

“The Current Nuclear Doctrine No Longer Works as a Deterrent”

Political scientist Sergei Karaganov speaks on changing Russia’s nuclear policy

Russian officials say that the work to update the country’s nuclear doctrine (Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence) is in an advanced stage. One of those who actively called for amending this document is **Sergei Karaganov**, a well-known political scientist, honorary chairman of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, and academic supervisor of the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs at the Higher School of Economics. In an interview with *Kommersant* correspondent **Elena Chernenko**, he outlined his vision of what the new doctrine should be like.

— You have long been insisting on amending the Russian nuclear doctrine and put forth your own proposals. What do you think the new doctrine will be like?

— Naturally, I do not know how exactly the final version of the document will be worded. But I can share some of my thoughts about it.

However, let me first say that the current doctrine and policy of the use of nuclear weapons are simply reckless. They seem to get stuck in the 1960s and the 1970s. I have tried but failed to find their roots, where they originated. This doctrine basically discards—by about 99.9 percent—the most powerful tool of our military and foreign policy. This is not only wrong but highly immoral. Millions of people died in the past for this policy instrument, that is, for our nuclear shield. This is a big story of heroism and dedication during the war, famine, and arduous reconstruction. But we have suddenly decided to forget it. And, I repeat, I do not quite understand how this could happen. I have a few guesses, but I don’t want to share them, because they are unpleasant for our expert and other circles.

It is time to declare that we have the right to respond to *any* massive attack on our territory with a nuclear strike. This also applies to any seizure of our territory.

Importantly, is necessary to introduce the concept of *nuclear escalation* in the doctrine so that such steps of a hypothetical or real adversary would be forewarned by our steps demonstrating our readiness to use nuclear weapons.

The main purpose of the doctrine should be convincing all existing and future adversaries that Russia is ready to use nuclear weapons. This is not only our duty to our own country and our citizens, who are now dying on the battlefield and even in peaceful cities, but it is also our duty to the world. If we do not reactivate nuclear deterrence, the world will slide into a series of wars that will inevitably go nuclear and end in a third world war. It’s a matter of several years. It is Russia’s duty to fundamentally enhance the nuclear factor in world politics and convince our adversaries that we are ready to use nuclear weapons in case of any encroachment

on our territory and our citizens. I have, indeed, made my little contribution to these efforts.

— *You say that the current nuclear doctrine is based on the postulates of the last century, but the effective presidential decree “On the Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence” is only four years old, it was signed in 2020...*

— I think this document is terribly outdated because it is based on the principles and chimeras, often alien, of the last century. I reproach myself for not having raised my voice publicly when this document was released, and for just expressing my opinion in a narrow circle of experts. It is anything but a doctrine. It is rooted in the illusions inherited from the realities of the last century, and in the natural rejection of nuclear weapons. It’s human nature. In fact, who would want to use them?

— *I hope no one.*

— I more than understand you and others who think so. The problem is that pacifists live only because others fight for them. Currently tens of thousands of our guys are fighting and dying for them on the battlefield, and if it goes on like this, people will die in our cities too, because the war will expand. And/or we will keep bleeding ourselves lifeless on the so-called line of engagement, spending enormous resources to compete with 50 states whose economy is much stronger than ours. Either option will lead a country, which has at last reached a certain level of affluence and comfort, to decline and possibly even disintegration.

— *The current military doctrine of 2010 envisages two scenarios for the use of nuclear weapons by the Russian authorities, and the Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence adopted in 2020 envisages four options. What will the introduction of additional scenarios in the doctrinal documents change in practice?*

— This will oblige our military to prepare for such strikes. “A threat to the existence of the state” [the fourth scenario under which the Russian authorities, according to the Foundations, can use nuclear weapons—*Kommersant*] is such an ephemeral scenario that I would not even want to discuss it seriously. In my opinion, this is a travesty of common sense.

Our current doctrine does not perform a deterrent function and hinders the use of many other useful functions nuclear weapons have. We have brought it to the point where our adversaries came to believe that we would not use nuclear weapons under almost any circumstances. When we started talking about the need to toughen up our nuclear doctrine eighteen months ago, and I can say that I actively contributed to that discussion, they piped down. American media suddenly spawned a series of publications on the need to avoid nuclear escalation by all means.

Europeans have completely lost their mind, they do not understand what they are doing, and have forgotten what war is. The Americans are acting much more cautiously.

