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Mutually Assured Distraction

Analysis of Sergey Karaganov's Doomsday
Rhetoric in the Context of Russian Nuclear
Deterrence

Oona-Maria Hyppölä

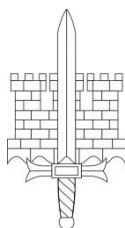
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Oona-Maaria Hyppölä



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DEPARTMENT OF WARFARE
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Oona-Maaria Hyppölä: *Mutually Assured Distraction: Analysis of Sergey Karaganov's Domsday Rhetoric in the Context of Russian Nuclear Deterrence*

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Abstract

Alongside conventional warfare, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has reminded us about the prevailing relevance of deterrence issues and nuclear weapons even in modern-day conflicts. The deterrence rhetoric promoted by the Russian state leadership and certain prominent foreign policy experts has become increasingly hawkish and aggressive. Many of the statements consist of outright nuclear threats and doomsday lexicon. This raises the question, whether such threats are merely a final attempt to salvage what is left from Russia's faltering position as a military superpower. Or, perhaps an attempt to discourage Western support in fear of Russian nuclear retaliation and to intimidate Ukraine to submission.

This research paper has a special focus on nuclear and deterrence rhetoric, namely, the statements of a long-standing Russian foreign policy expert, former advisor to the president, Sergey Karaganov. He has been a prominent figure in security policy debates for decades. He is most well-known for his long career in academia, but he also has an exhaustive list of positions in various Russian governmental organisations. The paper draws on Karaganov's writings and ideas from the past decade. Main focus is on statements made after February 2022. The status and possible leverage power of Karaganov within the Russian state apparatus is evaluated. The aim is to also observe change in nuclear rhetoric and look for the origin and objective of certain claims. Moreover, the authority of Karaganov's arguments and the prevalence of similar as well as contesting views is assessed. Karaganov's statements are also related to the official line in the context of Russian, as well as Soviet nuclear debate.

Karaganov's ideas have grown gradually more radical amidst Russia's war against Ukraine. His most prominent and extreme idea is the introduction of a Russian preemptive nuclear strike on European soil to restore the Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) doctrine and bring the war in Ukraine to a favorable conclusion. For Karaganov, humanity has become dangerously indifferent to the threat of nuclear war. Peace is taken for granted. The threshold for the use of nuclear weapons needs to be "lowered", so that nuclear rhetoric is no longer automatically perceived as a verbal saber rattling without real effect. Karaganov certainly has no direct political power, but judging by his current affiliations, he still has adequate authority left to enjoy trust and hold a place within the state apparatus and in Putin's orbit. By allowing a myriad of figures like Karaganov with varying, even contradicting views and statements to take part in the deterrence debate Russia is utilising a strategy aimed at creating confusion, fear and hesitation in the opposing side. I call this the Russian mutually assured distraction strategy.

The grim reality is that the current Putin regime – Karaganov as part of it – lives and breathes conflict. Its very existence is tied to it and it has no genuine vision of Russia free from conflict. Therefore, it can be assumed that escalatory rhetoric and confrontation will continue, without Russia showing any real desire to work towards peace. The role of strategic forces and nuclear weapons will undoubtedly be emphasised in building deterrence, not least because of the poor performance of the conventional forces in Ukraine. However, the state leadership, primarily Putin himself, has stuck to strictly reciting the Military Doctrine and seemed even moderate in some of his statements compared to e.g. Karaganov. It might largely be an attempt to burnish Putin's reputation to make him seem more rational. However, it does also signal that it is in Russia's own interests to prolong the rhetorical, non-forceful, coercion and intimidation for as long as possible, and to avoid nuclear escalation from words to action to the last. A shared understanding still exists that any form of nuclear weapons' use will have devastating effects.

Keywords: *Russia, strategic deterrence, nuclear deterrence, nuclear weapons, nuclear rhetoric, escalation management*

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Introduction

*“H*asn't our doctrine on using nuclear weapons become obsolete? I believe that it has certainly grown obsolete, and that it even looks frivolous. It was created in different times and, maybe, in a different situation, and it also follows old theories. Deterrence does not work anymore. Isn't it high time we modify the doctrine on using nuclear weapons, lowering the nuclear threshold and moving steadily and sufficiently quickly along the staircase of escalation, deterrence and bringing our partners down to earth? [...] They [West] are saying that, under our doctrine, we will never use nuclear weapons. Consequently, we unwittingly allow them [West] to escalate and conduct an absolutely monstrous aggression [...] We have to reinstall the safety catch called nuclear deterrence, which maintained peace for 70 years. Today, the West has forgotten history and fear, and it is trying to eliminate this safety catch. Shouldn't we change our policy in this sphere? “²

This unequivocal, almost bellicose, question was addressed to President Vladimir Putin in October 2023 in the annual meeting of the Valdai discussion club that brings together Russian government officials, scholars and policy experts. The man behind the question was Sergey Karaganov – a long-standing Russian foreign policy expert and academic. In his response, president Putin appeared almost conciliatory compared to Karaganov's apparent hawkishness. Putin, albeit generally respecting expert opinions on deterrence, confirmed that Russia's official line remains consistent with the 2014 Military Doctrine:

“Let me remind you that there are two reasons stipulated in the Russian Military Doctrine for the possible use of nuclear weapons by Russia. The first is the use of nuclear weapons against us, which would entail a so-called retaliatory strike. [...] I want to assure everyone that as of today, this response will be absolutely unacceptable for any potential aggressor [...] so that no enemy will have a chance to survive. [...] The second reason for the potential use of these weapons is an existential threat to the Russian state – even if conventional weapons are used against Russia, but the very existence of Russia as a state is threatened. [...]

Do we need to change this? Why would we? Everything can be changed, but I just don't see that we need to. There is no situation imaginable today where something would threaten Russian statehood and the existence of the Russian state. I do not think anyone in their right mind would consider using nuclear weapons against Russia. [...] Nevertheless, we do respect your [Karaganov's] point of view and the views of other experts, people with a patriotic attitude who have empathy for what is happening

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² Prezident Rossii. (2023). *Zasedanie diskussionogo kluba "Valdai". 05.10.2023*. Translation from Russian to English by the Presidential Administration of Russian Federation. The original translation chosen to be used, despite its slight grammatical awkwardness, to showcase the exact rhetoric and lexicon the Russian state apparatus itself is using.

*in and around the country and are concerned about the developments along the line of contact with Ukraine. I understand all this and, take my word for it, we do respect your perspectives. [...]*³

This dialogue was without doubt purposefully constructed to make Putin seem more diplomatic, reasonable and moderate vis-à-vis Karaganov – not least because such adjectives have long ceased to be associated with the President’s policies. Although the exchange of words between Putin and Karaganov was anything but spontaneous, it does offer an important insight on how the Russian political regime and its strategic culture⁴ in particular operate. No matter how personalised Russian politics have become, the state apparatus performing strategic planning and policymaking amounts to be more than a one-man-led war machine. There are still various influential stakeholders that hold significant roles in the system contributing to strategic thinking. Consequently, it is vital to study the statements and writings of such actors, both military and non-military, engaging in nuclear and deterrence debates in Russia.

As Anya Fink notes, nuclear policy in Russia, is “the result of an interplay among numerous civilian and military stakeholders in the Russian bureaucracy.”⁵ The civil-military relations, that is, the relationship between political leadership, civilian actors and the military, are in a constant flux. Fink hereby continues that the military’s ability to monopolise its role and expertise in nuclear weapons and deterrence related issues is dependable on the state of civil-military relations in Russia.⁶ In other words, non-military stakeholders, though admittedly in varying degrees, have an essential role in the Russian nuclear debate. Therefore, underestimating the input potential of, for example, civilian scholars and experts in generating information and discussions in nuclear deterrence related issues would be an error. The writing of Russia’s new Military Doctrine is underway, and the ongoing war will undoubtedly be reflected in its wording and concepts of escalation management. Therefore, analysing various debates and perspectives, especially statements made during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, that touch upon the role of nuclear weapons in the Russian deterrence equation, is crucial. Such analysis will undoubtedly improve our understanding of the upcoming doctrine and, most of all, the general nuclear posture of Russia.

This research paper analyses the statements and writings of Sergey Karaganov, with a special focus on nuclear deterrence rhetoric. The primary data consists of Karaganov’s articles and interviews from the past decade. The main focus of the analysis

³ Ibid.

⁴ Strategic culture is originally a Western concept coined by the American political scientist Jack Snyder in 1977. The concept of strategic culture is often utilised in close connection to deterrence theory in academic research. Most recently Dmitry Adamsky has adopted the concept of strategic culture as one of his main analytical lenses to study the Russian way of deterrence. Despite initially being a Western term, strategic culture as a concept is also referred to in Russian (academic) debate. See e.g. Adamsky, D. (2024). *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press; Lektoriya SVOP. *Strategičeskaja kul'tura – vojna, politika ili ideologija? Itogi Lektorija SVOP*. Russia in Global Affairs; Veršin, A. & Krivopalov, A. (2023). *Rossijskaja strategičeskaja kul'tura: opyt istoričeskoj retrospektivy*. Russia in Global affairs.

⁵ Fink, A. (2024). *The General Staff's Throw-Weight: The Russian Military's Role in and Views of US-Russian Arms Control*. CNA Corporation, p. i

⁶ Ibid., p. 45

is on writings that have been published after Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While focusing on Karaganov's arguments and wordings, the aim is to distinguish between the different levels of communication, assessing what is being said, what is aimed to be communicated, and what is the desired effect of such communication. I try to "read between the lines" and focus on the intention rather than specific wordings of Karaganov's statements. The approach to the research material is thus, rhetorical analysis.⁷ The aim is to evaluate the status and possible leverage power of Karaganov within the Russian state apparatus. In addition, a possible change in nuclear rhetoric is observed while looking for the origin and objective of certain claims. Moreover, assessment of the authority of Karaganov's arguments and the prevalence of similar, as well as contesting views in the context of Russian deterrence debate is made. Additionally, Karaganov's ideas are placed in a wider context of Russian, as well as Soviet state views on the use of nuclear weapons, as outlined in key strategic documents and by the state leadership. Doing so, the aim is to answer the following research questions: 1) What kind of position does Karaganov himself and his ideas have within the apparatus involved in the nuclear deterrence debate in Russia? 2) Is there something new or unusual in Karaganov's nuclear deterrence statements presented after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine? 3) What is the objective, explicit or implicit, of Karaganov's statements on the use of nuclear weapons?

Karaganov's argumentation, admittedly, represents only one discourse among many within the Russian deterrence debate. However, it is a narrative mindset that has gained growing acceptance and attention especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Karaganov is a longstanding expert on Russian foreign policy, often associated with President Putin himself. Admittedly, Karaganov may not be a part of the firmest inner circle of Putin, but he is undoubtedly in the President's orbit. He has gained an advisory role in state foreign policy and a somewhat authoritative place in the sun due to his extensive career in both academia and various state structures, during which he has systematically fostered views promoted by the state leadership. Most importantly, Karaganov has stayed unfailingly loyal to the regime.

After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and especially in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Karaganov has published increasingly hawkish writings examining Russia's deterrence and the use of nuclear weapons in particular. Some of these texts and statements have also gained international attention.⁸ His most

⁷ Aristotle's classical model of rhetorical analysis studies the author's ability to appeal to the object (audience). The analysis comprises three areas of rhetorical appeals: ethos, logos and pathos. The model is also known as the rhetorical triangle. In brief; ethos refers to the authority and credibility of the author and her argument; logos refers to reason, the logic of argumentation, and the facts provided to support the statements made; pathos refers to emotional appeals and appealing to the values of the audience. In other words, ethos relates to the author/speaker, logos to the message, and pathos to the audience. See e.g. Lutske, J. & Henggeler, M. (2009). *The Rhetorical Triangle: Understanding and Using Logos, Ethos, and Pathos*. Indiana University School of Liberal Arts; Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (2022). *Aristotle's Rhetoric*.

⁸ See e.g. Baklitskiy, A. (2023). *What We Learned From Recent Calls for a Russian Nuclear Attack*. Carnegie Politika. 20.07.2023; Cimbala, S. & Korb, L. (2023). *Karaganov's case for Russian nuclear preemption: responsible strategizing or dangerous delusion?* The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. 21.08.2023.; Freedman, L. (2023). *The Russo-Ukrainian*

prominent article⁹ thus far was published in June 2023. In the article, Karaganov presents the idea that Russia's possible pre-emptive nuclear strike on Europe would allegedly work as an escalation management tool saving "humanity from a global catastrophe."¹⁰ The deterrence rhetoric promoted by Russian state leadership and foreign policy experts, not to mention their recent outright (nuclear) threats, raise the question, whether such threats are merely a final attempt to salvage what is left from Russia's faltering position as a military superpower. Or perhaps a more direct informational operation aiming to discourage Western support in fear of Russian nuclear retaliation and to intimidate Ukraine to submission.

