

Sergey Karaganov: How Russia Will Win the New World War

Professor Sergey Karaganov is an Honorary Chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defense and has been an advisor of Russia's political elites for decades. Prof. Karaganov wrote speeches for Brezhnev and advised Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin. Prof. Karaganov argues we are already in a new World War and argues that Russia can only win by pursuing massive escalation, which includes the use of nuclear weapons.

#Glenn

Welcome back. We are joined today by Professor Sergei Karaganov, the head of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, and one of the most influential Russian scholars on Russian foreign policy. Professor Karaganov has written speeches for Brezhnev, advised Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and of course President Putin, and was also a leading advocate for changing Russia's nuclear doctrine. From what I understand, President Putin pushed back before eventually adopting many of these suggestions. So thank you for taking the time.

#Sergey Karaganov

Thank you. It's a great pleasure. I've been following your podcast for quite some time, and of course, I remember our conversations in Moscow and elsewhere. It's a pleasure.

#Glenn

Thank you. I wanted to ask you about how this conflict has evolved and changed, because over the past four years we've seen some incredible developments that were unthinkable during the Cold War. For example, we've seen NATO countries participating in missile attacks on Russia. We see NATO countries backing the invasion of Kursk, again, Russian territory, and seemingly also assisting in the attack on Russia's nuclear triad, as well as the early warning system. All of this used to be unthinkable, at least during the Cold War. So I was really looking forward to a Russian perspective on what you see going on and where we're all heading, because unfortunately, in the West at the moment, we don't really discuss the security concerns of opponents anymore. And there's not really that much discussion about the direction and the risks that are being taken by going down this path. So how are these developments assessed now in the Kremlin?

#Sergey Karaganov

Well, we have been procrastinating for too long, and I have been criticizing my fellows in the government for tolerating Western aggression for too long, hoping that we could find a solution. The solution is nowhere to be found at this juncture. So, I'm returning to what I have been proposing since 2023 to 2024, and this time I hope my suggestions will come true, though not in full. We have to escalate and to punish our... this time, European...

#Sergey Karaganov

Enemies conducting an all-out war against Russia. There are different calculations. I believe that it is the Fourth World War. If you take the Napoleonic War, with 25 nations joining Napoleon in invading Russia, as the first, that was the first. Then the second, now we have the third. The problem is not exactly on the battlefields of Ukraine. The problem is that overall, the systematic change of the world system brings about something like a Second World War. Actually, it has started. It started first in Ukraine, when Americans were willing to undermine Russia, unleashed it, and then Europeans greedily went into the abyss. But now it is also the Middle East and South Asia, and we see that as a Third World War. I have decided to write about that already in the open, and you've probably got one of my first articles, and then also the serials will follow.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, I always argue that this is a very dangerous time because whenever you see a massive shift in world order, it usually leads to a lot of instability. So as the world navigates from this unipolar moment for the collective West towards a multipolar system, you would hope that a lot of countries would be very careful in navigating and avoiding war and conflict. And this is why the absence of diplomacy has been concerning, to say the least. I did read your article, though, "How to Win a World War," and I was wondering if you could possibly flesh out the argument. And again, I hear this argument quite often as well, that we are likely in another world war now. So how do you see Russia's position in this world war? And, well, how can Russia win this?

#Sergey Karaganov

Well, the problem is that we have to win, and we have to win for two reasons. One is to stop this bloodletting war in Ukraine, which goes nowhere but towards more and more.

#Sergey Karaganov

Victims on our side, and ten times more, five times more, three times more on the Ukrainian side, etc., etc. And it is endless. But sooner or later, it would and should escalate. But the second element of this war is the prevention of horizontal escalation, which has already started. Because, as I have said, I mean, a couple of months ago, our American partners, enemies, whoever they are, according to, I mean, following all predictions, started to destabilize South Eurasia, and that is the Middle East.

It is not about Iranian nuclear weapons. It is about the destabilization of a huge area, starting from the Maghreb and going down to Southeast Asia. And that they have started to do. And we have to think how to stop that. On the Ukrainian front, it is relatively clear for me, but it is a much deeper and more profound task as to the whole international system.

