

# “Russia cannot afford to lose, so we need a kind of a victory”: Sergey Karaganov on what Putin wants

A former adviser to the Kremlin explains how Russia views the war in Ukraine, fears over Nato and China, and the fate of liberalism.

By **Bruno Maçães**

A former presidential adviser to both Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, Sergey Karaganov is honorary chair of the Moscow think tank the Council for Foreign and Defence Policy. He is associated with a number of key ideas in Russian foreign policy, from the so-called Karaganov doctrine on the rights of ethnic Russians living abroad to the principle of “constructive destruction”, also known as the “Putin doctrine”. Karaganov is close to both Putin and his foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, and he formulated many of the ideas that led to the war in Ukraine – though he has also expressed disagreement with the idea of a long-term occupation of the country.

Karaganov has promoted the concept of “Greater Eurasia” and has defended a closer partnership with China. He is known as a foreign-policy hawk, and has argued that the long reign of the West in world politics is now at an end. On 28 March the *New Statesman* columnist Bruno Maçães interviewed Karaganov about his views on the war – including controversial statements on Ukrainian nationhood and denazification that would be disputed by those outside Russia – and the future of the liberal international order.

**Bruno Maçães** Why did Russia invade Ukraine?

**Sergey Karaganov** For 25 years, people like myself have been saying that if Nato and Western alliances expand beyond certain red lines, especially into Ukraine, there will be a war. I envisioned that scenario as far back as 1997. In 2008 President Putin said that if Ukraine’s membership of the alliance became a possibility then there will be no Ukraine. He was not listened to. So the first objective is to end Nato’s expansion. Two other objectives have been added: one is the demilitarisation of Ukraine; the other is denazification, because there are people in the Russian government concerned with the rise of ultra-nationalism in Ukraine to the extent that they think it is beginning to resemble Germany in the 1930s. There is also an aim to free the Donbas republics of eight years of constant bombardment.

There was also a strong belief that war with Ukraine was inevitable – maybe three or four years from now – which could well have taken place on Russian territory itself. So probably the Kremlin decided that if you have to fight, let’s fight on somebody else’s territory, the territory of a neighbour and a brother country, once a part of the Russian Empire. But the real war is against the Western expansion.

**BM** On 25 February Putin called on the Ukrainian army to overthrow President Volodymyr Zelensky. More recently, however, the Kremlin seems to be suggesting that it is interested in negotiating with Zelensky. Has the Kremlin changed its mind? Does it accept that Zelensky is the president of Ukraine and will remain the president of Ukraine?

**SK** It is a war, and we're in the fog of war, so opinions change, aims change. At the start, maybe some thought that the Ukrainian military would arrange some kind of a coup so we would have a real power in Kyiv with whom we could negotiate – recent presidents, and especially Zelensky, are considered puppets.

**BM** You personally do not consider President Zelensky a Nazi, do you?

**SK** Of course not.

**BM** What do you think would be the final goal for the Kremlin at this point? What would be considered a successful outcome for the invasion?

**SK** I don't know what the outcome of this war will be, but I think it will involve the partition of Ukraine, one way or another. Hopefully there would still be something called Ukraine left at the end. But Russia cannot afford to "lose", so we need a kind of a victory. And if there is a sense that we are losing the war, then I think there is a definite possibility of escalation. This war is a kind of proxy war between the West and the rest – Russia being, as it has been in history, the pinnacle of "the rest" – for a future world order. The stakes of the Russian elite are very high – for them it is an existential war.

**BM** You talked about demilitarisation of Ukraine, but it seems that such a goal would not be achieved if the West continues to provide Ukraine with weapons. Do you think Russia will be tempted to stop that flow of arms, and does this risk a direct clash between Nato and Russia?

**SK** Absolutely! There is a growing probability of a direct clash. And we don't know what the outcome of this would be. Maybe the Poles would fight; they are always willing. I know as a historian that Article 5 of the Nato treaty is worthless. Under Article 5 – which allows a state to call for support from other members of the alliance – nobody is obliged to actually fight on behalf of others, but nobody can be absolutely sure that there would be no such escalation. I also know from the history of American nuclear strategy that the US is unlikely to defend Europe with nuclear weapons. But there is still a chance of escalation here, so it is an abysmal scenario and I hope that some kind of a peace agreement between us and the US, and between us and Ukraine, can be reached before we go further into this unbelievably dangerous world.