I use deterrence theory as the theory of interpretation while trying to understand the logic of the Russian nuclear rhetoric and the Russian way of building nuclear deterrence. While analyzing the current Russian nuclear rhetoric and narratives, deterrence theory is used as the basis to which I reflect on. The aim is to showcase that the Russian means of signaling its will and intention, as well as ways of affecting the opponent – the Russian way of deterrence – is deeply rooted in the existing theory. In the first section of this paper, I provide a brief summary of some of the main theoretical discussions on deterrence, where I also touch upon the Russian understanding and theorising of strategic and nuclear deterrence. I will likewise cover Russia's latest Military and nuclear doctrine in this section. The following section will be a reading of Karaganov's texts and statements focusing particularly on nuclear and deterrence rhetoric. A short biography and an analysis of Karaganov's social standing within the echelons of Russian elite will be included to better contextualise his statements and to help assess the weight of his arguments. The paper will end with a brief conclusion summarising the principal findings and suggesting possible future avenues for research.

War and the Durability of Deterrence. Survival, 65(6); Notte, H. (2023). *The West Cannot Cure Russia's Nuclear Fever*. War on the Rocks. 18.07.2023; Rosenberg, S. (2024). *Confident Putin warns Europe is 'defenceless'*. BBC. 07.06.2024;

⁹ Karaganov, S. (2023a). *Tjažeskoje, no neobhodimoe rešenje. Primenenie jadernogo oružija možet uberets' tšelovečestvo ot globalnoj katastrofy*. Profil, 13.06.2023.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Concept of Deterrence and Deterrence Theory

Deterrence is inscribed in all interstate relations, where actors aim at protecting their own interest and vital activities by creating a counterforce strong enough to dissuade or prevent opponents from achieving their objectives or taking a menacing action. Simply put, deterrence is about preventing hostilities or managing their further escalation. Status quo is the default position of deterrence, and maintaining this balance, ideally without warfighting, is the ultimate objective. In practice, deterrence is the use of implicit or explicit threats of force to cause the opponent to either refrain from hostile activity completely, or have the opponent either change or stop the course of its activity. Deterrent threats are signaled through the (potential) use of both conventional force and nuclear weapons. Albeit simple in definition, exercising strategic deterrence is a complex nexus of military, political, diplomatic, economic and informational means and actions. Come to think of it, strategic (nuclear) deterrence is ultimately paradoxical in nature. One of its main purpose is to manage escalation, prevent war and to never fully materialise, and yet, it must be based on a compelling demonstration of readiness and capabilities enough to convince the adversary of unacceptable damage should nuclear weapons ever be used.

As Colin Gray describes, deterrence is a “relational variable.”¹¹ This means that deterrence does not exist in a vacuum and cannot be generated unilaterally. Deterrence is a product of a relationship and it is a value that is constantly shifting.¹² Deterrence can be carried out in different strategies, whether it is denial, punishment or retaliation.¹³ *Deterrence by denial*, in summary, refers to preventing gains whereas *deterrence by punishment or retaliation* refers to the promise of imposing unacceptable costs for the adversary.¹⁴ The weapons used to perform deterrence can be both conventional and nuclear. However, since the cost of nuclear war is virtually uncontestable, “deterrent threats based on nuclear capabilities enjoy a degree of certainty that can never be achieved by conventional weapons.”¹⁵ As James Wirtz notes, the difficulty of fine-tuning the use of nuclear weapons makes it hard to utilise the *deterrence by punishment* strategy, that is, to compel the adversary to abandon specific course of action, because nuclear threats in their very essence suggest “that existential issues are at stake and that the time for moderation or negotiation has passed.”¹⁶ In the same vein, Wirtz continues that *deterrence by denial* strategy faces the challenge of being able to defeat the adversary quickly and with minimal costs, which is especially difficult against an adversary also armed with nuclear weapons and with second-strike capabilities.¹⁷ Hence,

¹¹ Gray, C. S. (2000). *Deterrence in the 21st century*. Comparative Strategy, 19(3), p. 256

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Wirtz, J. J. (2018). *How Does Nuclear Deterrence Differ from Conventional Deterrence?* Strategic Studies Quarterly, 12(4), p. 66.

¹⁴ Freedman, L. (2018). *Nuclear deterrence: A ladybird expert book*. London: Penguin Books, p. 26

¹⁵ Wirtz, J. J. (2018), p. 61

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 71

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 71

it can be argued that, due to the destructive power of nuclear weapons, nuclear deterrence serves best as a purely retaliatory strategy.

In Western thinking, nuclear deterrence has been seen as the ultimate “peace strategy”, to which nuclear weapons present an almost perfect tool because they tend to “eliminate optimism about a positive war outcome.”¹⁸ The sheer destructive power of nuclear weapons, and the fact that there is no viable defense against them, has created a situation where it is possible to cause massive destruction to the adversary without engaging in direct combat. In the 1940s, notably before the Soviet Union had even developed its own nuclear bomb, one of the progenitors of nuclear deterrence strategy, Bernard Brodie, aptly wrote that the chief purpose of the military establishments in the nuclear age must be, instead of winning wars, to avert them at any cost.¹⁹ The new reality of war inflicted by the emergence of nuclear weapons with the power to cause complete destruction was and is that, instead of fighting limited wars for limited objectives, “we are willing to limit objectives in order to keep wars limited.”²⁰ This has resulted in a fine balance structure, a status quo, between nuclear powers, where the fear of mutual and total annihilation works as a deterrent.

This delicate balance structure is most commonly known as *Mutual assured destruction* (MAD).²¹ Although never being an official doctrine existing on paper, MAD became a fundamental military strategy for the Cold War era saturated with nuclear confrontation. In the same spirit, Thomas Schelling, one of the key strategists of the nuclear age, has described the situation of maintaining the status quo to avoid total devastation as *the diplomacy of violence*: “The power to hurt is bargaining power. To exploit it is diplomacy – vicious diplomacy, but diplomacy.”²² Hence, it could be said that effective and sustainable deterrence requires certain shared interests between adversaries, in other words, “finding a bargain.”²³ If MAD, confrontation and arms race were the guiding principles of the Cold War era, the last 30 years that followed after the collapse of the Soviet Union were, instead, characterised by disarmament programs and contractual cooperation between major nuclear powers. During the post-Cold War era nuclear deterrence issues somewhat faded into the background as conventional deterrence took precedence.²⁴ However, Russia launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 sparked a new crisis in super power relations, reminding us that nuclear issues never really went away.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 63

¹⁹ Brodie, B. (1946). *The Absolute weapon: Atomic power and world order*. Yale Institute of International Studies. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, p. 76

²⁰ Brodie, B. (1959). *Strategy in the missile age*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

²¹ The term MAD was coined by U.S. Military analyst Donald Brennan, who was actually a firm critic of the policy of “assured destruction” introduced by the U.S. Secretary of Defense of that time Robert S. McNamara. See e.g. Encyclopedia Britannica. (2024). *Mutual Assured Destruction*.

²² Schelling, T. (1966). *Arms and Influence*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 2

²³ Ibid., p. 3

²⁴ Peters, R., Anderson, J., & Menke, H. (2018). *Deterrence in the 21st Century: Integrating Nuclear and Conventional Force*. Strategic Studies Quarterly, 12(4), 15–43, p. 16

At the very heart of deterrence lies ambiguity. Threats presented must be abstract enough to create uncertainty, but concrete enough lest they be ignored. In other words, effective deterrence requires credibility that stems from three components: “potent capabilities, demonstrably credible intentions, and the perceived willingness to use nuclear weapons.”²⁵ This means that deterrence is predominantly about setting boundaries, so-called “red lines”, and establishing as well as communicating risks related to crossing these lines.²⁶ What follows is that deterrence is inherently a psychological game, where efficient communication of one’s own capabilities, intent and willingness is used to affect the adversary’s comprehension of the believability of given threats.²⁷ But as its game-like nature would suggest, deterrence is not merely about considering our own moves and actions and guessing their possible effect. It is important to extensively study our opponents in order to anticipate their possible red lines and to “understand how they think as opposed to speculating about how we think they might react.”²⁸

Inasmuch as deterrence is about ambiguity, it is also about uncertainty. Reiterating this thought, Colin Gray bluntly notes that: “because deterrence worked yesterday, it does not follow that it will work tomorrow.”²⁹ Additionally, deterrence is a constant deed – an act that is never completed – and most of all, its success is never fully guaranteed. A factor adding to the uncertainty of deterrence, especially hindering its credibility, is threat proximity. As Bettina Renz notes, it is difficult to create a credible threat, especially “in situations of extended deterrence, when an actor’s national security is not immediately at stake.”³⁰ NATO’s deterrence, which is based on the idea of using U.S. nuclear arsenal to protect its allies, is a textbook example of extended deterrence. However, as Renz continues, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine should not be perceived as a total failure of Western deterrence or a sign that Russia has perceived the Western military capabilities significantly weaker than its own.³¹ “West had never articulated a clear strategy to deter such an eventuality” like the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but defense planning in the West has been namely aimed at deterring direct confrontation with NATO, in which the deterrence has provenly succeeded.³²

²⁵ Sinovets, P. & Vicente, A. (2024). “Nuclear spring is coming”: examining French nuclear deterrence in response to Russia’s actions in Ukraine” quoting Tertrais, B. *Pax Atomica? Théorie, pratique et limites de la dissuasion*, Odile Jacob, 2024, p. 16. Note de la FRS n°08/2024, p. 1

²⁶ Freedman, L. (2004). *Deterrence*. Cambridge, UK. Medford, MA: Polity, p. 116

²⁷ Sinovets, P. & Vicente, A. (2024), p. 2

²⁸ Stewart, A. (2024). The deterioration of deterrence? CHAR commentary, February 2024, p. 3

²⁹ Gray, C. S. (2000). *Deterrence in the 21st century*. *Comparative Strategy*, 19(3), p. 259

³⁰ Renz, B. (2023). *Was the Russian Invasion of Ukraine a Failure of Western Deterrence?* USAWC Press. The US Army War College Quarterly Parameters 53(4), p. 14

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13

³² *Ibid.*

Russian Approach to Deterrence & The Russian Military Doctrine

For quite some time, the Russian understanding of strategic deterrence was seen as more holistic in nature compared to traditional Western thinking. This gap was bridged, however, after the release of the 2022 U.S. national Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy.³³ Both documents outline an extensively comprehensive approach to deterrence issues converging with the Russian holistic approach. The plethora of instruments of Russian deterrence is extensive, containing both defensive and offensive strategies, and enabling the use of nuclear and conventional, as well as non-military means.³⁴ *Deterrence a lá Russe*, as Dmitry Adamsky characterises it, is “an uninterrupted, permanent engagement, with no divide between peacetime and wartime.”³⁵ This means that deterring activities span across all phases of conflict – pre, intra and post – and that the theatre of activities is both regional and global.³⁶

The Western lexicon makes a clear difference between deterrence, coercion and compellence.³⁷ In classical western theory coercion, as Schelling envisions it, is an overarching term comprising both deterrence and compellence.³⁸ Deterrence here refers to maintaining status quo and discouraging the adversary from taking action, whereas compellence holds changing the status quo by persuading the adversary to change the course of their action. The definitions of Russian military thought, on the other hand, outline strategic deterrence as a set of military and non-military measures engaging in actions of intimidation, persuasion, restriction and coercion simultaneously.³⁹ In Russian understanding deterrence is evidently used as an “umbrella reference to all forms of coercive influence.”⁴⁰ This said, subtle differences in terminology and lexicon do not automatically imply a significant difference between Western and Russian strategies and practical implementation of deterrence.

For Russia, strategic deterrence consists of two main components - nuclear deterrence and the deterrent effect of conventional forces.⁴¹ When exercising strategic deterrence, the state and its military authorities utilise all necessary means to carry out both

³³ The White House. (2022). *The National Security Strategy*. Washington; U.S. Department of Defense. (2022). *The National Defense Strategy*. Washington.

³⁴ Forsström, P. (2019). *Venäjän sotilasstrategia muutoksessa: tulkintoja Venäjän sotilasstrategian perusteiden kehityksestä Neuvostoliiton hajoamisen jälkeen*. MPKK, Julkaisusarja 1: Tutkimuksia No 32, p. 162-165; Ven Bruusgaard, K. (2016). *Russian Strategic Deterrence*. *Survival* (0039-6338), 58(4), p. 7

³⁵ Adamsky, D. (2024), p. 61

³⁶ Ibid.; Hrijapin, A. L. & Afanas'ev, V. A. (2005). *Kontseptual'nie osnovy strategičeskogo sderživanija*. *Voennaja mysl'*, 1, p. 8–9; Tšekinov, S. & Bogdanov, S. (2012). *Strategičeskoe sderživanie i nacional'naja bezopasnost' Rossiin na sovremennom etape*. *Voennaja mysl'*, 3, p. 17

³⁷ Adamsky, D. (2024), p. 32; Ven Bruusgaard, K. (2016), p. 7

³⁸ Schelling, T. (1966).

³⁹ Kalganov, V. A.; Ryžov, G. B. & Solov'jov, I. V. (2022). *Strategičeskoe sderživanie kak faktor obespetšenija natsional'noj bezopasnosti Rossijskoi Federatsij*. *Voennaja mysl'*, 8.

