

**Sergei A. Karaganov**  
*Scientific Head, School of World Economy and International Affairs, HSE University*  
*Honorary Chairman, Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy*

## **Interview for LIMES**

**Limes:** You said Russia can't lose this war, it seems It's losing it. Is it wrong?

*Karaganov:* I don't think Russia is losing, moreover militarily it is winning, but at a much slower pace than expected. I said it can't lose it, this military operation is existential for the country. The question is in the limits of victory, geographically, and the measures, means which could be used in order to achieve victory in case there is a looming defeat.

**Limes:** could you give us an idea of the parameters for judging whether you're losing o winning this war

*Karaganov:* let's put it this way. At the beginning, many people in Russia and in the West believed we would achieve a lightening victory and that assessment was a mistake. However, Russian troops are taking more and more ground, the military infrastructure of the Ukraine is being eliminated, the troops are being depleted. But the question is how we define the victory.

And this can be only a decision of the political leadership. Russia took over most of Eastern and Southern Ukraine and then could achieve some armistice: that would be a victory. If Russia takes control over all left bank (of Dnipro River) it would be even more of a victory. But the problem is that we could reach an armistice, not a peace. A lasting peace is not within reach so far. To achieve that United States should be persuaded that its fights till the last Ukrainian is counterproductive and outright dangerous for them.

So, the so-called limited military operation could last for years. We also see that for elites of some of our Western opponents, whomever they are, it becomes an existential war as well. And so there's a growing danger of things getting out of control. Though, of course, the stakes on the Russian side are much higher. It is whether the country survives.

**Limes:** were you surprised by the reactions of the Ukrainians? They're fighting bravely

*Karaganov:* Not me, but many were surprised. I knew for my personal experience, that there is a totally corrupt regime, hated by most Ukrainians. But they started to believe in their statehood. So many of them decided to fight for their homeland.

**Limes:** is the opinion about this military action changing among Russian people. Retired colonel Khodaryonok on the First Channel was a surprise. Etc.

*Karaganov:* Most of the information you get is false.

Probably most of the information we get is biased. So better not to read newspapers nor watch TV.

But the picture is relatively clear: there is a perception that is an existential war, most of the population supports the president. Most of the elite are supporting but also asking for a definition of what victory is, how far Russia should go. Also residual pro-Western elites are either leaving or changing their views watching these bellicose sanctions and Russophobia.

**Limes:** economic war against Russia, Germany and Japan rearming, Finland and Sweden asking to integrate into NATO, Chinese questioning the special relationship with Russia, America looking at Ukraine a new Afghanistan, it's not what Putin intended on February the 24<sup>th</sup>.

*Karaganov:* I wrote for many years even in your magazine that we had been living in a pre-war situation and that we were moving towards a war. One of the likely causes of war, as I said, was integration of Ukraine into NATO. I'm terribly sorry that I turned out to be right. My personal drama is that, though predicting, I was unable to prevent. The confrontation was totally predictable if not inevitable. The question was who strikes first and how. I would have preferred a different scenario, but that's my personal story. Of course, the reaction of the West was predicted, and for a very simple reason. We knew the desperate situation of the modern ruling Western elites, who are losing reputation on many fronts: economic, social, political, moral, ecological. They were not able and not willing to correct their previous mistakes, so they needed an enemy. They had been creating an enemy even before the start of an open confrontation. In 2009-2010, I wrote that we were already in a full body cold war. COVID was used as a temporary substitution of war distracting attention from problems and multiple crises. But not for long. Ukrainian conflict is a tragedy because people are dying, including civilians.

As to the Chinese position, it is wishful thinking of people writing in Western press. They have been always predicting distancing (in Russian Chinese relations). Also every five years they wishfully predicted an economic failure of China. And now here we are, very close strategical partners. Chinese are, of course, very cautious, but they understand that if Russia loses, they would become totally vulnerable.

