifteen-year-long period of its utterly dazzling victory in the late 1980s.

Q: Can you give any evidence?

A: Just look around! Why would I need any more evidence? They are crumbling entirely! They have complete morons in their leadership. Line up modern European leaders next to the leaders of the same European countries from fifty to forty years ago. These people are different physiologically. And what rubbish they say!

Q: In other words, you suggest making decisions concerning the life and death of millions of people relying entirely on the fact that there is something wrong with the faces of modern Western leaders?

A: No. Unfortunately, there is a severe degradation of elites in the West and in some other parts of the world, but particularly in the West. This is dangerous for the whole world.

Q: But how exactly are they degrading? Is President Biden dumber than President Lyndon Johnson, who for some reason started the Vietnam War?

A: President Johnson did not start it. The Vietnam War was started without him. But President Biden is by all means incomparably dumber than President Johnson, and even more so than Presidents Kennedy and Nixon. Actually, Biden is not yet the worst member of the present-day Western elites. After all, he is an old-school man. He is just quite old.

But he, too, says that nuclear war is no worse than global warming. However, we can see what is going on around him.

We can see all the American elites. I once knew them. But what we see now is just the remains of what they used to be. And there are almost no seriously thinking people left in Europe. I knew a significant part of the European strategic elites. You could disagree with them, argue, and even have verbal clashes. But they were worthy people. There are none now.

Q: Why do you call Biden dumb? Let's look at the situation from the point of view of American goals and interests: Russian energy supplies have been ousted from Europe, Europe obeys the United States without grumble...

A: The American policy to achieve these goals began long before Biden. The situation in Ukraine was intentionally destabilized in order to prevent rapprochement between Russia and Europe, which seemed quite real at the beginning of the 2000s.

In this sense, Americans act very rationally indeed, and so far they are winning, primarily commercially. They are trampling down the European economy. They have fewer possibilities to suck the World Majority countries dry, which is why they are now sucking Europe dry.

The conflict in Ukraine benefits them to some extent. What they spend on it costs them nothing by their standards, but they cause us serious strategic damage.

Q: And where does dumbness fit in here?

A: They are dumb because they are running the strategic risk of destroying both themselves and the whole world, Europe in the first place.

Q: I have recently read, with great pleasure, one of your articles published in 2011 in Rossiiskaya gazeta. I would like to quote one fragment from it: "By moving away from Europe, our country may further lose its identity and face socio-cultural degradation. Either we get closer to Europe, or we will barbarize. Russian civilization, original as it is, is still part of the European one, and it cannot exist as a civilization without it."

A: Unfortunately, we will have to tear ourselves away from it. I had such thoughts before, I remember that perfectly well. And by and large it is going to be a loss. However, fortunately, European civilization will remain with us. We have

already taken everything we needed from it, quite a long time ago. We will survive and remain perhaps the last European culture.

Humanism once came to us from Europe. But what we see there now is an absolutely crazy “abortion of values”: post-humanism and all sorts of things. We can’t do that. We are getting back to ourselves. After all, we are an Asian country that at some point got inoculated with potent European ideas. We got a lot from Europe, and we should be grateful to it.

Without Europe, we would not have Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Pushkin, and Gogol. And without Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Pushkin, and Gogol, there would be no Russia. We would be nobody. Or, sorry to say, we would be Ukraine.

Q: But if that position, as it turns out now, was wrong, naïve and poorly considered, maybe your current position is also faulty?

A: I disagree with your logic. I do not deny my previous position. I believe it will be a loss.

In fact, in the early 1990s, I was one of those who insisted that we should join NATO. I thought that if we joined NATO, then NATO would turn into a pan-European security system. But it didn’t work out. Therefore, we must act against NATO to make it fall apart, to destroy it.

Q: And yet you admit that you were wrong. Maybe your current position is also wrong?

A: It’s possible. I’m not a god. But, as they say, God sometimes makes mistakes, too. I just believe that based on my experience, my knowledge, and my moral feeling, I have to do exactly what I’m doing now, even though it is the least pleasant job.

Q: Judging from Putin’s answer to your question at the Valdai Forum, he believes that the current Russian nuclear doctrine is quite adequate. Does this mean from your point of view that the President is not vigilant enough?

A: I am a scholar, not a politician. My duty is to tell the truth. And as far as I understand, the President hears me. He said so.

Interviewed by Mikhail Rostovsky

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