⁴⁰ Adamsky, D. (2024), p. 2

⁴¹ Hrijapin, A. L. & Afanas'ev, V. A. (2005), p. 9; Tšekinov, S. & Bogdanov, S. (2012), p. 15

military (forceful) and non-military (non-forceful) measures.⁴² Although strategic deterrence is cross-domain in essence, nuclear weapons remain as the de facto "cornerstone of current and future Russian strategic-deterrence policy."⁴³ Moreover, Russian nuclear deterrence is essentially based on the strategy of retaliation with strategic nuclear forces playing a decisive role in its execution. However, deterring nuclear aggression requires making use of conventional forces and weapons.⁴⁴ Not least because the official nuclear policy is defensive in nature. Consequently, neither conventional nor nuclear capabilities supersede each other in Russian military strategy, but instead one complements the other.⁴⁵

All the above-mentioned characteristics can be directly read from the official documents outlining Russian security policy. According to the Military Encyclopedia of the Russian Ministry of Defense, "strategic deterrence" is "*a coordinated system of non-forceful and forceful measures taken sequentially or simultaneously by one party (subject or coalition of parties) in relation to the other party (object or coalition of parties) in order to restrain the latter from any forceful actions that cause or could cause damage of a strategic scale to the first. [...] [Strategic deterrence] is primarily based on the principle of 'preventing victory.' Under certain conditions [strategic deterrence] may be based on the principle of 'devaluing victory.'*"⁴⁶ The definition also suggests that strategic deterrence, in contrast to military-political deterrence⁴⁷, is a set of constantly prevailing measures undertaken by the subject in both peace- and wartime. These measures are aimed at, not only preventing any forceful actions, but also "*keeping the object within certain limits.*" Interestingly enough, the encyclopedic passage also states that "*in the current conditions and in the short term, Russia is forced to take measures of forceful nature relying mainly on its nuclear forces and on the Strategic Missile Forces in particular as their most important component.*"⁴⁸

Nuclear deterrence, as defined in Russian military lexicon, is a coordinated system of actions of nuclear forces in particular, aimed at preventing hostilities altogether or preventing or stopping the escalation of a military conflict or a war.⁴⁹ Similar to strategic deterrence, nuclear deterrence is also stated to be carried out both in peace- and wartime spanning across all stages of military action, from preparation to conducting a limited military operation and even up to "massive use of nuclear and other types

⁴² Tšekinov, S. & Bogdanov, S. (2012), p. 15

⁴³ Ven Bruusgaard, K. (2016), p. 11

⁴⁴ Forsström, P. (2019), p. 158–162; Hrjapin, A. L. & Afanas'ev, V. A. (2005), p. 9, 11–12; Tšekinov, S. & Bogdanov, S. (2012), p. 17–18

⁴⁵ Ven Bruusgaard, K. (2021). *Russian nuclear strategy and conventional inferiority*. Journal of Strategic Studies, 44(1), p. 25

⁴⁶ Voennij entsiklopeditseskij slovar'. (2024). *Strategičeskoe sderživanie*. Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.

⁴⁷ Military-political deterrence is a set of military-political measures taken by a state (or a coalition of states) to, first and foremost, prevent aggression and threats from materialising. These measures are predominantly indirect and preventive in nature, that is, pre-conflict. The use of military force is a political means to an end to force a potential aggressor to renounce an armed attack by posing a threat of consequences or retaliatory actions able to nullify the aggressor state's ability or political motives to continue the war so severe, the aggressor is forced to back down. See e.g. Voennij entsiklopeditseskij slovar'. (2024). *Voенно-političeskoe sderživanie*. Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.

⁴⁸ Voennij entsiklopeditseskij slovar'. (2024).

⁴⁹ Voennij entsiklopeditseskij slovar'. (2024). *Jadernoe sderživanie*. Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.

of weapons of mass destruction in a large-scale war.”⁵⁰ Thereby nuclear deterrence, more precisely, is considered to be one of the forceful measures when exercising strategic deterrence.⁵¹

The latest Military Doctrine published in 2014, as well as the Presidential Decree on the Basic Principles of the Russian Federation’s State Policy in the Domain of Nuclear Deterrence, also known as the “nuclear doctrine” published in 2020, state that “*Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear weapons and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and (or) its allies, and also in the case of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons, when the very existence of the state is put under threat.*”⁵² The first part of the statement is somewhat unambiguous and clearly reciprocal. However, the second part is formulated intentionally vague so that there are no self-imposed restrictions on Russia. This leaves the reader guessing, which – one may presume – is the exact effect *deterrence à la Russe* intends to achieve.

With reference to the war against Ukraine, we have heard multiple statements from the Russian side claiming it to be an existential struggle for Russian state and sovereignty, as Putin himself puts it “a matter of life and death.”⁵³ Statements like these, combined with an imprecise wording of the doctrine, suggest that Russia might consider using nuclear weapons also amidst a (local) war with a non-nuclear adversary, such as Ukraine. Especially in a situation where conventional force is considered to be underperforming or insufficient. Moreover, the nuclear doctrine seems to hold that the Russian nuclear arsenal and its deterrent effect likewise have an important task in preventing the escalation of military conflicts, where conventional weapons are being used, from local to regional conflicts or ultimately to large-scale wars. Especially in the context of regional wars, where conventional force supposedly has its limits, Russia considers nuclear weapons to be a feasible tool for escalation management.⁵⁴

Yet, with regard to the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia’s nuclear deterrence strategy appears to be a somewhat ill-fitting tool. As Jyri Lavikainen points out, the argument of existential struggle is somewhat lacking, given the fact it is Ukraine, not Russia, who is facing the actual existential threat.⁵⁵ The current reality is, as Lavikainen continues, that it is a “protracted war of conquest” rather than an existential war for Russia.⁵⁶ But then again, this demonstrates the inherent difficulty of deterrence. Ultimately, it is Russia’s own threat perceptions, not ours, that matter when it comes to deciding the tone of Russian nuclear signaling and the threshold for the country’s

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *Voennaja doktrina Rossijskoj Federatsii ot 25 dekabrya 2014 g.* (2014). Russian Federation; *Ukaz Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federatsii ot 02.06.2020 g. № 355 Ob Osnovah gosudarstvennoj politiki Rossijskoj Federatsii v oblasti jaderenogo sderživanija.* (2020). Russian Federation.

⁵³ Prezident Rossii. (2022). *Obraščenie Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federatsii 24.02.2024.*

⁵⁴ Ven Bruusgaard, K. (2021), p. 27

⁵⁵ Lavikainen, J. (2023). *Nuclear deterrence in the Ukraine war: Diplomacy of violence.* FIIA Briefing paper Feb 2023/355, p. 5

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 7

nuclear use. We might not consider it reasonable or proportional to play the nuclear card here. Yet, Russia is systematically portraying the Ukrainian conflict as an existential war in defense of Russian national interests. Thus, according to the Russian rationale, nuclear weapons fit into the picture and serve a purpose here.

The Russian nuclear doctrine and the statements made by the current political leadership claim to recognise only the possibility of a counterattack and categorically deny the option of nuclear first use. The doctrine also asserts that Russia considers “nuclear weapons exclusively as means of deterrence, the use of which is an extreme measure of last resort”, and Russia will undertake all necessary efforts to avoid resorting to them.⁵⁷ That said, there is a genuine concern that the first strike by the enemy, i.e. the United States, could be so destructive that it might cripple Russia’s ability to launch a retaliatory strike. According to Russian military thought, the enemy cannot, under any conditions, be allowed to perform a “knock-out strike” and, therefore, researching, theorising and training in drills and combat the use of preventive actions and possible preemptive strikes is justified.⁵⁸ This said, however, in Russian political and military understanding, going nuclear is an option only if and when all other conventional tools and forces of escalation management have been exhausted and an existential threat still persists.⁵⁹

Generally speaking, rather than brute force, latent violence, the threat of inflicting damage, to be more precise, is at the core of deterrence.⁶⁰ With threats of violence and damage, one can cognitively affect the opponent’s motives and “make someone yield or comply” much more effectively than with mere direct force which mainly aims at overcoming the opponent’s strength.⁶¹ Correspondingly, Russian strategic or nuclear deterrence is not only about intimidation or the threat of destruction. It is also about influencing – even manipulating – the adversary’s behavior and decision-making with both forceful and non-forceful means by deliberately shaping the enemy’s understanding of the risks and consequences of crossing the alleged red lines.⁶² However, as the war against Ukraine has demonstrated, Russia’s red lines are, in fact, lines drawn in water. They have already been crossed multiple times, and making risk assessments has become ever more difficult because what is deemed “acceptable” keeps on changing.

But then again, when it comes to deterrence – theory and practice –, red lines are hardly ever immutable or explicit, but instead, context-dependent and thus, implicit and adjustable. Another lesson learned from this war is that conventional warfighting is still very much a part of contemporary warfare. That said, conflicts do tend to take an increasingly complex form. In modern-day hybrid warfare, the means, tactics and

⁵⁷ *Ukaz Prezidenta Rossijskoj...* (2020).

⁵⁸ Kruglov, V. V. & Šubin, A. S. (2021). *O vozrastajuščem značenii upreždenija protivnika v dejstviiab*. *Voennaja mysl'*, 12, p. 33-34

⁵⁹ Ven Bruusgaard, K. (2021), p. 27

⁶⁰ Schelling, T. (1966), p. 3

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Kalganov, V. A.; Ryžov, G. B. & Solov’jov, I. V. (2022); Tšekinov, S. & Bogdanov, S. (2012), p. 12

domains of fighting are ever diversifying. Even though the Russian concept of strategic deterrence was outlined prior to any official conceptualisations of “hybrid warfare”, it appears so, that it is exactly the realities of contemporary warfare that the Russian holistic approach to deterrence is trying to respond to.

Now, having considered the key tenets of deterrence theory, it is worthwhile to shift our focus more closely onto examining the Russian nuclear and deterrence debate. The focal point of the analysis will be on the rhetoric of the Russian academic Sergey Karaganov. Karaganov – his character, statements and views combined – may be regarded as the epitome of a growingly antagonistic and hostile discourse that is creeping into the Russian deterrence debate. Of course, nothing or no-one exists in a vacuum. Therefore, no in-depth analysis of the Russian strategic debate would be considered comprehensive without the inclusion of other scholars’ views besides those of Karaganov. Moreover, connecting Karaganov’s statements to the official line of the Russian state on nuclear weapons will elevate the discussion to a more strategic level. This “official line” is generally observed and promoted by state leadership and outlined in the key strategic documents, such as the nuclear doctrine. Nuclear deterrence is a cross-domain effort with often ambiguous, conflicting and hazardous elements to it. Nuclear signaling, a favourite pursuit of Sergey Karaganov as of late, is a prime example of such multilateral deterrence in the making.

Sergey Karaganov: Position, Statements & Writings

Man of Many Hats

The Russian political scientist Sergey Karaganov has an exhaustive list of roles and positions in various governmental organisations, political councils and academic commissions. He is best known for his decades-long career at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow. Karaganov holds the position of scientific director of the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs. He is also the founder and chairman of the editorial board of “Russia in Global Affairs” journal which he currently uses as the main platform of his own written – academic, yet, often mad rambling – work. Karaganov serves as the honorary chairman of the presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, a think tank known for its political discussion club “Valdai”, in which president Putin also regularly participates. And as if the list was not impressive enough already, Karaganov is also a former advisor to the President, and either an active or a former member of several councils within governmental structures dealing with everything from foreign and security policy, to economy and patriotic education.⁶³

The Institute of Military Economics and Strategy at HSE was founded on his initiative in 2024.⁶⁴ The new institute researches “the new role of nuclear weapons as an instrument of deterrence, as well as the societal impact of long-term confrontation and military operations.”⁶⁵ Karaganov currently manages the institute’s eight main research projects commissioned by the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation, including projects such as “Theory and Practice of Nuclear Deterrence in Modern-day Conditions and Russian Deterrence Policy” and “The New Concept of Nuclear Deterrence in the Quadrilateral Russia-China-India-Pakistan Format”.⁶⁶ The Presidential Administration has initiated a new “Russian ideology” study module in all Russian universities, dealing with four thematic areas: History, Culture, International Relations and Future. Karaganov has been appointed as the head coordinator of the thematic block of International Relations titled as “Russia in the world”.⁶⁷

In Russian academia, Karaganov is claimed to be an internationally recognised and respected expert on global security policy, arms control and deterrence issues. Admittedly, he has an extensive history of publications ranging from articles and books to overseas interviews outside of Russia. Throughout his career, Karaganov has been featured in several international listings of influential intellectuals, he has performed

⁶³ HSE. (2024). *Sotrudniki: Karaganov, Sergey A.* Higher School of Economics -website; Karaganov.ru. (2024). *Sergej Karaganov: Biografija*; RSMD. (2024). *Sergej Aleksandrovitsj Karaganov. Biografija.*

⁶⁴ Karaganov, S. (2024b). *Vek vojn? Stat'ja vtoraja.* Rossija v globalnoj politike, 2024: 2 Mart/Aprel', 01.01.2024; Meduza. (2024a). *God nazad politolog Sergej Karaganov predložil nanesti preventivnyj jadernij udar po Evrope. Teper on po pros'be Kremlja izučšat kak možno sderžat Zapad.* Meduza, 09.04.2024.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Meduza. (2024b). *V VŠE sozdali insitut voennoj ekonomiki i strategii. Ego vozglavil byvšij komandujuščij Tibookeanskim flotom.* Meduza, 16.02.2024; RSMD. (2024).