#Glenn

Throughout this conflict, or at least over the past four years, there's seemingly always been a dilemma in Russia. That is, as the NATO side escalates again—and the NATO side did recognize the escalation—I always point out that Joe Biden once argued that sending F-16s would mean World War III. But we've kind of crossed all these lines. For the Russians, I guess they always have to choose: do they want to keep things stable, or risk world war by retaliating—or not retaliating, but then essentially emboldening the other side and seeing further escalation? You've argued for the need to actually use nuclear weapons, though, in order to essentially restore its deterrent. Is that correct?

#Sergey Karaganov

This war has brought a lot of benefits to Russia. It has recuperated from its idleness. We have restored our soul and our honor. We have started to value those people in our society who are truly valuable—meritocratic elites, scholars, doctors, officers. And the country is becoming healthier. But for that, we are paying with too many bodies. So my advice to my government at this juncture is that we should stop this war, at least in Europe, by going up the ladder of escalation. First, attacking by conventional weapons certain symbolic or logistical points on European soil. We, not an inch of Europe, as you might understand. And then, if they do not succumb, we should follow with nuclear strikes, relatively massive, with, of course, offering some kind of ultimatum.

If they do not succumb, well, some of the countries of Europe should perish. That is my suggestion, though I pray to God—and I'm a believer—that that wouldn't happen. But I believe that these people have lost their minds, lost a sense of history. These elites, they're totally responsible, and they should be punished. So that's why, in addition to many other things, I propose that our military nuclear doctrine should concentrate not only on deterring attacks against Russia proper, but it should concentrate on punishing European elites, including with special munitions which would do away with their bunkers. And the first waves should go there. The European elites, who are senseless and responsible, should suffer first, not the European peoples. But we are debating this issue, and later this debate will come to the petition.

#Glenn

I remember you made this argument a while back already, but do you get the feeling that the mood in the Kremlin is shifting now more towards your arguments, or has it not moved that much?

#Sergey Karaganov

I am not here to talk about the mood in the Kremlin. When I started three years ago to put that idea on the table, I was the proud voice of a minority. Now I am the voice of an overwhelming majority, both in the military, in the political circles, and in society. But again, I am not calling for massive nuclear strikes, because I know that they would take away innocence. But the problem is that we have to stop this war, at least in Europe. All the more, as I've said, the war is already expanding, and it is engulfing South Asia and Southwestern Asia. And then it will spread, because the attack against Iraq and Iran has brought about not only a curtailment of old transactions, but also a curtailment of the flow of fertilizers and many other things.

And it was absolutely predictable. And that means that we will have a new wave of instability also in the Third World, the so-called Third World. I must say that, from my point of view, what is happening is that the historic West, which has been losing its historic predominance in culture, politics, and economics, which allowed it to rob the world for 500 years, is on a revanche. And the Europeans do not quite understand what they're doing. But Americans, I think, do. And while Mr. Trump, with all his jokes and jerks, looks to be a funny person, he leads his country as he has been told to—exactly in the direction of the historic revanche. We will not allow it.

#Glenn

I wanted to ask about this as well, because it seemed for a while that the United States was looking to, as the Ukraine war wasn't going their way, unload it or at least outsource it to the Europeans and attempt to improve their bilateral ties with Russia. But this hasn't really moved much forward. And also, indeed, the negotiations over Ukraine haven't really moved forward either. What do you make of the negotiations now and what they refer to as the spirit of Alaska? The spirit of Alaska is a joke.

#Sergey Karaganov

Of course, at some point in the course of the continuation of this war, we could agree to a truce, some kind of truce, but it would not be peace. Peace could be achieved only when and if at least the European elites are thrown away by their peoples and by their deep states, because they are mad and they are leading their countries towards a big war.

#Glenn

I was wondering what I initially said about the invasion of Kursk. And were you surprised by the, well, very open support it got, at least rhetorically, but as we know, also in terms of weapons and intelligence to support this? As I said, this would have been unthinkable during the Cold War. Yeah, I was wondering, how do you see this development?

