

Appendix to:

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## **A Preemptive Nuclear Strike? No!**

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A response to Sergei Karaganov's "A Difficult but Necessary Decision / The use of nuclear weapons could save humanity from global catastrophe"

Sergei Karaganov's article on the need to make a difficult choice in favor of a preemptive nuclear strike on some NATO nation in Eastern Europe has expectedly drawn a wide response. Some took it as a course of action, others viewed it as the trolling of internal and external audiences. Still others considered it a subtle signal to the West, devised in advance in the political kitchen and voiced by an eminent scholar.

The official position clearly differs from the solutions proposed in the article. Last November, the Russian Foreign Ministry explicitly stressed the inadmissibility of the use of nuclear weapons, limiting this possibility to the conditions specified in Russia's nuclear doctrine. Besides, speculations in the Western media about "Russian nuclear blackmail" were legitimately regarded by the Russian authorities as an element of information warfare and anti-Russian propaganda. On June 16, Russian President spoke in the same vein at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum. Perhaps, the patriarch of the Russian school of realism knows more than others, anticipatively looking beyond the horizon and expressing what is just beginning to float around? In fact, the proposed scenario is offbeat. However, the scenario of a special military operation seemed just as offbeat to the overwhelming majority of observers until February 2022. Indeed, it seemed unlikely from the perspective of the past thirty years. And yet, it materialized. Maybe it is time to break down the habitual scheme of things?

Regardless of the motives behind this proposal, it requires rational reflection, considering the fundamental importance of the issue. After all, we are talking about nuclear weapons, which are associated not just with a breakdown but with a possible end of everything for everyone. It seems that the preemptive use of nuclear weapons will not solve the issues between Russia and the West. It will significantly aggravate Russia's international position, not to mention the risks of escalation into a full-scale exchange of nuclear strikes using strategic offensive weapons.

The underlying assumption Sergei Karaganov makes in his article is that the Ukraine crisis and relations with the West are a deep "bleeding wound" for Russia. Human lives and material resources are running into the sand, distracting us from more promising relations with the Global Majority.

Even a military victory in the Ukraine conflict will not solve the problem. The West will continue to restrain Russia with much zeal, seeking to wear the country out economically and facilitating conditions for revolutionary upheavals. This assessment seems to be correct.

We are going through an acute phase of deepening contradictions which had not been resolved by the end of the Cold War and which are now growing even deeper.

Relations between Russia and the West have slowly degraded since the mid-1990s, although Moscow has made several attempts to improve them and reach a compromise. Russia has for a long time underestimated her perception in the West as a fading power that does not deserve equal relations. The West, in turn, has underestimated the determination of the Russian leadership to take extreme measures to make it heed Moscow's position. The Ukrainian conflagration is a delayed consequence of the mistakes and contradictions that have piled up for more than 30 years. What could have happened in the early 1990s by the Yugoslav scenario as a big civil war is happening now, when Russia and Ukraine have long been recognized internationally as different states, which they legally are. An open armed conflict has spurred the hitherto simmering processes, bringing them out of shadow: NATO's enlargement and militarization, the expansion of its military and political presence in Ukraine and the post-Soviet space. For three decades, these processes developed slowly—once open conflict broke out, however, they have made a jump beyond anything we have seen since the end of the Cold War. There is no doubt about their irreversibility now. Over the past year and a half, Russia has made an equally abrupt turn to rely on its own resources and reorient its economic and humanitarian cooperation towards the Global Majority. What had been going slowly and hesitantly since the time of Yevgeny Primakov accelerated perforce after February 2022.

Now, Russia and the West are locked in a fierce confrontation that will continue for years. It is far from obvious whose side time is on. There is a popular belief in Russia that the West is about to collapse under the pressure of objective historical processes so that the problem of Ukraine will apparently get solved all by itself. But what if the West doesn't collapse? Or if it collapses after Russia has overstrained itself or missed its historical chance? What if time plays against us even if we secure a military victory in the special military operation? After all, the West's policy of containment will not go anywhere. This is the scenario Sergei Karaganov visualizes. It is hard to argue with him on that. Using the author's expression, the West will not "get lost."

This prompts a logical solution—a rapid escalation up the nuclear conflict ladder. In short, this means a crisis that would shock the West, forcing it to overhaul its approach to Russia and leave it alone, agreeing, among other things, to a new status quo in Ukraine. The only thing that can produce such a shock is the real use of nuclear weapons, but without taking the nuclear conflict to the level of strategic arms.