**BM** If Putin asks for your advice, would you tell him that Article 5 is to be taken seriously or not? I understand from your words that it is not to be taken seriously in your view.

**SK** It might be that Article 5 works, and countries rally to the defence of another. But against a nuclear country like Russia... I wonder? Put it this way: if the US intervenes against a nuclear country, then the American president making that decision is mad, because it wouldn't be 1914 or 1939; this is something bigger. So I don't think America could possibly intervene, but we are already in a much more dangerous situation than several weeks ago. And Article 5 does not presume automatic obligations.

### **On Ukraine's right to exist**

**BM** What was your reaction to President Biden's comment that President Putin cannot stay in power?

**SK** Well, President Biden often makes all kind of comments. [Afterwards,] he was corrected by his colleagues, so nobody's taking the statement seriously.

**BM** Putin has argued that Ukraine does not exist as a nation. I would imagine that the conclusion from the events of the past weeks is that Ukraine does exist as a nation, when you have the whole population, including civilians, willing to sacrifice their lives to preserve the sovereignty and independence of their country. Does Ukraine exist as a nation, or is Ukraine just a part of Russia?

**SK** I am not sure whether there is a massive civilian resistance as you suggest, rather than just young men joining the army. In any case, I don't know whether Ukraine will survive, because it has a very limited, if any, history of statehood, and it doesn't have a state-building elite. Maybe something will grow from below, but it's an open question... We shall see... This war – or military operation; however you call it – will decide. Maybe the Ukrainian nation will be born: I will be happy if Ukrainians have an effective, viable government – unlike the situation during the last 30 years. They were the absolute losers after the Soviet Union, because of their lack of a state-building elite.

**BM** If there is a partition, would the Russia-controlled section of Ukraine preserve a nominal independence, or would it be absorbed by Russia?

**SK** If the operation is to turn Ukraine into a “friendly” state, then absorption is clearly not necessary. There might be some kind of absorption – which has happened, effectively – in the Donbas republics. Whether they will be independent or not – I think they might be. Certainly there are calls for referendums there, but how you could run referendums during a conflict I do not know. So my judgement would be that some of Ukraine will become a friendly state to Russia, other parts may be partitioned. Poland will gladly take back some of parts in the west, maybe Romanians and Hungarians will, too, because the Hungarian minority in Ukraine has been suppressed along with other minorities. But we are in a full-on war; it is too hard to predict. The war is an open-ended story.

**BM** One argument is that Russia will fall under Chinese control, and this war does not help – because by isolating Russia from the West, it turns Russia into easy prey for Chinese economic influence. Are you worried that this could be the beginning of a “Chinese century” for Russia?

**SK** There are two answers to your question. One is that China's economic influence in Russia and over Russia will grow. China has most of the technologies we need, and it has a lot of capital, so there is no question about that. Whether Russia would become a kind of a satellite country, according to the Chinese tradition of their Middle Kingdom, I doubt it.

If you asked me how I would describe Russia in one word, it is “sovereignty”. We defeated those who sought to rule us, starting with the Mongols, and then Carl [Charles XII] of Sweden, then Napoleon and Hitler. Also, recently, we had years of Western domination here. It was almost overwhelming. And nevertheless, you see what has happened: Russia revolted against all that. So I am not afraid of Russia becoming a part of a great China. The other reason I'm not afraid is because Chinese civilisation is very different. We have our Asian traits in our genes, and we are in part an Asian country because of this. And Siberia is at the core of the Russian empire: without Siberia, Russia wouldn't have become a great country. And the Tatar and Mongol yoke left many traits in our society. But culturally, we are different, so I don't think it is possible that we will become a subsidiary country.

But I am very concerned about the overwhelming economic predominance of China over the next decade. People like me have been saying precisely [that] we have to solve the Ukraine problem, we have to solve the Nato problem, so that we can be in a strong position vis-à-vis China. Now it will be much more difficult for Russia to resist Chinese power.

## **On winners and losers**

**BM** Do you think the US is benefiting from this war?

**SK** At this juncture, yes, because the big losers are, in addition to Ukraine, Europe, especially if it continues with this mysterious zest for independence from Russian energy. But China is clearly the victor of this whole affair... I think the biggest loser will be Ukraine; a loser will be Russia; a great loser will be Europe; the United States will lose somewhat, but still it could very well survive as a huge island over the ocean; and the big victor is China.