⁶⁷ Meduza. (2022). *Molodye dolžny ponimat kuda idjot Rossija.* Meduza, 25.10.2022.

in various worldwide forums, and his articles have been published in numerous peer-reviewed journals. However, his glory days, internationally at least, are over. If, say, some 10-20 years ago, he was regarded as a serious scholar in the West, he has, for the most part, lost much of his international credibility as an academic in the West since becoming a vocal propagandist of the Putin regime and Russia's war of aggression. In other words, Karaganov, albeit contrary to his own view, has little academic authority or sway left in the West. He remains well-known and fairly cited in the West due to his extensive career, but more in the role of a propagandist rather than a serious political analyst.

This said, Karaganov is not generally reduced to be but an extreme mouthpiece or a mere puppet of Putin as, for example, the former president and now deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council Dmitri Medvedev is. Medvedev's nuclear statements have become so declamatory and extremist, but lacking any actual follow-through, that they are hardly taken seriously anywhere – Russia included.⁶⁸ Karaganov, at least judging from his current affiliations, still has adequate pull and authority within the Russian state apparatus, and he appears to hold a position in Putin's close circle. Karaganov himself insists that he is “*an academic, not a politician. My duty is to tell the truth. And, as far as I understand, the President listens to me. He has said so.*”⁶⁹ Whether he has any actual political leverage or influence is, of course, another matter.

Today's Karaganov has de facto detached himself from the international academic community of analysts on nuclear issues. He shows no real understanding of the global strategic-level debate on the matter, nor does he portray any genuine interest whatsoever in partaking in serious international discussions. An all too apparent example of this is how he hardly ever cites or refers to anyone else, except himself, in his own publications, which does very little for his international reputation and academic credibility. His participation in serious international industry events is nonexistent and he is hardly featured as an expert in any other than outright propagandistic news medias or publications. He claims to be “a mere academic” and no politician, yet, be that as it may, it is difficult to interpret his pugnacious statements as anything but political.

Nonetheless, there is something that can be said in Karaganov's defense. Perhaps an unfortunate comparison, but, say, we take Dmitri Medvedev and examine his sudden conversion from a liberal – in the Russian sense of the word – technocrat to an extreme patriot.⁷⁰ Given the conspicuousness of Medvedev's ideological U-turn, it is unlikely that any of this has gone unnoticed to domestic or international audiences,

⁶⁸ Freedman, L. (2023), p. 16–17; Sinovets, P. & Shultz, D. (2023). *Russia's Nuclear Propaganda: From the Cold War to Ukraine*. The Journal of Slavic Military Studies, 36(4), p. 351-352; For the most recent and radical outbursts of Medvedev see his Telegram and X (former Twitter) page. Telegram: https://t.me/s/medvedev_telegram; X: <https://x.com/medvedevrussiae>

⁶⁹ Rostovskij, M. (2023). *Antor idei udarit' po NATO jadernym oruzhjem Karaganov: "Prezident menja slišit"*. Moskovskij komsomolets, 09.10.2023.

⁷⁰ See e.g. Mackinnon, A. (2022). *The Fall and Fall of Dmitry Medvedev*. Foreign Policy. 23.06.2022; Motyl, A. & Soltys, D. (2022). *Former moderate Dmitry Medvedev becomes Putin's pro-war cheerleader*. Atlantic Council. 29.10.2022.

and we may very well doubt it has done any good to his overall credibility. Similarly, there has been a number of prominent public figures in Russia, ranging from politicians and scholars to celebrities, that have been quick to renounce their former liberal or even pro-Western views in support of the “special military operation” and Putin’s regime.⁷¹ This, inevitably, comes across as means to an end – as a desperate attempt to salvage themselves, their gained assets and their careers by showing loyalty, rather than expressing genuine ideological conviction.

Yet, Karaganov, in contrast, has stuck to his ideas consistently throughout his career. According to the so-called “Karaganov Doctrine” generated by Sergey Karaganov himself in the early 1990s, “Russia should pose as the defender of rights of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking population in the “near abroad”, providing protection of the Russian language, as well as state support for the unification of Russian-speaking regions into the Russian world as a single political space.”⁷² This notion has remained an integral part of the ethos of his thinking through the years. Consequently, the “Karaganov doctrine” acts very much as the cornerstone of his world view. These beliefs are reflected also in his recent statements about Ukraine and Russia’s strategic role in the world, not to mention the influence they have on his views on deterrence and nuclear weapons.

Restoring Fear of Armageddon

One of Karaganov’s main arguments is that nuclear deterrence no longer works as it should. In his view, the West, in particular, has been lulled into believing that nuclear threat is a relic of the past and a war fought with nuclear weapons cannot break out in modern times. Karaganov calls this “delusional” sense of security *strategic parasitism*.⁷³ The term appeared in Karaganov’s vocabulary in 2018, after which it has been a recurring theme in his rhetoric. According to Karaganov, the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons needs to be “lowered”, so that nuclear rhetoric is no longer automatically perceived as a verbal saber rattling without real effect – a bluff – but as an actual threat that needs to be taken seriously.⁷⁴ The logic of Karaganov’s argument is that credible nuclear deterrence, which is based on demonstrated capabilities and readiness to use these capabilities, has decreased globally. The threshold of nuclear use has been raised so high and the idea of using a nuclear weapon seems so “absurd”

⁷¹ See e.g. Meduza (2023). *Oni gotovy tebja prostit*. Meduza, 31.10.2023.

⁷² Traditsija: Russkaja entsiklopedija. (2024). *Doktrina Karaganova*.

⁷³ See e.g. Infoštit. (2023). “Tret’ja mirovaja. Jadernaja?” Interview with Sergey Karaganov. NTV, 03.05.2023; Karaganov, S. (2018a). *Mir na vyrost. Politikan a puti v buduščee*. Rossija v globalnoj politike, 2018: 1; Karaganov, S. (2022). *My nabljudаем pojavlenie novogo mira v moment ego sozdanija*. 2022 Valdai-club speech, 27.10.2022; Karaganov, S. (2023c). *Kuda tetšjot reka - 2024 “Rossija zakonščila svojo evropejskoe pu-tešestvie”*. Rossija v globalnoj politike, 29.12.2023; Karaganov, S. (2024a). *Vek vojn? Staťja pervaja*. Rossija v globalnoj politike, 2024: 1 Janvar’/Fevral’, 01.01.2024; Karaganov, S. (2024b); Karaganov, S. & Suslov, D. (2019a). *Novoe ponimanie i puti ukrepljenja mnogostoronnej strategičeskoj stabil’nosti*. Moskva: Vyšaja škola jekonomiki; Karaganov, S. & Suslov, D. (2019b). *Sderživanje v novuju jepobu. Kak ukrepiť mnogostoronnuju strategičeskuju stabil’nost’*. Rossija v globalnoj politike, 4/2019; Tsepljaev, V. (2021). *Satanizatsii vopreki. O novoj holodnoj vojne i russkoj idee*. Interview with Sergey Karaganov. Argumenty i fakty, 16.07.2021; Uglanov, A. (2024). *Sergey Karaganov: Zapad natšal ponimat’, tšo možet proigrat’*. Interview with Sergey Karaganov. Argumenty nedeli, 02.05.2024.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

in the minds of modern people that nuclear rhetoric has lost its power.⁷⁵ This statement of Karaganov echoes the fundamental tenet of deterrence theory, that is, that (nuclear) signaling must succeed in making the threat real in the minds of the recipients.

Correspondingly, Dmitri Trenin, a security policy expert and a former Soviet intelligence officer, later-on known for his pro-Western sympathies, has also experienced an escalatory pivot in his views. Much like Karaganov, Trenin is now alarmingly concerned about the credibility of Russia's deterrence and Russian actions being brushed off as bluff, thus inciting the need to lower the threshold for nuclear weapons' use.⁷⁶ Karaganov, again, insists that restoring a credible deterrent effect is what Russia ought to do as a "responsible" global superpower.⁷⁷ Karaganov describes Russia in global politics as *the main provider of security in the world*⁷⁸ par excellence. According to Karaganov's argument, maintaining a credible deterrence is responsible great-power policy, because only by restoring the principles of MAD in contemporary global politics, can a new world war be prevented from starting in the first place.⁷⁹ As Karaganov himself frames it: "*We face not only the challenge of ensuring the fundamental security interests of Russia, but also the challenge of saving the world. These [goals] are inseparable from each other. This is the very essence of the great Russian mission.*"⁸⁰

According to both Trenin and Karaganov, strategic forces and nuclear weapons play an integral, if not the main, role in modern-day warfare. They both appear to think that the Russian strategic forces should somehow redeem themselves preferably by making an ultimate demonstration of their capabilities – using nuclear weapons. It is, however, arguable whether respect for the Russian strategic forces, in particular, has at any point been significantly low or their reputation in need of restoration. Instead, what Karaganov may actually be implying is the desire to restore *Russia's* status and honour. Unwilling to admit to Russia's weaknesses, Karaganov resorts to fatalistic euphemisms about Russia's necessary quest to save the world from itself and about the need to restore the MAD doctrine in the awe of global destruction.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Trenin, D. (2023). *Ukrainskij konflikt i jadernoe oružje*. Rossija v global'noj politike. 20.06.2023.

⁷⁷ See e.g. Infoštīt. (2023); Karaganov, S. (2018a); Karaganov, S. (2022); Karaganov, S. (2023c); Karaganov, S. (2024a); Karaganov, S. (2024b); Karaganov, S. & Suslov, D. (2019a); Karaganov, S. & Suslov, D. (2019b); Tsepljaev, V. (2021); Uglanov, A. (2024)

⁷⁸ Главный поставщик безопасности в мире (Glavnij postavštšik bezopasnosti v mire)

⁷⁹ See e.g. Besedovala, N. (2013). "*Jadernoe oružje – eto netšto poslannoje nam Vsevyšnim*". Interview with Sergey Karaganov. Terra America, 23.02.2013; Karaganov, S. (2016). *Rakety v Evrope: vospominanija o buduščem?* Rossija v globalnoj politike; Karaganov, S. (2018b). *Potšemu Rossii važno imet' jadernoe oružje*. Rossijskaja gazeta, 12.03.2018; Karaganov, S. (2018c). *Meždunarodnye tendentsii i rosijskaja vnešnjaja politika* in Lukin, A. (ed.) *Novye meždunarodnye otnošenija: osnovnye tendentsii i vyzovy dlja Rossii*. International Affairs; Karaganov, S. (2019). *Novoj missej Rossii možeet stat' saštšita vsego mira*. 2019 Valdai-club interview with Sergey Karaganov in VZGLJAD, 15.10.2019; Kobzev, A. (2016). "*Poka nužno kak možno žeštšše sderživat' SŠA*". Interview with Sergey Karaganov. Lenta.ru, 26.05.2016; Kobzev, A. (2014). "*Im otšen' hotelos' uteret' nos naglym russkim*" *Politolog Sergej Karaganov rasskazal o sovremennom miroustrojstve*. Interview with Sergey Karaganov. Lenta.ru, 30.04.2014; NBJ (2016) *Šans poslannyj Rossii Bogom*. Interview with Sergey Karaganov. Natsion-al'nij bankovskij žurnal. 26.01.2016; Uglanov, A. (2024). *Sergej Karaganov: Zapad natšal ponimat', tšo možeet proigrat'*. Interview with Sergey Karaganov. Argumenty nedeli, 02.05.2024.

⁸⁰ Uglanov, A. (2024).

Introducing Preemptive Nuclear Strike

In June 2023 Karaganov published an article titled “A Difficult but Necessary Decision” in which he introduced the idea of a preemptive nuclear strike.⁸¹ In his polemic article Karaganov called for Russia to launch a limited nuclear strike on European soil in order “to restore nuclear deterrence and bring the war in Ukraine to a favorable conclusion.”⁸² The article quickly gained both domestic and international attention sparking a conversation on whether Russia is truly willing to lower its threshold for using nuclear weapons and prepared to wage a limited nuclear war. In the article, Karaganov presents the following controversial claim which he assures to be based on “years of research in deterrence issues”: “*The emergence of nuclear weapons is the result of the intervention of the Almighty who was horrified to see that people (Europeans and the Japanese who joined them) unleashed two world wars in one generation, claiming tens of millions of lives, and thus, handed humanity the weapon of Armageddon showing those who had lost the fear of hell that hell does in fact exist.*”⁸³ While such remarks may be lacking in academic rigour, as a deterrent tool, “catchy” doomsday lexicon has proven its relative power. Systematically repeated Russian nuclear threats with coarse undertones have “triggered a widespread reevaluation of deterrence strategies”⁸⁴ in the West and shaken, at least, the European, sense of security.

