

«We are at war with the West. The European security order is illegitimate»

by Federico Fubini
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Sergey Karaganov has served as a presidential advisor in the Kremlin both under Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin. He is still considered close to Russia's president and foreign minister Sergey Lavrov. His recent proposals on Russian-speaking minorities in the "near abroad" are known as "Putin doctrine" and Professor Karaganov, who is honorary chair of the Moscow think tank the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, was first to come out publicly about an all-out invasion of Ukraine in 2019.

President Putin has mentioned on Feb. 24 that Ukraine's accession to NATO warrants Russia's military intervention to prevent it. However, Ukraine didn't even have a Membership Action Plan for NATO and Germany's chancellor Olaf Scholz clearly stated accession was many, many years off. How can an attack be justified on such grounds?

For 25 years people like myself have said that NATO expansion would lead to war. Putin said several times that if it came to Ukraine becoming a member of NATO, there would be no Ukraine anymore. In Bucharest in 2008 there was a plan of quick accession of Ukraine and Georgia to NATO. It was blocked by the efforts of Germany and France, but since that time Ukraine has been integrated into NATO. It was pumped up by weaponry and its troops were trained by NATO, their army getting stronger and stronger day by day. In addition we saw a very rapid increase of neo-Nazi sentiment especially among the military, the society and the ruling elite. It was clear that Ukraine had become something like Germany around 1936-1937. The war was inevitable, they were a spearhead of NATO. We made the very hard decision to strike first, before the threat becomes deadlier.

But Ukraine was not about to become a member of NATO, not for at least many, many years. There was time to negotiate.

We have heard all kinds of promises by Western leaders throughout these 30 years. But they lied to us or they forgot about their promises. We were told at the beginning that NATO would not expand.

How can you think a non-nuclear medium-sized country like Ukraine would ever attack a nuclear giant like Russia? And how can you think this is a Nazi country with a Jewish president elected with over 70% of the votes? Ukraine was being built by the US and other NATO countries as a spearhead, maybe of aggression or at least of military pressure, to bring NATO's military machine

closer to the heart of Russia. We can see now how well their forces had been preparing for a war. And Nazis were not only about killing Jews. Nazism is about supremacy of one nation over another. Nazism is humiliation of other nations. The regime and the society in Ukraine were going very much like Germany in the 1930s.

You say that NATO promised never to enlarge to the East and Russia was cheated on that. But former Warsaw Pact countries requested to be included in NATO themselves. And Russia signed up to the Founding Act on Russia-NATO relations in 1997, accepting NATO enlargement. No cheating there. It was the biggest mistake of Russia's foreign policy in the last 30 years. I fought against it, because the Founding Act of 1997 legitimized further NATO expansion. But we signed it because we were desperately poor and we still were trusting in the wisdom of our partners. President Yeltsin probably thought that we would sneak between drops of rain, to no avail. As for NATO, it was formed as a defensive alliance. But when the Soviet Union collapsed and Russia was weak, I was shocked when I saw the rape of Serbia in 1999. Then we had an absolutely atrocious war in Iraq waged by most of the NATO members and then we had another clear-cut aggression in Libya, always by NATO. So we do not trust words. But we know that article 5 of NATO, stating that an attack on a NATO member is an attack to all, doesn't work. There is no automatic guarantee that NATO would come to the defense of a member under attack. Please read article 5 of the Treaty. But this enlargement is an enlargement of the aggressive alliance. It's cancer and we wanted to stop this metastasis. We have to do it by a surgical operation. I regret we were unable to prevent such an outcome.

We all agree the Iraq war was illegitimate and was a very serious mistake. Corriere della Sera came out against that war at the time. But one grave mistake doesn't justify a second grave mistake. And the US people could elect a new leader, Obama, that was against the Iraq war and changed American policy. Can Russians have an opportunity to do the same?

I don't think that in the foreseeable future we will have any change of power in Russia, because we are fighting a war of survival. This is a war with the West and people are regrouping around their leader. This is an authoritarian country and the leadership is always very attentive to the moods of the people. But I don't see real signs of opposition. Also, in the US or else nobody was really punished for the war in Iraq, so we have our doubts about the effectiveness of democracy.

Your parallels don't seem to match. In Libya, Ghaddafi was bombing protest demonstrations from the sky. NATO enforced a no-fly zone that had been called for by a UN Security Council resolution and Russia did not veto it.

Yes. At that time we believed the reassurances of our Western partners. But then we saw a clear-cut aggression devastating the country. That led us toward total distrust of Western countries, and especially of NATO.