At the same time, they are persistently advancing the idea that the World Majority does not support Russia. Why we do not work with the World Majority as we should is a separate question. But many people in China and other World Majority countries understand the logic of our actions, including our intention to amend the nuclear doctrine. So statements of various government and near-government Western experts that the World Majority countries would turn away from us if we take a tougher stance on the use of nuclear weapons are ridiculous. This is an element of psychological and information war, which, unfortunately, is picked up by our people who are stupid or, still worse, secretly wish Russia defeat.

— But China has stated its position on this issue quite clearly. Commenting the other day on Russian officials’ statements regarding the pending changes in our nuclear doctrine, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said that from Beijing’s point of view, “nuclear weapons must not be used and a nuclear war must not be fought.” In July, China once again urged Russia and other nuclear powers to adhere to the no-first-use policy on nuclear weapons. And in May, the leaders of Russia and China, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, signed a joint statement, which, among other things, stresses the inadmissibility of nuclear war because it cannot be won.

— This is their official position, and I somewhat understand it. They cannot benefit from strengthening nuclear deterrence because they are still weak in this respect.

As for the statement signed by the leaders of the “Nuclear Five” [January 3, 2022—*Kommersant*] and its wording repeated in other documents that there can be no winners in a nuclear war and that it must not be unleashed, I think this is an incredible intellectual mistake. After all, what does this mean? That any other war can be [unleashed—*Kommersant*] and that we can destroy each other with all other types of weapons available to us. When this formula appeared almost half a century ago [in a statement made by Gorbachev and Reagan in 1985—*Kommersant*], it was believed that there could be no war between nuclear powers. But now U.S.-led nuclear-armed NATO is waging a full-blown war against us, using Ukrainian cannon fodder. And if we do not stop this madness, they will soon start using others as well.

Nuclear weapons are weapons of peace and war prevention in the first place. They served us in this way for many decades. But then the approaches and formulations imposed on us opened the way for non-nuclear aggression around the world. In the 1990s, shortly after the leaders of the USSR and the U.S. [Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan—*Kommersant*] first subscribed to this idea, it also opened the way for NATO expansion because Russia had completely abandoned the nuclear factor as a foreign policy instrument. It was a crime.

— *But the statement of the “Nuclear Five” leaders, on January 3, 2022, emphasized particularly that no military confrontation between the nuclear powers is admissible in principle.*

— That’s correct. They somewhat supplemented the formula on the inadmissibility of nuclear war, and this is a step in the right direction. But we have not rescinded the previous statement, which, in addition to its purely pacifist nature, is designed to untie the hands of the countries whose arsenal of conventional weapons and economic power increase their chances of winning interstate confrontation. After all, you do understand, don’t you, that the United States has always been and will be ready to use nuclear weapons first...

— *During his election campaign, incumbent U.S. President Joe Biden promised to revise this practice in favor of the no-first-use approach, or at least secure the “sole purpose” of nuclear weapons as a defensive instrument. He has not delivered on either of his promises...*

— Do you really believe any of the American presidential candidates?

— *No, I am just saying that he promised it.*

— There are several groups of people who do not accept the idea of using nuclear weapons, and I partly agree with some of their arguments. I understand that the decision to use nuclear weapons, which will inevitably lead to the death of innocent people, is a terrible step. But possessing nuclear weapons and not being able to convince your adversary of your readiness to use them is suicide.

— *Speaking with you recently at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF), Vladimir Putin said “God forbid!” and “I really would not want” it to come to nuclear strikes because the “death toll can grow indefinitely.”*

— I have a different opinion. This is one of the stories we created in the last century, and I was personally involved in this in order to prevent nuclear war. Assertions that any limited use of nuclear weapons will necessarily lead to a universal nuclear Armageddon does not hold water. I can assure you that all nuclear powers have plans for the dosed use of nuclear weapons under certain scenarios.

I can also say just as confidently that the United States has always lied and continues to lie about the fact that its nuclear guarantees apply to its allies. I am dead certain about it.

— *Do you mean that the United States will not respond to Russia’s nuclear strike on one of the European NATO countries?*

— During the Cold War, the United States claimed that we could send our tanks to the West through Germany, using nuclear weapons as cover, and the only

response the Americans considered for such a contingency was a nuclear strike on Germany, not the USSR. Nothing has changed for the United States in this respect since then. But we are still enthralled by false ideas.