**Limes:** the conflict in Ukraine as beginning of a wider conflict.

*Karaganov:* The world positions of West have been weakening for several decades except for a dozen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These positions have been collapsing in the last fifteen years. Now Western elites are trying a desperate counterattack, to take out Russia, which in many ways has become a linchpin of the non-Western world in military and political sense. They would make life of Russians harder. But they could not turn back the tide of history. The world is freeing itself from the Western hegemony.

It is our military might, which has deprived the West of military preponderance, on which Europe has been basing its political and economic and

cultural superiority. The dominance of the last four or five centuries gave Europe/West a possibility to siphon off world wealth in their favour. Soviet Union, then Russia catering to its own security interests, undermined the foundation of this hegemony. This fight is in final stages, there will be ups and downs, but the Western dominance can't be returned. The world is becoming more free. But instability comes with this freedom.

**Limes:** do you see the possibility of new, different conflicts with Russia?

*Karaganov:* there will all kind of conflicts. We are in a long phase of the most drastic change of correlation of forces in human history. Ukraine is a small piece of a general great conflict, the platform on which the West decided to fight us. But there will be many conflicts until a new balance of power is established, hopefully some fifteen years from now. However, we've got to survive this one. We are living under very dangerous circumstances. I would call it a prolonged Cuban missile crisis. I think one of the biggest task for leaders also for pundits like myself, is to avoid a nuclear world war that would finish off humanity. Now the possibility of a nuclear conflict is rapidly growing, and nobody knows whether or where escalation could stop.

**Limes:** Putin on 9th of May said this conflict was unavoidable. How was it possible Russia let put itself into this situation, with no alternative to invading Ukraine?

*Karaganov:* I said many times since the end of 1990s that if the expansion of the West to the territory of Ukraine wouldn't stop, the war would be inevitable. Also, we saw that our Western partners were in a desperate position, they were losing control of the situation in their countries. I would have wanted to achieve a peaceful redistribution of the balance of power, I have been pursuing this, I failed. As to the position of my government, I think they decided to go first because they believed that taking into consideration policies of the U. S. and their clients the direct confrontation was unavoidable. Maybe that should have been done earlier.

**Limes:** you mean before, when the Ukrainians were weaker

*Karaganov:* The COVID crisis was a substitution of war for many reasons, it distracted us from the real situation. When the COVID was waving away I wrote, and said: the chances of war are rapidly increasing.

**Limes:** this war seems to contribute a lot to identity construction, and state construction in Ukraine.

*Karaganov:* for the first 10-11 years after the fall of the Soviet Union I was a chairman of most Russian-Ukrainian commissions, I was afraid of war. Then I became desperate, as it was impossible to work with degrading Ukrainian élites, which for the extent they existed, were not interested in state building and were just degrading and stealing. So I just quit.

Whether this war will bring something back I don't know, maybe, but if something is being build up it can be only a fascist regime, no question about this. I do not think that Ukraine as a state will occupy in the future the territory it is occupying

now. There are many pretenders to the territory of weakened Ukraine. Russia probably will keep the South-Eastern part under some kind of control.

**Limes:** but at the end of the day, there will always be a border between you and Ukraine. What kind of border you imagine?

*Karaganov:* I do not know, it's an open question. We are living in a highly unpredictable situation. As I don't think Russia should take control of the full territory of Ukraine because it would be a huge burden. We strangely believed in Brzezinski tong-in-cheek utterance that Russia without Ukraine cannot be a viable empire. In my vision, Russia with Ukraine could not be a viable great power. Siberia, not territory of what is now Ukraine, made Russia a great power.

**Limes:** you mean with all the Ukrainian territory.

*Karaganov:* Brzezinski was a grand thinker but a provocateur, too.

**Limes:** if you look at the map you noticed that at the end of the day there won't be any buffer state. But Russian rule has always been to have some buffer zone between itself and the West, so it's not really a big success the loss of a buffer State, or not

*Karaganov:* the alternative was worse. The alternative was Ukraine as an anti-Russia, as it had been built, with a strong ideologically fascist army, being better and better armed day by day. I think Russia now is willing to destroy military infrastructure or any infrastructure so that these arms will never be viable. And some kind of a buffer zone will be created.