#Sergey Karaganov

This is my own government and my own political class. We did not understand what kind of conflict we are in. I would hope that it was superficial, it was about Ukraine, etc., etc. It is a world war. And it is about an attempt at a revanche of the Old West. I mean, it would be futile because the Old West will be destroyed if it continues, or the world will be destroyed. Hopefully not. But we were thinking about how to avoid, how to agree, how to find piecemeal solutions. We played with the Minsk process for three years, which was an astonishing mistake. Now we are talking about this.

Spirit of Alaska, I am smiling. Spirit of Alaska is about nothing, because if and when we agree on something which is close to what President Trump proposed in Alaska, then that would mean that in a year or so the war would be resurrected and in full scale, and of course with nuclear weapons. So the Spirit of Alaska is a trap on one side, or a mistake on the other side. I do not trust the Spirit of Alaska, though I hope that eventually Americans and Russians would agree on some rules of behavior towards each other. But Europeans would not be a part of that game.

#Glenn

Well, at least that's something — the U.S. and Russia are trying, at least, to improve relations, although I have limited optimism for how far this can go. I was speaking two days ago with Professor John Mearsheimer, and he told me I should ask you this. I think it's something he had been wondering about, which was the attack on the early warning radar system of Russia — the ones that were essentially used to detect a nuclear strike, something that would give Russia some time before a retaliatory strike, essentially. This is interesting. It seems like it's in everyone's interest for each side to have some warning time, unless you're planning a first strike, of course. But then also, in June of last year, the attack on Russia's nuclear deterrent, which I heard from the FSB, had assistance from the British MI6. I was just wondering, how are you reading this? Because for me, it's a very concerning development.

#Sergey Karaganov

They are pushing to the limits. The Russian government wanted to avoid a no-out confrontation, and I think we're reaching a stage where we should start to punish our enemies full scale, hopefully without unleashing an all-out nuclear war. But first, of course, I mean, these crimes which they have committed, which have been unheard of even in the worst days of the Cold War, should be punished. And there are many ways, and we are planning them. First, of course, attacking serious targets on the territory of Europe proper. But let me remind you that we don't need an inch of Europe. We have to be as far away from this Europe as we could.

#Sergey Karaganov

But before that, of course, we probably have to crush this regime in Kiev. And without climbing the ladder of nuclear escalation, that looks to be impossible or too expensive in terms of spending our

human material, our best men. So my advice to my compatriots, and I fully support it, is to escalate — first by striking with conventional weapons, symbolic and also important targets like logistical centers or military bases. And then, if they do not stop, we should go nuclear with a series of limited strikes.

Before that, we have to change our doctrine, which is outdated by 40 or 50 years. Let me remind you that our nuclear doctrine believes that there will be no victories in a nuclear war. That's stupidity. There will be victories, could be victories, and will be victories in a nuclear war. I beg Almighty that it will happen, especially in Europe. I think that eventually we could even use an ultimatum to some European neighbors, especially in the western part of Europe, so that they will succumb or surrender. But before that, we could probably look for possibilities for limiting...

#Sergey Karaganov

Limited casualties on the European side. But we are tired of spending our best men on this junk, which, I am sorry, you are European and I am European too, on this junk which is called Europe.

#Glenn

In your article, though, on how to win a world war, you did advocate for many policy changes for Russia to essentially begin to change course and begin to restore the deterrent, which has kind of slipped gradually over the past four years. One of them was to walk away from arms control as well. I was wondering, how does that fit into the wider argument?

#Sergey Karaganov

Well, now we have to change our policies in many directions. One, which I have not yet mentioned, is, of course, we have to change our doctrine of using nuclear weapons. And for that, we should put there...

#Sergey Karaganov

I think that if we are attacked by a group of countries which have a preponderance over us in economic, technological, and demographic potential, we not only have a right, we have an obligation to use nuclear weapons. The second proposal which I have pushed forward is that the commander-in-chief should delegate some of his power to the commander-in-chief of the European theater, a general who would be supported by officers with field experience, and that he would be responsible for the possibility, or even the necessity, to use all means, including nuclear weapons, against certain European countries which have unleashed and continue to unleash an aggressive war against Russia.