Despite its seeming logic, the implementation of this approach would be extremely dangerous. It underestimates the Western elites' determination to climb the escalation ladder with Russia, and, if necessary, ahead of it. It also overestimates the possibility of having a Russian nuclear strike accepted, albeit painfully, by China and other countries of the Global Majority. It overestimates the desire of the Global Majority to throw off the "Western yoke." It overlooks the possibly catastrophic consequences for Russia itself. Let's consider this in detail.

In his article, Sergei Karaganov portrays the Western elites as a community of degraded politicians who have lost political instincts over decades of calm and peaceful life and who have got bogged down in moralizing, essentially turning into a kind of subhuman advocating LGBT and destroying traditional values in the name of totalitarian control over masses who have lost their roots and bonds. On the one hand, these elites want to destroy Russia as a stronghold of traditional values. On the other hand, they will not have enough determination to respond to Russia's nuclear strike. After all, such a response will put an end to their comfortable life and totalitarian plans.

The real situation is different. True, Western politicians have never lacked the ability to engage in populism or moralizing, or feel their superiority. But one can find this in any public policy. Indeed, the West shows much more tolerance towards (if not taking pride in) LGBT and other unconventional manifestations than the East, but generalizations are dangerous. Within the West, there is its own strong conservative response to both LGBT and many other unconventional trends. Moreover, it is the largely conservative countries that spearhead the anti-Russian front. Poland—which, judging from the text, Sergei Karaganov proposes as a target for a nuclear strike—is the most conservative of them. Abortion is prohibited in Poland. Divorces are not welcome. Society is religious. One can get beaten up by athletic young men with a half-box haircut for a deliberate demonstration of LGBT identity in Poland.

Another example can be found in the United States. Republicans are well ahead of the congressional Democrats in introducing sanctions bills against Russia. But it is they who stand for family values, religiosity, service to the nation, and much more. In any case, such is their electoral core. In other words, different forces oppose Russia, including quite traditional ones, which are far from breaking away from their historical roots and identity. These are patriots of their countries, fathers and mothers who believe in God, honor their ancestors, value their freedom, realize the threats of new social control technologies, and have no intention to become compost for totalitarian "liberals."

There is no obvious reason to believe that the Western elites will lose nerve when it comes to responding to a nuclear strike, let alone surrender and "get lost," leaving Russia alone. Rather the opposite. They will only get more arguments in support of their position, consolidate and mobilize themselves.

The governments of the United States and other nuclear powers in the West will most likely carefully think over the level of response. They will try to keep the escalation under control, striking when and where they consider it necessary and convenient.

It should also be remembered that standing behind Western public politicians, some of whom are in fact real freaks, are the professional military and bureaucratic machines. Joe Biden may stumble on the stairs or miss the door. But his age and eccentricities are more than compensated by an army of disciplined and qualified officials with a low level of corruption on top of it all. Formally, the final decision will be made by the president. In reality, it will be prepared, and pushed through where necessary, by officials. This is a dangerous opponent. The same can be said about the U.S. military, intelligence, and other security services.

As such, the scenario of nuclear escalation raises questions as well. Sergei Karaganov is quite accurate in assessing the current risks of a slow escalation. The West is gradually raising the bar for arms supplies to Ukraine. While they talked about defensive systems earlier, they are now gradually supplementing them with increasingly advanced offensive weapons. Roughly speaking, they are trying to cook Russia on a slow fire. Nuclear escalation is a way to jump out of the boiler, abruptly bringing the temperature to the boiling point. The problem is that after jumping out of the boiler, you can get directly into the fire.

Let's imagine that Russia hypothetically delivers one or more nuclear strikes on one or more military facilities in Poland that are directly used in the military campaign against Russia in Ukraine. The supply of qualitatively new types of

weapons to Kiev, or the participation of Polish citizens in the conflict in Ukraine, or the comprehensive “hybrid war” the West is waging against Russia is used as an excuse. In fact, the “hybrid war” can be regarded as actual and growing aggression against Russia, to which it responds. The strikes are preceded by several stages of escalation: calls urging the West to come to its senses, threats of a nuclear strike, military exercises, public warnings about a strike, etc. Then, the strike itself comes, using a tactical weapon. It cannot destroy a state, an individual province or even a more or less big town. But there will be massive casualties and contamination of the area, as well as a striking media image.