As for the intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999, it was made to stop a war that led to over 10,000 deaths and a UN tribunal charged Milosevic for war crimes, deportation and crimes against humanity. The massive killings in former Yugoslavia happened after the NATO's rape of Serbia. People were killed on all sides. It was a civil war. It was an unspeakable aggression. And the Milosevic trial was a sad and humiliating show by petty people trying to rationalize their previous mistakes if not crimes

It was a UN tribunal, not a EU tribunal.

We don't acknowledge the right of that tribunal.

You said that the real war now is against Western expansion. What do you mean?

We saw Western expansion happening, we see Russophobia in the West reaching levels like antisemitism between the world wars. So war was already becoming likely. And we saw deep divisions and structural problems within Western societies, so we believed that anyway a war was more and more likely. So the Kremlin decided to strike first. Also, this military operation will be used to restructure Russian elite and Russian society. It will become a more militant-based and national-based society, pushing out non-patriotic elements from the elite.

The bottom line question is: Mussolini did not recognize the international order that emerged from the Versailles Treaty in 1919. Does the Kremlin recognize the legitimacy of the European order that emerged from the fall of the Berlin Wall? Do you think this order is legitimate?

We should not recognize the order that was built against Russia. We tried to integrate in it but we saw it was a Versailles system number 2. I wrote that we had to destroy it. Not by force, but through constructive destruction, through refusal to participate in it. But after the last demand to stop NATO was again rejected, it was decided to use force.

So the overall goal of this war is to overturn the presence of NATO in central and eastern European countries?

We see that most of the institutions are, in our view, one-sided and illegitimate. They are threatening Russia and Eastern Europe. We wanted fair peace, but the greed and stupidity of the Americans and the short-sightedness of the Europeans revealed they didn't want that. We have to correct their mistakes.

Is the EU part of the institutions that Russia feels are illegitimate?

No, it's legitimate. But sometimes we dislike EU policies, especially if they become more and more belligerent.

You seem to believe that an escalation of this war to other countries is inevitable. Is that what you are saying?

Unfortunately it is becoming more and more likely. Americans and their NATO partners continue support of Ukraine by sending arms. If that continues, it is obvious that targets in Europe could or will be hit in order to stop lines of communications. Then the war could escalate. At this juncture it is becoming more and more plausible. I think the Joint chiefs of staff of US armed forces are of the same opinion as I am.

Denazification is what Ukraine seems to have proven by electing a Jewish president. Demilitarization is the opposite of what Mr. Putin has achieved, as this attack led Ukraine to get heavy weaponry from the West. Plus, Germany and the EU are rearming too, NATO has moved troops closer to Russia's borders, Western sanctions are now much tighter, while Europe and the US got closer together and Russia is becoming financially isolated. Would you say Putin's military operation is proving a success, so far?

Nazism is not only about antisemitism. It is about hating and suppressing all other nationalities. And it was taking over Ukraine. We never know how the military operations end. Demilitarization means destruction of Ukrainian military forces - that is happening and will accelerate. Of course, if Ukraine is supported with new weapons, that could prolong the agony. We can only talk about "victory" in quotes, because there are many casualties on both the Russian and the Ukrainian side. The war will be victorious, in one way or another. I assume demilitarization will be achieved and there will be denazification, too. Like we did in Germany and in Chechnya. Ukrainians will become much more peaceful and friendly to us.

But so far the Russian military had to withdraw after keeping Kiev under siege for one month. It doesn't look like the military operation is going so well, does it? It's a large military operation, so it has secrets in the way it's waged.

What if the Kiev operation was meant to distract Ukrainian forces and keep them away from the main theater in the South and South-East? Maybe that was the plan. Moreover Russian troops have been very careful not to hit civilian targets, we used only 30-35% of the lethal weapons that we could use. If we had used everything, that would have meant the destruction of Ukrainian cities and a much quicker victory. We did not do carpet bombing like Americans in Iraq. The endgame probably will be a new treaty, maybe with Zelensky still there. Probably it would mean the creation of a country in South and South-East Ukraine that is friendly to Russia. Maybe there will be several Ukraines. But at this juncture it is impossible to predict because, of course, it's an open-ended story. We are in the fog of war.

There is clear evidence that civilians have been targeted and killed by the Russian in Mariupol, in Bucha and elsewhere. These look very much like war crimes and crimes against humanity and they were deliberate. Should they be

persecuted?

The Bucha story is completely fake-staged, it's a provocation.

It doesn't look staged at all.

I watched the pictures and I am 99% sure. But more in general there is a war and civilians suffer. We know that Ukrainian neoNazi forces have been using civilians as living shields, especially in Mariupol. We have different pictures with you.

It's rather the opposite: the Russian army did not allow humanitarian corridors.

We opened them. They were blocked by nationalist forces. I know how our military operates but, of course, this is a war. We face a tragedy.