In summer 2023, a “secret report”⁸⁵, allegedly ordered by the Presidential Administration leaked to the public.⁸⁶ The report accounts numerous shortcomings of Russian domestic and foreign policy. Rumour has it, the report was co-written by a team of Russian academics, including Karaganov and Trenin. Strangely enough, the contributors are listed on the first page of the report, yet, none of the alleged authors have publicly admitted their involvement in writing the report. There were even rumours that the “shocking” report was, in fact, AI-generated or otherwise fabricated without actual involvement of the alleged authors. Judging by the views expressed, however, the report’s arguments would seem to be in line with Karaganov’s general ethos. The authors’ frank policy recommendations did cause a minor storm in a teacup. One of the report’s “policy proposals”, for example, suggests that Russia should start having serious high-level conversations about the possibility, even inevitability, of launching limited low-yield nuclear strikes on major cities of countries supporting Ukraine.⁸⁷ The target countries mentioned, as one would assume, are primarily European NATO member-countries.⁸⁸

⁸¹ Karaganov, S. (2023a).

⁸² Cimbala, S. & Korb, L. (2023).

⁸³ Karaganov, S. (2023a).

⁸⁴ Sinovets, P. & Vicente, A. (2024), p. 1

⁸⁵ Karaganov, S.; Kramarenko, A.; Luk'janov, F. & Trenin, D. (2023). *Problemy i uroki nedavnej istorii otetšestvennoj vnešnej politiki (i vozmožnosti korrektsii)*. HSE.

⁸⁶ Saltykov-Štšedrin, M. (2023) *Karaganov podgotovil sekretnyj doklad dlja Putina. Migrantam – vsjo, russkim – deportatsija v Sibir' i katorga*. Newsland, 01.09.2023.

⁸⁷ Karaganov, S.; Kramarenko, A.; Luk'janov, F. & Trenin, D. (2023), p. 15

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 16; Countries mentioned include e.g. Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania.

Interestingly enough, the report encourages to “leak” information about such conversations to the public.⁸⁹ The authors maintain that this would “help reinforce [Russian] deterrence”⁹⁰ and would be an “indirect” way of adding to Russia’s nuclear signaling. In practice this means abstaining from making direct threats to the enemy, whilst insinuating that the possibility of a nuclear strike is being discussed. This is a practical application of the theoretical concept of indirect, yet credible enough signaling. The possible rationale behind the idea of introducing the use of tactical nuclear weapons, as Lawrence Freedman suggests, is that, since the war is already in full gear, the threat posed by Russia would need to be more compelling rather than deterrent.⁹¹ In other words, the deterrent effect of Russia’s nuclear capabilities was not enough to initially prevent Ukrainian resistance, but bringing nuclear weapons to the table now, could possibly allow Russia to change the course of the war to its favor.

While not taking authorship of the report, Karaganov has commented on the views presented. He has admitted to the provocativeness of some of the statements and suggestions made in the text. However, as Karaganov states, the notions of the said report have turned out to be extremely useful both domestically and globally, as they “have forced us out of the lethargic slumber of *strategic parasitism*”⁹².⁹³ In Karaganov’s opinion it is time to abandon such fallacies that Russia would never use nuclear weapons if the situation demanded as much.⁹⁴ He calls this a “rude awakening” to the world to face the reality and totality of war.⁹⁵ Whatever criticism the “report” or his article on preemptive nuclear strike has received, Karaganov has brushed off – “*Even my modest article has been labeled as propaganda. It is not. It is an invitation to reflection.*”⁹⁶ But with Karaganov, it is a fine line between provocation and argumentation. And he most certainly knows it.

Blast from the Past

It is paramount to recognise that many of Karaganov’s statements, however audacious they seem, echo the ideas of Soviet times. In the Soviet perception, the Western concept of deterrence was solely understood as offensive in nature. Instead of using the word *sderživanie* that inherently suggests containment, the word used to identify Western deterrence was *utrašenie* – a term conveying intimidation, coercion, terror and compellence.⁹⁷ Although during the Cold War era the “U.S. declaratory nuclear policy was that of deterrence, popularly interpreted to be the use of nuclear weapons in a second

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Freedman, L. (2023), p. 22

⁹² Strategic parasitism refers to delusional sense of security where peace is taken for granted. See page 13 of this paper.

⁹³ Karaganov, S. (2024b).

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Karaganov, S. (2023b). *How to Prevent a Third World War*. Rossija v globalnoj politike, 26.09.2023.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Garthoff, R. (1990). *Deterrence and the Revolution in Soviet Military Doctrine*. Washington: The Brookings Institution, p. 24–25; Geist, E. (2019). *Armageddon Insurance: Civil Defense in the United States and Soviet Union, 1945-1991*. The University of North Carolina Press, p. 194

strike mode”⁹⁸, the prevailing Soviet belief was still that the United States was preparing for a surprise nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union.⁹⁹

During the early Hruštšov reign, the role of the Soviet nuclear arsenal was emphasised over conventional weapons.¹⁰⁰ The idea that the Soviet Union could deliver the first blow if need be was adopted.¹⁰¹ In other words, a defensive preemptive Soviet strike was deemed potential if enemy attack seemed imminent.¹⁰² A formal statement of the Soviet military strategy was published in 1962 endorsing the idea of a preemptive strike to counter an enemy first strike, namely that of the United States.¹⁰³ The idea of solely relying on Soviet nuclear deterrence was now accompanied with the idea of “best defense is an attack” -strategy.¹⁰⁴ Hruštšov engaged in direct nuclear sabre-rattling, even nuclear boasting and “blustery atomic diplomacy”, as Craig and Radchenko argue.¹⁰⁵ Both parties, namely the Soviets and Americans, were decisively building up their nuclear arsenal. However, close-call situations like the Cuban Missile crisis in 1962 resulted in both sides becoming aware of the devastating consequences that a war fought with nuclear weapons would have.¹⁰⁶ Hruštšov, as Craig and Radchenko maintain, became evermore determined to seek stability and avoid risking a nuclear war.¹⁰⁷

By the 1970s, as the limitations in the actual utility of nuclear weapons were realised and awareness of the severe consequences of nuclear use grew, the Soviet nuclear doctrine shifted gradually from emphasizing preemption to the idea of *launch under attack*.¹⁰⁸ Preventing further nuclear escalation by retaliatory means became the top priority.¹⁰⁹ Although the Brežnev era formal pledge of no first use (NFU) from 1982 was abandoned in the Russian 1993 Military Doctrine¹¹⁰, to this very day, Russia, like its predecessor the Soviet Union, claim to pursue a strategy of no first use.¹¹¹ Based on analysis of interviews with former Soviet officials and high-ranking military officers, Battilega asserts that the possibility of launching a Soviet first strike was never seriously discussed by the political leadership, even though theoretical writings, plans and exercises might have included a potential first strike against the Americans.¹¹² The

⁹⁸ Battilega, J. A. (2004). Soviet Views of Nuclear Warfare: The Post-Cold War Interviews and Practice. In Sokolski, H. (ed.) *Getting MAD: Nuclear Mutual Assured Destruction, Its Origin and Practice*. Strategic Studies Institute. Pennsylvania: Army War College Press, p. 157–158

⁹⁹ Battilega, J. A. (2004), p. 157–158, 164; Geist, E. (2019), p. 179

¹⁰⁰ Battilega, J. A. (2004), p. 153–154

¹⁰¹ *Khrushchev on Nuclear Strategy*. (1960). Current Intelligence Staff Study. Office of Current Intelligence. CIA, p. 7-11

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Battilega, J. A. (2004), p. 157–158, 164; Geist, E. (2019), p. 154–156

¹⁰⁴ Garthoff, R. (1990), p. 35

¹⁰⁵ Craig, C. & Radchenko, S. (2017). *MAD, not Marx: Khrushchev and the nuclear revolution*. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41(1–2), p. 215–220, 228–229

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 228–230

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Battilega, J. A. (2004), p. 153–154, 158, 164; Garthoff, R. (1990), p. 86–87

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Panda, A. (2018). ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons. Council on Foreign Relations.

¹¹¹ Garthoff, R. (1990), p. 80–86

¹¹² Battilega, J. A. (2004), p. 158, 164

military leadership was firmly convinced that it was the United States that planned to strike first and thus, preemption, launch under attack and retaliation were the three possible scenarios the Soviet Union was preparing for.¹¹³

Garthoff suggests that from as early as the 1960s Hruštšov era, the Soviet Union was advocating a non-first-strike policy and putting emphasis on the solely defensive nature of its nuclear arsenal.¹¹⁴ To some extent, a preemptive strike could seem like an ill-fitting tool considering the general Soviet – and contemporary Russian – political and ideological canon of framing West as the sole initiator of war and the party with first strike aspirations. However, in the Soviet mindset, the adoption of launch under attack and the concept of preemption did not run against the idea of no first use, since even a preemptive strike is no more than a timely, anticipatory retaliation.¹¹⁵ Similar logic assumingly applies to the contemporary Russian view of a preemptive strike, that is, treating it as a purely defensive act against a confirmed enemy attack.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 158–159

¹¹⁴ Garthoff, R. (1990), p. 81

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 87

Interpreting Nuclear Rhetoric in the Context of War Against Ukraine

Reckless Rhetoric

Academic Aleksey Arbatov shares Karaganov's concerns about the risks of falling into a false sense of security and taking peace for granted in the present-day. Arbatov is an internationally acclaimed Russian expert on strategic deterrence and nuclear weapons who has, unlike Karaganov, maintained a critical stance towards aggressive nuclear signaling in the midst of Russia's war against Ukraine. Arbatov is one of the only Russian moderates still left in this field continuing to engage in international academic debate on issues related to especially arms control and non-proliferation. According to Arbatov, there is a historical paradox in that the success of nuclear proliferation and regulatory agreements have reduced genuine fear of nuclear war and made issues related to nuclear weapons secondary in contemporary security policy.¹¹⁶ Lessons learned from the past have lost their effectiveness as today's politicians and societies have less personal experience of the Cold War era confrontation clouded by an all-encompassing fear of nuclear escalation.¹¹⁷ Consequently, the idea of a nuclear war seems so distant in today's world that one doesn't even realise to be afraid of it.¹¹⁸

However, compared to Karaganov's sinister metaphors and intimidation tactics, Arbatov takes a far more moderate approach. In fact, his stance is completely opposite to Karaganov. Arbatov emphasises the importance of arms control and recalls some of the most critical escalatory moments in history, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, that should have taught us a lesson.¹¹⁹ Arbatov also reminds his readers to treat nuclear doctrines with caution, since they tend to run the risk of turning against their original idea – if read instrumentally.¹²⁰ Instead of mapping out the basic principles to guide the use of nuclear weapons and, thus, being *de jure* deterrence-strengthening documents, nuclear doctrines all too easily turn into *de facto* plans to wage a nuclear war.¹²¹

The most alienating factor vis-à-vis other security policy experts is Karaganov's escalatory rhetoric. In response to Karaganov's controversial article on preemptive nuclear strike, Arbatov *et al.* argue that the "escalate to de-escalate" logic *à la Karaganov* is an outright reckless approach to escalation management.¹²² Moreover, Karaganov's ideas, as Arbatov *et al.* point out, are in contradiction with the official Russian line as stated in such key strategic documents as the Military Doctrine and the Foreign Policy

¹¹⁶ Arbatov, A. (2022). *Ukrainskij krizis i strategičeskaja stabil'nost'*. Polis; Političeskie issledovanija, 4.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Arbatov, A. (2023). *Jadernye metamorfozy*. Polis; Političeskie issledovanija, 5.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Arbatov, A., Bogdanov, K. & Stefanovič, D. (2023). *Jadernaja vojna – plohoje sredstvo rešenija problem*. Kom-mersant. 21.06.2023.

Concept.¹²³ Karaganov's theory of "escalate to de-escalate" rests on the idea of using limited nuclear strike amid a local or regional conflict, suggesting that a constrained demonstration of escalatory power – moving from conventional force to tactical nuclear weapons – would unnerve the adversary to such extent that a full-scale global (nuclear) war would, thus, be prevented. However, as Arbatov *et al.* argue, the idea of surgically precise tailored damage with a de-escalatory effect that could be achieved with low-yield nuclear weapons is an illusion.¹²⁴ Karaganov, by contrast, insists that "the automatic escalation from limited nuclear weapon use to a global thermonuclear conflict is a myth."¹²⁵

Karaganov, however, does not offer any solid argument to support this claim. He even admits that "*discussing specific scenarios for using nuclear weapons is clearly above my paygrade, since I am not even familiar with our capabilities or those of our adversaries, including potential ones.*"¹²⁶ Arbatov aptly remarks that Karaganov's argumentation often lacks follow-up analysis of what comes after the first strike, that is, an in-depth analysis of the likelihood and nature of a counterattack.¹²⁷ Karaganov, it seems, expects the Western side to display a high degree of political restraint in responding to Russia's nuclear first strike. Without providing any convincing support for his claims, he assumes that the West will respond with mere conventional force without the United States, not to mention NATO, launching a nuclear retaliation strike. However, Karaganov's argumentation is inherently flawed. On one hand, he portrays a growingly aggressive West with a powerful nuclear arsenal as the counterforce that justifies Russia's (defensive) actions. On the other hand, he does not consider a Western nuclear response to Russian preemptive nuclear strike likely.¹²⁸ In Karaganov's postmodern thinking, the West – more precisely the United States – has a lower threshold for offensive first-strike than defensive second-strike nuclear use. This irrational rationale explains why Russia needs to strike first.