I don't want Europe to be eliminated because I'm culturally European, but I am reminding my own compatriots that, unlike many of our dreams, Europe is the source of all evil, of all wars, of all genocides, of everything worst in human history. It is returning back to its normal situation, and I hope that we will be able to prevent that for the sake of Europe, for the sake of us, and for the sake of the European people. But Europeans have to understand that their countries are leading them towards the political.

#Glenn

Yeah, that's one of the things I usually have difficulty understanding. It seems like this escalation, if we follow a clear track over the past four years, is leading us very predictably into an all-out conflict with Russia, which would likely... Yet there doesn't seem to be much discussion or effort to have any course correction. Indeed, it's a demand for consensus around one policy, and everything else is dismissed essentially as nonsense—taking the side of Russia—if one calls for some restraint or for recognizing the security concerns of the other side. But a colleague of mine, Jeffrey Sachs, often puts a lot of the blame for the Ukraine war on Germany and the United Kingdom, in addition to the U.S., of course. You also tend to focus more on both Germany and the UK as being the leading, I guess, aggressors against Russia. I was wondering if you can elaborate on how you see this.

#Sergey Karaganov

Well, this war over Russia, it has been unleashed by the United States. It has been unleashed. You can read a series of my articles since 2003, 2004. Then it escalated. Then Europeans jumped into this game.

#Sergey Karaganov

Now, the Germans and the Brits, of course, are playing their usual game, and that is igniting war in Europe to weaken the continent, ignite the continental neighbors, and weaken them.

#Sergey Karaganov

That has been their bad habit for several centuries. Unfortunately, we in Russia have not yet understood that we are turning back to the worst times in our history. And as to Germany, when, as I've said, a German chancellor calls for the strongest army in Europe, that means that he calls for the elimination of Europe, of Germany totally. I mean evaporation. And the German burghers, and, you know, we have common German friends, they should understand that.

#Glenn

Well, you mentioned, though, that the spirit of Alaska is a joke and it's dead. But do you see any other possible pathways to a diplomatic solution? Because, well, a year ago, when the Trump administration returned, there was some talk from the United States that we had to find peace. They recognized that expanding NATO up to Russia's border had been a mistake. They argued then for a neutral Ukraine. They argued for accepting territorial concessions. But again, this seems to have gone nowhere. Indeed, it appears to some extent to walk this back. But is there still any pathway to a diplomatic peace instead of this war? Of course, let diplomacy have a chance.

#Sergey Karaganov

But from my point of view, the endgame should be the elimination of the Kievan regime.

#Sergey Karaganov

First. Second, the restoration of our lands in the south and east of Ukraine. We don't want to take, and we should not want to take, all of Ukraine because it is a breadbasket. But the main thing now, in addition to what has been proposed, is to break the will of European elites for aggression. They have started an aggression. They're conducting an aggression. And they should be punished for that or eliminated by their government. Deep states, hopefully, obey their people. When the president of France calls for extending deterrence, French deterrence, to other countries, he's not only a blatant, stupid liar. He should be treated by the French as a traitor because that means that he wants to sacrifice or is ready to sacrifice Paris or Lyon for the sake of, say, Britain.

#Sergey Karaganov

Berlin or Poznan, these idiots have lost the sense of history. The answer, I mean, the simple devil's search should be either punished or eliminated. Better, that should be done not by Russian missiles, not by troops. We will not invade Europe under any circumstances because there is nothing good we need there. But by European people who have also lost the sense of self-preservation. They are led by mad ducks. Hopefully, Europeans will be able to throw them away. But I'm not trying to intrude into the internal affairs of European countries. It's up to you to decide.

#Glenn

It seems to me that one possible avenue for escalation into a massive direct war would be possibly unleashed in the Baltic Sea. That is, over the past months now, we've seen blockades on Venezuela, Cuba, hijacking of Iranian tankers. And of course, first it began with referring to Russia's civilian fleet as a shadow fleet. And then, yeah, there's efforts to board them. And now we see talks of a naval alliance that is the UK plus nine others. Essentially, the task is to confront what they have now labeled Russia's shadow fleet.