Further, NATO must decide on measures to protect its ally. A retaliatory strike may not immediately follow due to the risk of rapid escalation. It will be preceded by thorough diplomatic, information and military preparations. Moreover, the absence of an immediate military response will put Moscow at a disadvantage. This will provide serious grounds for demanding a complete trade blockade against Russia and its political isolation. Imposing sanctions on non-Western countries will be much easier. States that were previously neutral will have to take a strong stance. Arms supplies to Ukraine—and now Poland—will immensely increase, limited only by production capacities. But this can be taken care of. Now, Poland will have every reason to enter the war. There is no doubt that there will be a huge patriotic upsurge and a large number of citizens will take up arms. Russia’s position on the front lines will significantly worsen, even without NATO’s immediate retaliatory strike.

In this case, Russia will face a new difficult choice: to remain in a rapidly deteriorating situation or deliver an even more massive strike (in fact, this is what the article says—the West must show clear signs that it has come to its senses), for example, using a dozen or more tactical weapons. The conflict will become ever more violent. It will inevitably affect Belarus and Russia’s border-lying regions. NATO can use cruise missiles for a massive strike, for example, against the Crimea, Kaliningrad or any frontier region (although such a move may follow after the first Russian strike).

What should Russia do in such a situation? Respond by firing tactical missiles at the rest of Europe? But in this case, Americans will use their tactical nuclear weapons against Russian military facilities and cities. What’s next? Use strategic weapons? But the one who uses them first will die second as a result of a retaliatory strike. This will be a disaster with tens of millions of casualties in Russia, Europe, and America. Other parts of the world will have a hard time, too, including the Global Majority, due to the disruption of global economic processes, possible climate changes, radiation, and other factors.

Not everyone will go to heaven. Perhaps, many will survive, but they will find themselves in a radioactive hell. Under such a scenario, the Russian state will most likely be catastrophically undermined if not destroyed.

The position of Russia-friendly countries is also important. If Moscow delivers a preemptive limited nuclear strike, its ability to maintain credibility among the Global Majority will be dramatically reduced, especially if the West does not strike back immediately. Sergei Karaganov is right when he says that Beijing and other friendly countries will inevitably condemn the preventive nuclear attack. But the hopes that the Global Majority will eventually put up with it in order to throw off the Western “yoke” seem unrealistic. Russia will turn into a toxic asset for Beijing, New Delhi, Riyadh, and many other capitals. No one will accept our arguments that we had no other choice, that we were forced to make such a decision.

In addition, one should not overestimate the Western “yoke,” let alone the desire of the Global Majority to get rid of it. No matter what many countries think of the West (including most negative attitudes), most of them build pragmatic relations with the West, trying to use them in their own interests. The West is indeed losing its relative advantages. However, this is happening not because the majority is rebelling, but because individual centers of power are growing stronger, including through partnership with the West. In other words, the Global Majority’s agreement with the Russian position, let alone its joint uprising against the West in order to shake off its “yoke,” is not so obvious a scenario at all.

The question arises: if the proposals under consideration are risky while unlikely to solve the problems with the West, is there an alternative? There is. An alternative would be living with a “bleeding wound” in the form of a hostile West and Ukraine, but understanding that the confrontation with Russia is also a “bleeding wound” for the West, which will be losing resources and political capital.

Not only Russia, but also the omnipotent West, is slowly boiled. Such a “wound” does not seem to be an exorbitant problem for the United States, given its huge potential. But the slowly boiling relations with China are changing the nature and the danger of the “wound” in the form of a hostile Russia.

Moscow has the opportunity to consolidate the status quo on the battlefield, withstand the tsunami of sanctions and stop attempts to incite internal destabilization. Yes, the price is quite high already. But a preemptive nuclear strike will neither recover losses nor solve the problem. Over time, Russia will get a chance to tighten the “bleeding wound” or reduce the loss of “blood,” because Moscow is not the only headache for the United States and the West.

In addition, a turn to the East can increasingly make the western direction secondary and then tertiary for Russia. Hopes for a conciliation with the West in the current situation are illusory. Rivalry is a long-term factor for the relations with the West, with all the ensuing costs and losses. Ultimately, however, international relations are doomed to anarchy and

competition. We should not underestimate our opponent and consider its elite weaklings. This can lead to erroneous decisions.

Nuclear weapons retain their significance as a deterrent. Should there be direct military aggression against Russia or a threat to the very existence of the state, their use may become inevitable in full compliance with the effective Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence. Otherwise, other foreign policy tools should be used.