Even other academics who follow the same belligerent line as Karaganov, have restrained themselves from such maximalist ideas. In his response to Karaganov's article on preemptive nuclear strike, Fjodor Lukjanov – allegedly also one of the writers of the "secret report" – demands that the current Russian Military Doctrine and the defensive nature of nuclear weapons ought to be respected.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, Lukjanov admits that Karaganov's article is a timely warning that has initiated important discussions about the possibilities of escalation management.¹³⁰ As Arbatov *et al.* emphasise,

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Karaganov, S. (2023b).

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Širjaev, V. (2023). *Uprežđajušij udar vozmездija*. Interview with Aleksey Arbatov. Novaja gazeta, 19.07.2023

¹²⁸ See e.g. Karaganov, S. (2024b); Karaganov, S. (2023a; Karaganov, S. (2023b).

¹²⁹ Lukjanov, F. (2023). *Why We Won't Be Able to "Sober Up the West" with a Nuclear Bomb*. Russia in Global Affairs. 26.06.2023.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

voicing differing views in security debates is acceptable, desirable even, but the argumentation must be professional and responsible.¹³¹ It is not good professional practice to mix military technical discussions and security policy with issues of religion and morality.¹³²

Fortunately, the Russian official documents and the head of state thus far only recognise the possibility of a nuclear counter-strike against a confirmed first strike.¹³³ The Russian state leadership has not yet changed its official threat assessment according to which Western support for Ukraine – in its current or even slightly amped-up form – should be considered transgressing the boundary of risking a nuclear war.¹³⁴ It is also important to emphasise that the “escalate to de-escalate” theory is still largely presented in theoretical or academic writings only without being explicitly discussed in official doctrine or strategies.¹³⁵ The escalation management envisioned by the Russian military officials does not entertain the idea of widespread nuclear weapons use in any situation.¹³⁶ Nor does the official strategy believe in a shortcut to success in the battlefield with the help of low-yield nuclear weapons.¹³⁷

Serious concerns about Russia’s threshold to deploy nuclear weapons were raised in February 2024 when Financial Times obtained leaked Russian military documents outlining strategic scenarios on nuclear weapons’ use.¹³⁸ However, it should be noted that the scenarios described in the leaked files did not actually deviate from the official doctrine, and the weapons discussed were tactical, not strategic. Furthermore, as the political expert William Alberque points out, Russian state leadership believes that, whereas a low-yield nuclear strike against another nuclear power, such as the United States or China, could be a necessary and justified step in some scenarios, the threshold for a nuclear strike on Ukraine is still very high.¹³⁹ Alberque continues, that Putin is likely to understand that Russian nuclear use against Ukraine would undoubtedly lead to escalation of the conflict and result in direct intervention by the West – quite possibly in a U.S. or UK nuclear response.¹⁴⁰ Hence, it should be stressed that it is precisely the sole figures like Karaganov who are the ones spreading the gospel of nuclear use as a viable way out of this conflict.

In Aleksey Arbatov’s opinion, Karaganov’s views and the revisionist school of thought on nuclear weapons’ use are “politically grandiose and professionally very questionable.”¹⁴¹ The temptation to simply ignore such maximalist statements is

¹³¹ Arbatov, A., Bogdanov, K. & Stefanovitš, D. (2023).

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Arbatov, A. (2023).

¹³⁴ Freedman, L. (2023), p. 1

¹³⁵ Ven Bruusgaard, K. (2016), p. 12

¹³⁶ Kofman, M. & Fink, A. (2022). *Escalation Management and nuclear employment in Russian Military Strategy*. War on the rocks.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Seddon, M. & Cook, C. (2024). *Leaked Russian military files reveal criteria for nuclear strike*. Financial Times.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Arbatov, A. (2023), p. 24-25

strong, compelling even. However, there is real concern that such nuclear related loose talk could dangerously distort serious analytical discussions on deterrence issues.¹⁴² Arbatov warns that rhetoric that exceedingly crosses the doctrinal line is quickly becoming the official shorthand for “industry professionals” and state media in Russia.¹⁴³ This runs the risk of leading into a situation where regulatory documents become guidelines for nuclear weapons’ use instead of limiting their use. The risk for unintentional nuclear escalation is real when there is too much room for interpretation in regulatory documents and nuclear related statements.¹⁴⁴ Borrowing from deterrence theory, these notions – embodying the key pitfalls of nuclear signaling – are an example of inadvertent escalation. Unfortunately, the Russian state leadership regards its ability and willingness to take risks that would be deemed unacceptable in the West as a pivotal strategic advantage for Russia.¹⁴⁵ This may result in reckless risk-taking at the highest echelons of the state apparatus, thus, leading to a situation where “escalate-to-escalate” becomes the intended, or unintended, *modus operandi* overriding any de-escalation efforts.

Talk is Cheap – Yet Gaining Something

Hesitation in the decisiveness of aiding Ukraine is a clear example of the West buying into Russia’s nuclear threats. Western escalation management has become all but a self-detering mechanism signaling to Russia that, by mere “nuclear bullying”, actual results can be achieved. Jessica Berlin describes the situation as a “self-made hurdle” which the West could overcome by acknowledging that no actual red lines drawn by Russia seem to have been crossed - at least with no explicit consequences.¹⁴⁶ This notion is supported by the fact that no significant changes in Russian force posture can be detected. The Ukrainian drone strikes on Russian soil, e.g. the symbolically important strike to the Kremlin in May 2023, have demonstrated the ambivalence of Russia’s presumed red lines.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, Ukraine has sunk multiple Russian naval vessels – including Russia’s flag ship missile cruiser “Moskva” – and hit several Russian regions and airbases deep inside Russian territory destroying strategically important military assets, aircrafts and air defense systems. In Russia, this has caused public outrage, but no unambiguous climb up the nuclear escalation ladder.

Needless to say, Russia has responded with conventional force to Ukrainian strikes launching e.g. severe and extensive cruise missile attacks. But nevertheless, what actually determines the level of political or military “unacceptability” for Russia remains

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Arbatov, A. (2019). *Rol' jadernogo sderzhanija v strategičeskoj stabil'nosti: Garantija ili ugroza*. Moskovskij tsentr Karnegii. 28.01.2019.

¹⁴⁵ Baev, P. (2019). *Russian Nuclear Modernization and Putin's Wonder-Missiles: Real Issues and False Posturing*. IFRI. *Russie.Nei*. Visions, 115, p. 29

¹⁴⁶ Berlin, J. (2024). *Policy of escalation management has hurt Ukraine and is not a strategy for victory*. Silicon Curtain - podcast, episode no 329, 24.04.2024.

¹⁴⁷ Baev, P. (2023), p. 247

uncertain. Equally unclear is what would drive Russia to take significant (nuclear) escalatory actions instead of just huffing and puffing. True, after the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, the President ordered Russia's strategic deterrence forces to a special mode of combat duty. In June 2023, Putin also announced the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, which were apparently stationed on site by the end of 2023. By the end of the year, Russia had withdrawn its ratification of the global treaty banning nuclear weapons tests. As of latest, Putin announced joint military drills with Belarus in May 2024, involving the Russian strategic forces deploying tactical nuclear weapons. Russia seems to believe that such nuclear signaling "costs nothing and achieves much."¹⁴⁸

However, none of these signaled actions have been particularly alarming or persuasive. Instead, they appear more an attempt to show that the Russian nuclear rhetoric is more than a façade. Be that as it may, the façade itself is cracking. Logistics training – that is, moving military equipment and even nuclear weapons – and military drills with the strategic deterrence forces even in peacetime is not unheard of. Therefore, until Russia resumes, for instance, nuclear weapons testing, it is too early to make reference to unequivocal nuclear escalation. What is more, China has successfully deterred Russia from pursuing strategic brinkmanship by publicly condemning Russia's nuclear threats, while seeking resolution in Ukraine.¹⁴⁹ Additionally, hitherto, only civilian actors – politicians, academics like Karaganov or simply propagandists – have taken part in the nuclear debate in Russia. Presumably, the Russian military leadership would have to participate, even if nominally, in the discussion before we would see the situation evolve from words to actions. Admittedly, we do not know for certain, whether such conversations – discussion on nuclear use with military involved – are not, in fact, already held behind closed doors.

For that matter, Karaganov has been extremely vocal about the need to update the Russian Military Doctrine to reflect the prevailing global realities.¹⁵⁰ Karaganov is paving the way for the new and already overdue Military Doctrine, claiming that: "Our frivolous, if, alas, not irresponsible, nuclear doctrine [...] is being used as a pretext to wage an endless war against Russia."¹⁵¹ This rhetoric is yet another manifestation of the same argument Karaganov made in the 2023 "Valdai" club meeting, according to which the Russian Military Doctrine is alarmingly outdated and represents a bygone era.¹⁵² Even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Karaganov had voiced concerns about Russia's official stance on nuclear weapons. He has emphasised the need to crystalise the Russian nuclear doctrine and strategic documents. To his view, the official documents ought to be categorical about the fact that "*Moscow will not make a*

¹⁴⁸ Kendall-Taylor, A.; Kofman, M.; Lokker, N. & Hautala, H. (2023). *Assessing the Evolving Russian Nuclear Threat*. Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, p. 14

¹⁴⁹ Baev, P. (2023). *The Russian War Machine Fails the Tests of War*. *Current History*, 122(846), p. 247

¹⁵⁰ See e.g. Karaganov, S. (2024a); Karaganov, S. (2024b); Karaganov, S. (2023b); Rostovskij, M. (2023); Uglanov, A. (2024).

¹⁵¹ Karaganov, S. (2023b).

¹⁵² Prezident Rossii. (2023).

distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear counter-strike, or between an attack on its territory by strategic or non-strategic missiles with nuclear warheads."¹⁵³ Yet, it is highly unlikely that a new doctrine would be published in such an unstable geopolitical situation. Even Karaganov understands this. In a state of active full-scale war, there are too many uncertainties to draw strategic-level conclusions, let alone put them on paper.

Additionally, it could be argued that the lowest possible threshold for nuclear weapons' use has already been reached in the Russian Military Doctrine. The drawing up of the latest Military Doctrine is an illustrative example of the doctrinal nuclear threshold reaching its limits. Nikolay Patrušev, the secretary of the Russian Security Council at the time, envisioned in 2014 that the Military Doctrine which was being updated under his supervision, should include the possibility of a pre-emptive nuclear strike in local and regional conflicts.¹⁵⁴ Patrušev's proposal was, however, dismissed. What was left, was the already existing ambiguous phrasing of Russia reserving itself the right to use nuclear weapons against conventional forces if the situation demands. Strategic documents, such as the Russian Military Doctrine, are typically phrased vaguely and with flexibility, leaving them open for broad interpretation and without any unnecessary self-imposed constraints. However, Russia is not alone in using ambiguous language in its doctrine. Inasmuch as a doctrine is a strategic-level policy document, it is obvious that its phrasing is generic and any "awkward" or too specific details are omitted.¹⁵⁵ This practically applies to any strategic-level documents, including Western ones.

Us Against the World

For Karaganov, the ongoing war is not a war between two countries, namely Russia and Ukraine, but a conflict between two civilisations – the corrupt West and the righteous rest. In this equation, Russia is the vanguard of a larger global community opposing unipolar Western hegemony headed by the United States.¹⁵⁶ Since the confrontation is, and has always been, in Karaganov's view, a struggle between two power blocks, nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence, not just conventional forces, are an inseparable part of the "Ukrainian question". Karaganov views this war as existential for Russia rather than opportunistic in nature. For Karaganov, there is a fine line

¹⁵³ Karaganov, S. & Suslov, D. (2019a), p. 52

¹⁵⁴ Yuškin, V. (2014). *Krah 'Doktrina Patruševa'*. International Centre for Security and Defence, Estonia.