#Sergey Karaganov

Do you see this as a possibility? In our internal discussion, I'm criticizing my government for being too soft on the acts of piracy. And if and when the Danish channels are or could be closed, then it would simply mean there will be no Denmark anymore. But I love Denmark, it is a nice country, and it is close to your country and also to Sweden. We should be serious about returning these idiots back to their senses.

#Glenn

Well, yeah, again, I'm hoping there will be a way of restoring deterrence again, as you said, God forbid, without any nuclear exchange.

#Sergey Karaganov

Well, nuclear exchange, limited nuclear exchange, if it happens, and if it brings these mad dogs to their senses, it could be a savior of humanity. Because overall, we are living in a multiple-crisis world where many underlying notions of our life are crumbling. Modern capitalism has been exhausting its life. We see that this modern capitalism plus the informational revolution is undermining the sense of the human, dehumanizing the human. But it is very deep. Now we are going to the geopolitical level. On the geopolitical level, that is being reflected by this revanche of the West, which tries to restore its previously prevalent position in the world, which allowed it to rob the world. But it will never happen. Hopefully, we could, somewhere along the road, arrange a world of multipolarity, of mutual respect, and a world which is much more peaceful. But we are in for 20 years of wars.

#Glenn

Just my last question is, how do you see Russia's future after this war? Because, you know, since Peter the Great, for the past 300 years, Russia modernized by looking West. And indeed, Gorbachev had this Greater European Home idea as well. But as you said, with the rise now of the East, modernization is no longer monopolized by the West. And Russia has all these partners in the East as well. Yeah.

#Sergey Karaganov

How do you see Russia's future? First of all, I'm, of course, a historian of Russia too. Russia has never been a European country. Originally, it had been a Eurasian country from the beginning. We took our external cultural roots not from Europe. We took them from Palestine, from the brilliant Byzantium, from the Muslim world, and from the Buddhist world. And the political and external political cores of our society and of our culture came from the great Mongol Empire. The European journey by Peter was useful because, at that juncture, for the time being, we were lacking technological progress and technological knowledge. And our army was not that well organized

because Europeans were much better organized. But the European journey of Peter the Great had to be stopped about at the end of the 19th century, 20th century.

By that time, we took everything positive that we could have taken from Europe — both military organization, though in terms of artillery and military tactics, we became the first country in Europe by the end of the century. Now, we absorbed great European culture. Without Europe, we wouldn't have had Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, etc. But we should have stopped the journey at the end of the 19th century. After the end of the 19th century, we continued, unfortunately, with the journey and got two world wars and communism from there. We have to finish our European journey. But Mozart, Beethoven, and Shakespeare are our writers and our composers, and they are very deep in our souls. But Europe should be thrown away from our history, but kept as a very interesting and useful element.

#Glenn

Yes, you mentioned Dostoevsky there. I was thinking you sounded a bit like Fyodor Dostoevsky, because in the second half of the 19th century, he was making a similar point that the Russians had for too long attempted to mold themselves into being like Europe and Europeans, and they only gained the contempt of the Europeans. So he essentially said the same, the Russians should part ways.

#Sergey Karaganov

Yeah, I'm going further than Dostoevsky. Now, though he's my most favorite writer in Russia, of course, I love Tolstoy and Pushkin. I'm saying that Europhiles and Westernizers in Russia now, after what has happened, are either intellectually impotent or morally corrupt. This is idiocy. You have to be a moral idiot in Russia to follow the European way.

#Glenn

Well, thank you for taking the time. I appreciate your views. Absolutely.

#Sergey Karaganov

However, Professor Diesen, you know that I have a lot of friends in Europe, and I cherish our friendships, and I do not want to totally cut our ties with Europe. Now, with Europe of distant people, there are some still. They are brainwashed. And I hope that some of the markets could be restored. But Europe for Russia is passé. It's something that should be either kept away, and we don't need an ensured Europe. The farther we get away from Europe now, the better it is for Russia, for its future development.