**BM** You have argued that in the future there could be some kind of alliance between Russia and Europe – or at least some European countries, if not others. Surely now you must think there is no possibility for Europe and Russia to come closer together.

**SK** If we could have solved the crisis peacefully there's no question that parts of Europe would have orientated themselves not towards Russia itself but Greater Eurasia, of which Russia would be a key part. That scenario is now postponed, but Europe needs to develop a relationship with Greater Eurasia. We lived through world wars and cold wars, and then we rebuilt our relationship. I hope that we shall do that in ten years. I hope I shall see that before I pass.

**BM** Do you think this is a moment of supreme danger for Russia?

**SK** I would say yes, this is an existential war. If we do not win, somehow, then I think we will have all kinds of unforeseen political repercussions which are much worse than at the beginning of the 1990s. But I believe that we will avoid that, first, because Russia will win, whatever that victory means, and second, because we have a strong and tough regime, so in any event, or if the worst happens, it will not be the dissolution of the country or collapse. I think it will be closer to a harsh authoritarian regime than to the dissolution of the country. But still, defeat is unthinkable.

**BM** What would qualify as defeat?

**SK** I do not know. That is the question. We need victory. I don't think that, even if we conquered all of Ukraine and all the military forces of Ukraine surrendered, it would be a victory, because then we will be left with the burden of a devastated country, one devastated by 30 years of inept elite rule, and then of course devastation from our military operation. So I think at one point we need a kind of a solution which would be called peace, and which would include de facto the creation of some kind of a viable, pro-Russian government on the territory of Ukraine, and real security for the Donbas republics.

**BM** If the current stalemate were to continue for years, would that be a defeat?

**SK** Stalemate means a huge military operation. No, I don't think it is possible. I am afraid it would lead to escalation, because fighting endlessly on the territory of Ukraine – even now, is not viable.

**BM** It's the second time you've mentioned that if there is no progress it would lead to an escalation. What does "escalation" mean in this context?

**SK** Well, escalation in this context means that in the face of an existential threat – and that means a non-victory, by the way, or an alleged defeat – Russia could escalate, and there are dozens of places in the world where it would have a direct confrontation with the United States.

**BM** So your suggestion is that, on the one hand, we could have an escalation towards the possible use of nuclear weapons – if there is an existential danger to Russia – and, on the other, an escalation towards conflict in other areas beyond Ukraine. Am I following you correctly?

**SK** I wouldn't rule it out. We are living in absolutely a new strategic situation. Normal logic dictates what you have said.

**BM** How do you feel personally? Do you feel tormented by what is happening?

**SK** We all feel like we are part of a huge event in history, and it's not just about war in Ukraine; it's about the final crash of the international system that was created after the Second World War and then, in a different way, was recreated after the collapse of the Soviet Union. So, we are witnessing the collapse of an economic system – of the world economic system – globalisation in this form is finished. Whatever we have had in the past is gone. And out of this we have a build-up of many crises that, because of Covid-19, we pretended did not exist. For two years, the pandemic replaced decision-making. Covid was bad enough, but now everybody has forgotten about Covid and we can see that everything is collapsing. Personally, I'm tremendously saddened. I worked for the creation of a viable and fair system. But I am part of Russia, so I only wish that we win, whatever that means.

### **On the decline of European democracy**

**BM** Do you sometimes fear this could be the rebirth of Western power and American power; that the Ukraine war could be a moment of renewal for the American empire?

**SK** I don't think so. The problem is that during the last 500 years the foundation of Western power was the military preponderance of Europeans. This foundation started eroding from the 1950s and 1960s. Then the collapse of the Soviet Union made it seem for a while that Western predominance was back, but now it is done away with, because Russia will continue to be a major military power and China is becoming a first-class military power.

So the West will never recuperate, but it doesn't matter if it dies: Western civilisation has brought all of us great benefits, but now people like myself and others are questioning the moral foundation of Western civilisation. I think geopolitically the West will experience ups and downs. Maybe the shocks we are experiencing could bring back the better qualities of Western civilisation, and we will again see people like Roosevelt, Churchill, Adenauer, de Gaulle and Brandt back in office. But continuous shocks will of course also mean that democracy in its present form in most European countries will not survive, because under circumstances of great tension, democracies always wither away or become autocratic. These changes are inevitable.

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