¹⁵⁵ Forsström, P. (2016) *Venäjäin sotilasdoktriinien kehittyminen Neuvostoliiton hajoamisen jälkeen*. MPKK, Julkaisusarja 3: Työpapereita Nro 3, p. 77

¹⁵⁶ See e.g. Karaganov, S. (2023a); Karaganov, S. (2023b); Karaganov, S. (2022); Karaganov, S. (2020). *Novye idei dlja sebja i mira*. Rossiya v globalnoj politike, 2/2020; Karaganov, S. (2017a). *Vzaimnoe garantirovannoe sderzhanie*. Project syndicate, 22.02.2017; Karaganov, S. (2017b). *Holodnaja vojna: prognoz na zavtra*. 2017 Valdai-club speech, 23.10.2017; Karaganov, S. (2016); Kobzev, A. (2022). *Sergej Karaganov "Eto nado prijamo nazvat' Otetšestvennoj vojnoj"*. Interview with Sergey Karaganov. Profil, 26.09.2022; Kobzev, A. (2014); Sestakov, J. (2022). *Protiv nas bol'soj Zapad, kotoryj rano ili pozdno natsnjot sypat'sja*. Interview with Sergey Karaganov. Rosijskaja gazeta, 12.04.2022; Tsepljaev, V. (2022). *"Krepost' Rossija". Skol'ko let prodlitsja konfrontatsija s Zapadom?* Interview with Sergey Karaganov. Argumenty i fakty, 13.06.2022; Uglanov, A. (2022). *Sergej Karaganov: "Ukraina v NATO – jeto odnozhatšnaja vojna v Evrope*. Interview with Sergey Karaganov. Argumenty nedeli, 01.02.2022.

between military assistance and military intervention, and the West has crossed this “red line” long ago, making Ukraine essentially a vassal in this proxy war. Hence, it is natural that, even before the full-scale invasion, Karaganov has relentlessly fostered nuclear rhetoric in relation to Ukraine.

Karaganov’s latest escapade took place in the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2024. Karaganov was responsible for moderating a presidential plenary session, during which he tried to provoke an opinionated answer from Putin with suggestive questions. According to Karaganov, Europe is a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah – biblical cities that were burned to ashes by the fire of God for their wickedness.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, taking the floor in the Forum, Karaganov proposed Russia to act as a harbinger of God, with a mission to launch a nuclear strike and fiery rain on Europe that would bring humanity to its senses.¹⁵⁸ Without completely ruling out possible changes to the doctrine¹⁵⁹, Putin, yet again, insisted that Russia is refraining from nuclear weapons’ use in Ukraine.¹⁶⁰ The dialogue between Karaganov and Putin in St. Petersburg followed a similar pattern as the Valdai 2023 discussion between these two. Karaganov plays the role of the warmonger, while Putin remains seemingly cool, calm and collected. Karaganov’s recourse to religious metaphors and sanctimonious rhetoric elevates the discourse from mundane to a divine level, suggesting that the battle Russia is engaging in is existential rather than a limited conflict that could, would and should be managed with mere conventional force.

Colonel general Vladimir Zarudnitskiy, chief of the Military Academy of the Russian General Staff, recently published a hard-hitting article in which he argues that the long-standing objective of the West is to inflict, not just a military, but a strategic defeat on Russia.”¹⁶¹ This, to Zarudnitskiy, means destabilising Russia so deeply that it loses its great power status. This is not a matter of deterring Russia, but a matter of destroying Russia. Consequently, ending the conflict in Ukraine is not synonymous with ending the conflict with the West.¹⁶² Zarudnitskiy, thus, sides with Karaganov, claiming that for Russia, the war in Ukraine is not about Russian imperialist endeavours, but about self-defense against the hostile collective West. Direct military confrontation with NATO in the ongoing war is avoided solely because of Russia’s powerful nuclear arsenal.¹⁶³

Most statements of the current political elite, as well as Karaganov’s writings, convey Russia’s self-conception of being misunderstood and ignored in global politics. Russia sees itself as a superpower, whose great power status has not been recognised in a

¹⁵⁷ Prezident Rossii. (2024). *Planernoje zasedanie Peterburskogo meždunarodnogo jekonomičeskogo foruma*.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Putin described the doctrine as a “living tool”. Putin continued that Russia is carefully monitoring the geopolitical situation and developments, “watching what is happening in the world around us”, that could have an impact on doctrinal changes. Prezident Rossii. (2024).

¹⁶⁰ Prezident Rossii. (2024).

¹⁶¹ Zarudnitskij, V. B. (2024). *Tendentsii izmenenija sistemy obestetženija voennoj bezopasnosti gosudarstva v uslovijah novoj geopolitičeskoj karty mira*. Voennaja mysl’, 2, p. 7

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 14

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 8

way that would correspond with the Russian understanding of itself. *“It’s time to correct the historical mistakes, our own and others’, made as a result of the greed of others and our own weakness”*, Karaganov declares.¹⁶⁴ It is as if Karaganov admits that Russia itself has allowed its deterrent power and posture to decay. This said, categorically us buying into the confrontational rhetoric of Russia versus the West is perilous. There is no denying that the world is divided. Ultimately, however, for Russia, the West is the necessary enemy and the counterforce it needs to utilise its deterrent power. In other words, emphasising confrontation for confrontation’s sake seems to be what the Russian regime is set out to do.

Interestingly enough, this kind of almost absolute confrontation and constant smearing of the other side without genuine desire for a dialogue deviates from Russia’s own theory of escalation management. According to prominent Russian scholar and former deputy Defense Minister Andrey Kokošin, one of the principal conditions of managing a conflict is to study the historical and causal dynamics of the conflict while maintaining an objective and constant consideration of the interests of the parties involved.¹⁶⁵ Kokošin continues that it is imperative “not to become a hostage of one’s own emotions”¹⁶⁶ in decision-making in order to avoid irrational choices.¹⁶⁷ It is crucial in a conflict situation not to lose contact with the opposing side and to make maximum use of various channels of interaction, be it political, diplomatic or as a last resort, military.¹⁶⁸ Unfortunately, the return of the great power struggle has muddied the waters, leaving no common ground on arms control or viable diplomatic channels left. At present, the emphasis on nuclear issues is solely on deterrence – on reinforcing and maintaining it.¹⁶⁹

Mutually Assured Distraction

The target audiences of Karaganov’s nuclear statements are manifold. At least four different audiences can be detected: the domestic audience, that is, the Russian people; the Russian elite and official level actors; Ukraine; and the international audience. The first target audience, the Russian public, is systematically being exposed to the theme of nuclear weapons. The general public is constantly “reminded” that nuclear confrontation between superpowers in the present-day is as real as it was in the Cold War era. However, it is unlikely that the purpose of such nuclear rhetoric, despite it being increasingly extreme, is to prepare the nation for actual use of nuclear weapons or legitimise Russian first strike. Suffice it to say, even the most militant of Russians seem to understand that the use of nuclear weapons – be it tactical or strategic –

¹⁶⁴ Rudakov, V. (2022). *Sistema opasnosti: neobhodimo jejo lomat’*. Interview with Sergey Karaganov. Istorik, 17.02.2022.

¹⁶⁵ Kokošin, A. (2021). *Strategičeskoe sderživanie v politike nacional’noj besopasnosti Rossii*. Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie.

¹⁶⁶ Не стать заложником собственных эмоций (ne stat’ založnikom sobstvennyh jemotsii)

¹⁶⁷ Kokošin, A. (2021).

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Juntunen, T.; Lavikainen, J.; Pesu, M. & Särkkä, I. (2024). *Naton ydinasepelote ja Suomi*. Valtioneuvoston kanslia, Helsinki. Valtioneuvoston selvitys- ja tutkimustoiminnan julkaisusarja 2024: 2, p. 103

would result in total annihilation. This is evident from – admittedly contradictory – statements that first paint a picture of nuclear weapons as godsend, but concurrently emphasise the nature of nuclear weapons as the ultimate vessels of wrath. Additionally, unlike Karaganov, other Russian scholars and the President himself have publicly argued for restraint in nuclear use. “Nuclear weapon skeptics are by far the more credible side of the debate”, asserts Hanna Notte.¹⁷⁰

Therefore, one is inclined to believe that the primary goal is to merely normalise the theme of nuclear deterrence among the domestic audience. This is because the deterring role of nuclear weapons upon conventional forces will presumably be emphasised in the near future. Russia has to reform its self-conception as a military superpower – not least because of the massive losses or the generally poor military performance in Ukraine.¹⁷¹ As Pavel Baev notes, the Russian state leadership is entangled in a self-made dilemma.¹⁷² While encountering humiliating defeats in a war that was supposed to be over by now, Russia is unable to use “its most powerful instrument” which, albeit ending this war, would surely bring about total disaster.¹⁷³ The mere status of a nuclear superpower is a matter of “national dignity” for Russia. Thus, pronounced nuclear rhetoric is used, not only to compensate for the weaknesses of the conventional forces, but also to generate a shared sense of worth for the nation.

Regarding the second target audience, the Russian elite, it is evident that Karaganov seeks to demonstrate loyalty to the state leadership. By amping up the “desirable” political views, he aims at preserving his place in the official elite. In Putin’s regime infected by the virus of systemic mistrust, there is little room for personal ambitions – at least not without grave consequences. Neither is there room for new names to redeem their place in the apparatus. The circle of trusted people, in other words, is shrinking.¹⁷⁴ This means that the most valuable of currencies is earned loyalty and not, for example, actual competence.¹⁷⁵ Although, to borrow from Bettina Renz: “Loyalty and competence are not mutually exclusive.”¹⁷⁶ Hence, proficiency is, by no means, extinct from Putin’s regime. Presumably, Karaganov’s interest is to hold on to his earned position. Consequently, the interest of the system itself is to hold on to the dwindling group of trusted people. This is why the system – namely, Putin – allows

¹⁷⁰ Notte, H. (2023).

¹⁷¹ See e.g. Dalsjö, R., Jonsson, M., & Norberg, J. (2022). *A Brutal Examination: Russian Military Capability in Light of the Ukraine War*. *Survival*, 64(3), 7-28; Renz, B. (2023). *Western Estimates of Russian Military Capabilities and the Invasion of Ukraine*. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 71(3), 219–231.

¹⁷² Baev, P. (2023), p. 247

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ See e.g. Gershkovich, E., Grove, T., Hinshaw, D. & Parkinson, J. (2022). *Putin, Isolated and Distrustful, Leans on Handful of Hard-Line Advisers*. *The Wall Street Journal*. 23.12.2022.

¹⁷⁵ Luzin, P. (2023). *The political considerations behind Russia’s military command chaos*. *Jamestown Eurasia Daily Monitor* 20(16), 26.01.2023.

¹⁷⁶ Renz, B. (2024). *Can dysfunctions in civil-military relations explain the ineffectiveness of Russian armed forces in Ukraine? A debate*. In forthcoming Forsström, P. (ed.) *Russia’s War Against Ukraine - Complexity of Contemporary Clausewitzian War*. FNDU.

its cronies a little leeway. But whether it is through reassignments, dismissals or criminal charges among the elite, the system reminds its confidants that this “room for maneuver” has its limits and that earned trust must be maintained.

The third target audience is, without question, the Ukrainian political elite and the Ukrainian people. Throughout the war, Russia has systematically used nuclear signaling in attempts to get its message across. After realising that Ukraine is more resilient against conventional means of warfare than may have been expected, Russia has had to resort to hybrid ways of influencing the Ukrainian side. By threatening with nuclear weapons, Russia aims to put maximum pressure on Ukraine. The desired end goal is to persuade Ukraine to yield and agree to negotiations, the terms of which would, without doubt, be unfavorable for Ukrainians. Thus far, Russia’s nuclear signaling has been somewhat unsuccessful, because with or without nuclear weapons involved, Ukraine is fighting an existential war. By no means, does this suggest that nuclear signaling fails as a rule in situations where the object of the signaling is – all the same – fighting an existential war. This merely suggests that Ukraine in particular has not succumbed to Russia waving around its nuclear weapons. In Ukraine, Russia’s nuclear threats are by no means brushed aside. The risk of inadvertent nuclear escalation is not considered impossible as Russia is desperately seeking its way out of the war of attrition.¹⁷⁷ However, Russia’s signaling is still largely treated as a routine hostile information operation, the primary goal of which is to intimidate and undermine Western support.¹⁷⁸ There is little indication that Russia genuinely intends to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine other than as a means of blackmail.¹⁷⁹

The fourth target audience is the wider international community – mainly the West. Due to Karaganov’s limited, but existing international recognition, his statements on Russian nuclear policy tend to get a fair amount of media coverage outside of Russia as well. His threats about “unacceptable consequences” and a possible Russian nuclear strike are intended to create uncertainty, and most of all, hesitation. The primary goal is to discourage Western support for Ukraine in fear of Russia’s reactions. As Dmitry Adamsky suggests, Russia’s cross-domain coercion is, above all, “aimed at paralysing Western assertiveness and responsiveness.”¹⁸⁰ Unfortunately, this escalation rhetoric has been a somewhat winning strategy for Russia.¹⁸¹ However confusing or contradictory Russia’s nuclear threats have been, they have indeed undermined Western support for Ukrainian resistance – at least slowed it down. This said, the

¹⁷⁷ Kurivskiy, I. (2024). *Zastosuvannya jadernoji zbroji RF: Strategična dezinformatsija vs real’na zagroza*. Polityka ta pravo. V umovah diji voennogo stanu: Pošuk rišen’. Materialy Mižnarodnoji naukovoji konferentiji. Ukrainian State University of Myh’ail Drahomanov.