We showed our Western partners the red line for years: this is the red line, don't cross. When they refused to accept this, Russia decided to act militarily.

**Limes:** if Finland and Sweden are accepted in NATO you will have a virtual naval blockade in St Petersburg, Kaliningrad encircled also via the sea. So that could be a very dangerous area of attrition between Russia and NATO

*Karaganov:* yes it's more and more dangerous, I agree.

I think we are not afraid, but we are concerned. This expansion of NATO to Finland and Sweden means one very simple thing: the nuclear threshold will be lowered. NATO membership does not provide security, it guarantees insecurity. Article number 5 does not provide for automatic guarantee, everybody who wants to read it, please do. But it guarantees member countries to become prime targets in times of crisis. Now we're leaving in a very strange world where countries are becoming suicidal. I would have never believed that Finland would do that. But elites are losing sense of responsibility. See what's happening, Americans and some people in Europe are using Ukraine to undermine and curtail any possible systematic links between Russia and Europe. Modern European elites are desperately working to undermine these links. But they are undermining competitiveness of European businesses, their economies.

**Limes:** the only guarantee is probably having the atomic bomb. But NATO is also meant by some Americans as an alternative to European atomic bomb. If the American umbrella is put into question, than some European countries like Germany, for example, could think they need an atomic bomb.

*Karaganov:* it's a very philosophical question, I do not share the official views of my government. U.S. are using Japan and Europe as their pawns. If they become nuclear, the world become freer and safer.

Poland is a very desperate country, worse than Iran, so I wouldn't think Russia could tolerate Polish proliferation. They're suicidal.

I would tolerate Italy with an atomic bomb, and saying this, of course, I'm joking. Germany is a very difficult question, they are very different from what they used to be, they are more pacific than Danes are. Nowadays, they are in a strange mood, but I don't think they are already in a militaristic mood. Let's see what comes out. We are in a very fluid situation, and I don't think the structure of Europe which we've seen in the last 70 years will survive. We should think about the future of this fading Europe. What is sure is that this dependence from the United States, which are not interested in stability and cooperation in Europe, is dangerous.

**Limes:** What is your grand strategy?

*Karaganov:* hopefully after a decade things will start to become different. We will be able to fix our Western security border. In the meantime, we'll become, of course, more dependent on China and the East. But in 10 years there will be a different world and a different Europe, and we will start to build what I call a Greater Eurasia, that is a Commonwealth of countries from Shanghai to Lisbon or Paris, I'm not sure if Britain can be included, but many countries in Europe, yes. This is the best scenario. And history is more open than ever, and we're in a state of war, it is a total war unleashed by the West, which is trying to regain positions which it has been losing, against the rest. Russia is the crucial part of the rest, it's a beacon of the rest. I know history, that whomever wanted to achieve victory over Russia were in the end defeated, but I'm not happy of the eventual defeat of others because of the many victims on that road to victory.

**Limes:** do you see the risk of a disaggregation process of the Russian Federation starting as consequence of a prolonged conflict?

*Karaganov:* We know it's a possibility and we are openly talking about that and discuss that. We recently had an impressive discussion at the Assembly of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy.

We were talking about the absolute need of a victory exactly to avoid that kind of a scenario. And we also know that for the first time since the previous Cold War we have some Western powers openly aiming at disaggregating Russia. The picture is much worse that the one we had during the previous Cold War, when the aim was

detering and containing, but now the aim is simple disintegration and collapse. So, we know the stakes are very high and that is why I am very worried about escalation.

---

//This interview was originally published in *Limes* magazine №5/22 «*La cortina di acciaio*» (pp. 143-148) on June 3, 2022 in Italian language: <https://www.limesonline.com/cartaceo/se-perdissimo-la-russia-rischierebbe-di-spaccarsi>.