Did you expect this level of cohesion between Europe and the US?

Well, the cohesion will collapse because of the problems of the West. But for the time being they were organizing even before this conflict. The West is failing and losing its position in the world, so it needs an enemy – for the moment we are the enemy. I don't think the unity will last, Europe will not commit the suicide by choosing to lose its independence. I hope our European neighbors will recuperate from this dizziness of hatred.

You speak like some other country started this war, in fact Russia started it.

I was not for this particular scenario, but it happened. And I support my country. The West committed several aggressions. We are now on the same moral level, we are equal, we are doing more or less like you. I regret that we lost our moral superiority. But we are fighting an existential war

Sanctions are getting tighter. Will Russia become more dependent on China?

There is no question about that: we will be more integrated and more dependent on China. It has positive elements but overall we will be much more dependent. I am not very much afraid of becoming a pawn of China like some EU states became pawns of the US. First, Russians have a core gene of sovereignty. Second, we are culturally different from the Chinese, I don't think that China could or would like to overtake us. However we are not happy with the situation, because I would have preferred to have better relations with Europe. But Chinese are our close allies and friends and the biggest source of Russian strength after Russian people themselves. We are a source of their strength. I would prefer to end this confrontation with Europe. My calculation was to create a safe Western flank to compete more effectively in the Asian world of tomorrow

You declared that China, not Russia, will emerge as the victor in this war.

What did you mean?

We will be victorious because Russians always are in the end. But in the meantime we will lose a lot. We will lose people. We will lose financial resources and we

will become poorer for the time being. But we are ready to sacrifice in order to build a more viable and fair international system. We are talking about Ukraine, but we really want to build a different international system than the one that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union and, in turn, is now collapsing. We all are sinking into chaos now. We would like to build Fortress Russia to defend ourselves from this chaos, even if we are getting poorer for this. Unfortunately the chaos could take over Europe, if Europe doesn't act according to its interests. What Europe is doing right now is absolutely suicidal.

Is that a threat? Don't you think nuclear deterrence still applies?

I know that officially under certain circumstances the US could use nuclear weapons for the defense of Europe and they allegedly could fight for the defense of Europe against a nuclear superpower. There is a 1% chance this might happen, so we have to be careful. But if a n American president takes such a decision inviting devastating response it would mean he is insane.

This war doesn't look sustainable, including for Russia. It can't go on for long. What are the elements to agree at least on a real ceasefire?

First, Ukraine must be a completely demilitarized neutral country – no heavy arms, for whatever of Ukraine remains. This should be guaranteed by outside powers, including Russia, and no military exercises should take place in the country if one of the guarantors is against it. Ukraine should be a peaceful buffer, hopefully sending back some of the arms systems deployed in recent years.

Ukraine needs security guarantees, it needs to be able to defend itself or it will not be a sovereign country anymore.

I am sorry but Italy and most European countries cannot defend themselves either.

They belong to NATO...

They have been saving on security. That is how they got themselves into this awkward position that Europe is not considered to be a serious actor in the world. Switzerland and Austria are neutral, but are safe. So can Ukraine.

Do you realize that after what you just said, the debate in Italy will move towards investing more on defense?

You are welcome. One of the grave mistakes of the Europeans in the last decades is that they didn't invest in their security, under their ideal of eternal peace. But I think European nations should be able to defend themselves, because they have real threats coming from the South and the world is becoming a very dangerous place as international relations are collapsing. The question is more against whom Italy would like to arm. Against Russia? Well, that would be insane. But you need a more robust military force. You are living in a very dangerous place in the world. If you depend on America, you are selling out your own security and sovereignty because the Americans have their own interests.

The EU seems to be moving towards cutting dependence from Russian energy – first coal, then oil and finally natural gas. Did you expect that?

I hope you are not suicidal. Of course that would damage Russia, too, but Europe would undermine its economy and its social situation. I hope it will not happen, because you can calculate your own interests. If you don't want our coal, we will sell it somewhere else. If you don't want our oil, after a time and some losses, we will sell it elsewhere. And if you don't want gas, well, well, we can also eventually redirect it after some suffering. Russians support Putin at 81% now, people are ready for a rough period.

Do you think Italy and Europe could do something to broker a deal?

Not easy, given the situation. But what they could do is try to stop this Russophobia, akin anti-semitism of the previous centuries, this satanization of Russia that would lead us eventually to a worse confrontation than we have now. Even Russian culture is being erased in Europe by a new cancel culture.

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https://www.corriere.it/economia/aziende/22_aprile_08/we-are-at-war-with-the-west-the-european-security-order-is-illegitimate-c6b9fa5a-b6b7-11ec-b39d-8a197cc9b19a.shtml