— *The other day, CIA Director William Burns said that although he allegedly had information in the fall of 2022 that Russia could use nuclear weapons in Ukraine, he was convinced at that time and is convinced now that this factor should not affect the West’s support for Kiev. “Putin’s a bully. He’s going to continue to saber-rattle from time to time. We cannot afford to be intimidated by that saber-rattling,” Burns said. What will change if the Russian nuclear doctrine is reworded to make it stronger?*

— Toughening up the nuclear doctrine is not enough. The Russian leadership should also clearly say that we are ready to use [nuclear weapons—*Kommersant*].

— *Use against whom?*

— Against the countries that support NATO’s aggression in Ukraine.

— *These are all NATO members.*

A: No, not all of them. There is no need to attack all of them. It is up to those responsible to draw up a list of specific targets for a group nuclear strike. God forbid, of course, that it should ever come to that. We must make sure that everything is over before that happens.

William Burns is a very smart man and I respect him. But he is clearly bluffing incredibly, brilliantly and unashamedly.

As far as I know, he threatened Russian officials that if we attack NATO countries, a devastating conventional strike will be launched against us and our armed forces in Ukraine and around it. I do not exaggerate my role in history, but I replied to that by saying that we would have the right for a second nuclear strike on a much bigger number of targets in Europe. And if they continue to escalate, we will have the right to strike at American bases in NATO countries and around the world, killing hundreds of thousands of troops.

— *Isn’t this a direct way to total nuclear war?*

— It will not happen if they know that we will be ready to eventually use nuclear weapons, even if it is fraught with large casualties, primarily among the military.

— *It sounds unpredictable and dangerous.*

— I am not calling for treading a dangerous path; I am calling for saving the world and Russia. Either we win this war or we will fall apart. The West can fight

permanently because it benefits from this war. And I am not suggesting starting a nuclear war. I would like to hope very much that things will not go that far and that we can stop before we have to make such a terrible choice.

— Vladimir Putin has repeatedly said that Russia has enough conventional capabilities to achieve its declared goals. Won't this create a situation where, by toughening up our nuclear doctrine and threatening a nuclear strike in response to any aggressive action against us but doing this selectively, Russia's red lines will become even more blurred? For example, there was a Ukrainian drone attack on the Kremlin. What should we do if it happens again?

— Our adversaries should know that our president will make this decision [to launch a nuclear strike—*Kommersant*] or delegate the right to do so to someone else. Readiness to do this is his duty to the country, the world and God. If the adversary sees this readiness, then almost certainly there will be no more drone attacks on the Kremlin.

We must understand that a war of annihilation is being waged against us. Many people do not fully realize this. Our Western “partners” will know no rest until we are demolished. Or they will calm down when they understand that they cannot demolish us without huge damage to themselves.

— I still do not quite understand why we should back ourselves into a corner by pledging to respond with nuclear weapons to almost any non-nuclear strike. I think that drone attack on the Kremlin, to which the Russian authorities responded so reservedly, seems quite telling.

— If a drone attacks the Kremlin again, why don't we launch a conventional missile strike on the Reichstag first? Let it burn.

If the Germans have forgotten their heinous crimes, which should never be forgotten, they should be reminded of them.

In any case, nuclear strikes must be preceded by preventive non-nuclear strikes.

— And you think that their retaliatory strike will not be nuclear?

— The first strikes should not be nuclear, of course. According to the theory of escalation, we need to take another 10-15 steps before nuclear strikes; so far we have only taken five. But after that we will obviously have to strike facilities in NATO countries that play an important role in supporting the Kiev regime. If this does not stop them, then we should move on.

— They launch a massive conventional strike on us, we respond with an even more massive group non-nuclear strike, and at some point we come close to the top steps...

— Then we should respond with a group nuclear strike on targets in Europe right away.

— *Who can guarantee that the parties will be able to stop at some point and not blow up the planet?*

— As you probably know, only Rosgosstrakh gives guarantees. What I can guarantee is that if we do not do this, if we do not reactivate nuclear deterrence, we will not be able to avoid the self-destruction of humanity. But before that we may collapse ourselves.

// Original link for interview in Russian: [Политолог Сергей Караганов — об изменении политики России по применению ядерного оружия \(kommersant.ru\)](#)