

Appendix to:

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Conflict in Ukraine and Nuclear Weapons

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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”

In his recent article, Sergei Karaganov has publicly raised an utterly difficult question concerning the use of nuclear weapons in the ongoing 16-month special military operation in Ukraine. Many responses to this publication boil down to a well-known formula: there can be no winners in nuclear war and therefore there must be no war. Replying to a question at this year's St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, President Vladimir Putin said that nuclear weapons are a deterrent and the conditions for their use are defined in doctrinal documents; a theoretical possibility of their use exists, but there is no need to do that now.

From the very beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, nuclear weapons have actually been “on the table” of Russian politics precisely as a means of keeping the United States and its allies from getting involved in the armed confrontation. Nevertheless, repeated public references to Russia's nuclear status by its president and other officials have so far not prevented NATO's creeping escalation of the crisis and increasingly growing involvement in the hostilities in Ukraine. Eventually it became clear that nuclear deterrence, which many in Moscow relied on as an effective means of ensuring the vital interests of the country, has turned out to have much more limited uses.

The United States has essentially set itself the unthinkable task of defeating another nuclear superpower in a region that is strategically important for the latter, without resorting to nuclear weapons, but by arming and controlling a third country. At the same time, the Americans act cautiously, testing the opponent's reaction and consistently expanding the boundaries of arms supplies to Kiev as well as the choice of targets for them. In fact, starting with the supply of anti-tank weapons, the U.S. has come close to sending F-16 jet fighters and long-range missiles to Ukraine.

The U.S. strategy is most likely based on the belief that the Russian leadership will not dare use nuclear weapons in the current conflict, and its references to Russia's nuclear capabilities are nothing but a bluff. Even the deployment of Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons in Belarus seems not to have perturbed the Americans, at least publicly. Such “fearlessness” is a direct result of geopolitical transformations over the past three decades and the change of generations of politicians and leaders in the United States and the West as a whole.

The restraining fear of the atomic bomb, which existed throughout the second half of the 20th century, is gone. Nuclear weapons are left aside. The practical conclusion from this is obvious: there is no need to be afraid of Russia's reaction.

This is an extremely dangerous misperception. The trajectory of the war in Ukraine clearly shows that the conflict is being escalated both horizontally by expanding the theater of operations, and vertically by increasing the power of the weapons used and the intensity of their use. We must soberly admit that this trajectory leads towards a direct armed clash between Russia and NATO. If this inertia is not stopped, such a collision will occur, in which case the war will spread to Europe and will almost inevitably go nuclear. After some time, a nuclear war in Europe will most likely lead to an exchange of strikes between Russia and the United States.

The Americans and their allies are actually playing Russian Roulette. True, so far Russia's reaction to the destruction of the Nord Stream pipelines, drone attacks on a strategic air base in Engels, the incursion of Western-armed saboteurs into the Belgorod region, and many other actions of Ukraine, backed and directed by Washington, has been relatively reserved. As President Putin recently made it clear, there are serious grounds for such reserve. The Supreme Commander-in-Chief said that Russia has the ability to destroy any building in Kiev, but it will not stoop to the methods of terror the enemy uses. However, Putin also said that Russia is considering different options for destroying Western combat aircraft if they are deployed in NATO countries but used in the war in Ukraine.

Until now, the Russian strategy in the Ukraine conflict has allowed the enemy to ramp up the hostilities. The West used this in an attempt to wear Russia out on the battlefield and destabilize it from the inside. Following the same path makes no sense for us. On the contrary, it makes sense to refine and update our nuclear deterrence strategy, taking into account the practical experience gained during the conflict in Ukraine. The current doctrinal provisions were worded not only

before the start of the special military operation, but apparently without a clear understanding of what might happen during it.

Apart from purely military considerations, Russia's foreign strategy also includes foreign-policy, information, and other aspects. We should send our main adversary an unambiguous—not verbal any more—signal that Moscow will not play at giveaway and by the rules set by the opposite side. At the same time, we should build a trust-based dialogue with our strategic partners and neutral states, explaining the motives and goals of our actions. The possibility of using nuclear weapons during the current conflict should not be hushed up. Such a perspective, real not theoretical, should serve as an incentive to curb and stop conflict escalation and ultimately pave the way for a strategic equilibrium in Europe that suits us.

As for possible Russian nuclear strikes on NATO countries, hypothetically speaking, Washington is unlikely to respond to these strikes by attacking Russia for fear of its retaliation against the United States. The absence of such a reaction will dispel the myth built for decades around Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and will lead to the deepest crisis in NATO, perhaps even to its collapse. It cannot be ruled out that the Atlantic elites in NATO and EU countries will panic and will be swept away by national forces, which will realize that the security of their countries does not depend on the non-existent U.S. “nuclear umbrella,” but on building equitable relations with Russia. It may also be quite possible that America will finally leave Russia alone.

The above considerations may or may not prove entirely correct. There may not be an immediate U.S. nuclear strike on Russia. In fact, the Americans are unlikely to sacrifice Boston for Poznan just as they were not going to sacrifice Chicago for Hamburg during the Cold War. But there is likely to be some kind of response from the United States. This non-nuclear response—let's not make guesses about what exactly it may—in all probability will be sensitive and painful for us. It will probably pursue a goal similar to ours: paralyzing the will of the Russian leadership to continue the war and creating panic in Russian society.

The Russian leadership is unlikely to capitulate after such an attack as the very existence of Russia will be at stake. A retaliatory strike is likely to follow, and we can assume that this time it will target the main adversary rather than its allies.

So let us stop at this point of no return and summarize our preliminary analysis. The “nuclear bullet” must necessarily and demonstratively be put into the “revolver drum” the U.S. leadership is recklessly playing with. To paraphrase a now-deceased American statesman, we can say: Why do we need nuclear weapons if we refuse to use them in the face of an existential threat?

There is no need to scare anyone verbally. It is necessary to prepare for a possible use practically, thoroughly considering possible options and their consequences.

The war in Ukraine has become protracted. As far as one can judge from the actions of the Russian leadership, it expects to achieve strategic success, relying on internal resources, which by far surpass those of Ukraine, and on the fact that the stakes for Russia in this war are much higher than for the West. This perception is probably correct, but it must be borne in mind that the adversary assesses Russia's chances differently from us and can take steps fraught with a direct armed clash between Russia and NATO and the United States. We must be ready for such a turn. In order to avoid a global catastrophe, fear must be brought back into politics and public consciousness: in the nuclear age, this is the only guarantee of humanity's survival.