¹⁷⁸ See e.g. Defence Express. (2023). *RF pidvištšit’ gradus jadernobo šantažu ta perevela strategični sili u 24-hodinnu botovnist’ – GUR*. Defence Express, 19.02.2023; Kohv, M. (2023). *Why the West Should Not Be Afraid of Russian Nuclear Threats*. Commentary. International Centre for Defence and Security, 25.04.2023; Kurivskiy, I. (2024); Valjuško, I. (2023). *Jadernij šantaž rosiji: štšo novobo?* Rubryka, 21.06.2023.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Adamsky, D. (2024), p. 96

¹⁸¹ Baev, P. (2024). *Nuclear brinkmanship in Putin’s war: Upping the ante*. The Talbott Papers on Implications of Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine. Brookings.

West is gradually overcoming reservations in supplying arms and delivering support for Ukraine.¹⁸²

It is certainly important to take note of all Russian nuclear related statements and prepare for different escalation trajectories, but this should not “dictate pre-emptive panic.”¹⁸³ The increasingly radical suggestions of various figures, like Karaganov, on the use of nuclear weapons are means to an end to make Putin appear more serious and sensible in his views and statements. Therefore, widespread nuclear hysteria is premature and unnecessary. It is still unclear whether this burnishing of Putin’s public image is preparation for future peace negotiations. Arguably, the President seeks to appear as “diplomatic” and rational as possible for both domestic and global audiences amid his failing “special military operation”. This somewhat moderate – even if artificially constructed – reputation might benefit Putin in political negotiations with “unfriendly” parties as well as when talking business with “friendly” partner countries. Supposedly, Putin is equally interested in maintaining his reputation, domestically, as the provider of stability and peace within Russia.

By showcasing a cacophony of expert opinions on nuclear deterrence – from maximalist rants to careful recitals of the Military Doctrine – Russia is deliberately putting up a smoke screen. I call this the Russian *mutually assured distraction* strategy. ‘*Mutually assured*’, because given the level of publicity these varying views get – e.g. coverage in (state) news media and primetime television broadcasts – it is irrefutable that there is a higher-level acceptance to such statements – concurrence even. ‘*Distraction*’, I say, because by creating a contradictory and inherently fragmentary image whereby Russia is, on the one hand, able and willing to escalate the situation, but, on the other hand, does not wish to do so, Russia is aiming to distract and confuse the Western community and is, thus, driving polarisation. When one party is left guessing the other party’s true intentions and red lines based on conflicting statements, there is a risk that self-restraint translates to complete inaction. As Pynnöniemi and Rácz argue, “strategic deception”, in which all available means are deployed to “alter the target audiences’ perceptions’ to secure strategic objectives”, is an integral part of Russian security policy.¹⁸⁴ The strategy of deception is essentially about throwing the adversary off balance in order to create the conditions for a strategic surprise.¹⁸⁵ Such a strategy, however, has its limits. See, as Pynnöniemi and Rácz continue, success – or failure – of Russian strategic deception is ultimately dependent on the adversary’s susceptibility to self-deception.¹⁸⁶ This means that such a strategy can be, if not overcome, then at least deterred with intent to remain agile, alert and resilient.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Freedman, L. (2023), p. 29

¹⁸⁴ Pynnöniemi, K. & Rácz, A. (eds.) (2016). *Fog of Falsehood. Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine*. FIIA Report 45, p. 16–17

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 314

Conclusion

Suffice it to say, Karaganov has introduced very few, if any, new ideas in his thinking during the past decade. He has been utilising threatening nuclear rhetoric throughout his career. However, study of his writings uncovers how some of his ideas have evolved and crystallised over time. Concepts, *like strategic parasitism* and *Russia as the main provider of security*, are prime examples of how Karaganov's pathos takes on a more precise form. In general, we may perceive a gradual hardening of his narratives. The only novel ideas appearing in his rhetoric during the period under review are the introduction of a preemptive nuclear strike and the pronounced demand to update Russia's Military Doctrine. Additionally, a trend of other Russian observers joining the debate and siding with Karaganov with increasingly bellicose statements can be detected. This trajectory has taken place primarily after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Karaganov's argumentation on deterrence issues has hardened over the course of the war. The increasing belligerence has crept into his rhetoric gradually. The most distinct example of such rhetoric is Karaganov calling for Russia to enable limited preemptive nuclear weapons use on European soil. Until the summer of 2023, when Karaganov released his infamous article, the idea of first-strike use appeared in his statements solely as a tactic the United States would be willing to entertain. Russia, instead, was adhering to its official doctrine, reserving the right to counter a strike by its adversary. However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a starting point for gradual radicalisation and growing aggression in Karaganov's argumentation. During the last few years Karaganov has also begun to systematically criticise Russia's strategic documents – namely, the Military Doctrine – for being obsolete. He has vocally demanded that Russia's nuclear threshold should be lowered, insisting that a resolution for the ongoing war and means to restore Russia's might are to be found in using (tactical) nuclear weapons.

Above all, Karaganov has remained true to his beliefs throughout the years. It can be said in his favour that he appears to be no turncoat. He has not gone through any overnight radicalisation – something that cannot be said about many other Russian experts or politicians after Russia started its full-scale war. For them, this sudden change of opinion has been a mere desperate attempt to show loyalty but at the cost of professional credibility. Karaganov, however, has voiced concerns about the decay of Russian strategic deterrent effect long before the war. He has promoted the need to maintain Russia's military superpower status and Russia's nuclear deterrence – the sole factors for which Russia still continues to be respected in the global arena.¹⁸⁷ Sticking to his original views and remaining loyal to the ruling elite through the ebb and flow of politics have guaranteed Karaganov a place in the sun. Even though some

¹⁸⁷ See e.g. Karaganov, S. (2010). *Otvét Sergeja Karaganova na stat'ju Alekseja Arbatova "Zdravij smysl I razoruženie"*. *Rossija v globalnoj politike*, 4/2010; Karaganov, S. (2012). *Zatšem oružije? Potšemu Rossii nužno naraštšivat' voennuju silu daže v nebyvalo blagoprijatnyh vnešnih uslovijah*. *Rossija v globalnoj politike*, 5/2012.

of his ideas have become disturbingly maximalist and, quite frankly, unacademic, he has not been labeled as an idle “talking head” in Russian strategic debates.

Nevertheless, Karaganov’s authority within the apparatus dealing with strategic and nuclear deterrence should not be overestimated. Neither should it be underestimated. The level of attention his controversial statements have gained both domestically and internationally, especially amid the war, indicate that he is not without relevance. It goes without saying, his international academic credibility has been irrevocably damaged by his latest doomsday rhetoric.¹⁸⁸ However, Karaganov’s statements do not go unnoticed, and he remains to be in President Putin’s orbit. This is evident from his current affiliations and from the attention and media coverage his statements receive in Russia. The contemporary Russian media landscape, academia and the public space are controlled to such a degree that no “unwanted” figures would get publicity to their views to the same extent as Karaganov does.¹⁸⁹ Karaganov, however, has no direct political power or military authority. Neither does he have any real say in decision-making related to the use of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, he is an integral part of a wider strategic community of policy experts that have been trusted with the authority to generate narratives and policy guidance for the Kremlin’s use to justify Russia’s war efforts. Simultaneously more moderate voices, like that of Arbatov, are marginalised and even completely silenced. Karaganov is far from being the “main ideologist” of the Kremlin, yet, he does have a say in the pseudohistories Russia is writing to justify its military actions.

The final research aim of this paper was to understand intention via interpretation of Karaganov’s statements on nuclear weapons’ use. There are, indeed, various target audiences for Karaganov’s output and, thus, a myriad of objectives as well. Regarding target audiences outside of Russia, Karaganov’s endgame appears to be to confuse and to intimidate. Correspondingly, by allowing polarising figures like Karaganov to engage in public debate, Russia seeks to contest the boundaries of Western resilience and consensus in conflict situations. Essentially, Russia is exploring its way on the escalation ladder, fixating on nuclear rhetoric as means of escalation. A pivotal question for Russia is where do words end and action begin. As a hardline political scientist, Karaganov clearly understands the name of the nuclear deterrence game – that deterrence is essentially a rhetorical gamble where stakes are high and thresholds even higher, but where failure of one party to demonstrate sufficient ability and willingness to take action, may result in the other calling one’s bluff. Considering that deterrence theory is initially a Western concept, it is striking how thoroughly Russia has adopted – even further developed – it to meet its own needs.

¹⁸⁸ In Western media, for example, Karaganov has been dubbed as the “Doomsday Professor” rather than referring to him as a security policy analyst. See also p. 12–13 of this paper.

¹⁸⁹ See e.g. Berlin, P. (2024). *The Carrot and the Stick. Systemic Corruption in Russia* in Berlin, P. *Rethinking Corruption: Reasons Behind the Failure of Anti-Corruption Efforts*. Cambridge University Press, p. 87–111; Mulford, J. P. (2016). *Non-State Actors in the Russo-Ukrainian War*. *Connections*, 15(2), 89–107; Vendil Pallin, C. & Oxenstierna, S. (2017). Stockholm: FOI.

Russia is intentionally allowing an array of figures – each more radical than the other – to showcase views and statements that quite often stand in direct contradiction to each other. The rhetoric ranges from apocalyptic metaphors to moderate reciting of the official Military Doctrine Russia. I call this an orchestrated Russian strategy of *mutually assured distraction* – a commonly accepted mode of operation in Russia, where each exaggerated statement and even seemingly trivial mouth piece has its strategic purpose. The commentators come, of course, with varying degrees of influence and importance. Russian MAD is a pervasive deception strategy, which aims at setting the conditions for fear, confusion and hesitation to be instilled in the opponent by any means necessary. Now, to what extent is this whole debate and the voices partaking in it coordinated and by whom, is a question that requires further scrutiny. It is, nevertheless, paramount to keep track of the ongoing debate on nuclear weapons and deterrence issues and to be familiar with the development of the rhetoric and the actors participating in the creation of the varying deterrence narratives. Only thus, can we relate even the most outrageous or contradicting statements to the overall picture and act accordingly, not underestimating or overestimating the weight of such statements. Moreover, understanding the context, from which the expressions and lexicon originate, is a prerequisite for in-depth comprehension of the official strategic documents and doctrines of Russia – existing and upcoming ones.

With the Russian conventional Armed Forces being excessively tied up in the ongoing war with Ukraine, and based on assessments made about their overall performance in the battlefield, the deterrent effect of Russia's conventional force appears lacking. Hence, examining the changing relationship between conventional and strategic forces and the relative – presumably growing – importance of nuclear deterrence in Russian security policy is crucial. Since nuclear deterrence, in its ideal form, is a gamble, with the intent to actually restrain from using the all-destroying weapon itself, it is exactly the rhetoric, as well as words existing on paper and in speech, we must study. We must relate the general nuclear rhetoric in Russian public debate and in official documents to what is actually happening within the Armed Forces in terms of military performance, financing, forming of new units and doctrines, as well as technological development. Predicting the future is impossible, but making better assumptions of possible future trajectories and of Russia's deterrence posture – at present and in future – is not. We should not be deluded by Russian strategic distraction, but instead, keep relying on informed analysis. Submitting to Russian nuclear blackmail now would provide an incentive for Russia to henceforth resort to similar scheming and *modus operandi*.

The grim reality is that the current Putin regime, from which even Karaganov can no longer extricate himself, lives and breathes conflict. The very existence of the political order is built on this war. For the time being, it seems that bringing the war to an end

would, in fact, be riskier than continuing it. Although no martial law is officially imposed throughout Russia¹⁹⁰, the ongoing war in Ukraine is nevertheless used to justify almost any difficult decision or aggressive action enforced by the regime. Should the conflict cease, this justification would likewise vanish, and the Kremlin would have to face the music and bear responsibility for its actions. To borrow from Andrey Kokošin, it is relatively easy to enter a conflict, but to exit a conflict is much more difficult – painful even – a process.¹⁹¹ The lack of genuine vision or strategy for Russia free from conflict means that the Russian state leadership, as of now, has no real desire or intention to work towards peace. Karaganov as well has based his entire worldview and argumentation on endless confrontation. Without conflict, Karaganov's theses lose their foundation and meaning. His rationale turns to dust. Therefore, it can be assumed that escalatory rhetoric emphasising confrontation will continue – both in Karaganov's statements and, as a rule, in Russian public debate.

However, this rhetoric ultimately reflects the fragility of power and the desperate need for the current Russian political system to survive and legitimise its very existence. Therefore, exposing this escalatory rhetoric for what it largely is – hot air and alarmism – will eventually result in such narratives losing their power. Admittedly, there might, in fact, be a point when rhetoric becomes reality. However, there are no serious indications that the apocalyptic state of affairs envisioned by Karaganov is becoming reality anytime soon. As previously defined, deterrence for Russia is a permanent cross-domain activity combining both forceful and non-forceful methods with strategic deception at its core. Hence, the recent rhetorical build-up of nuclear threats and Karaganov's jingoism can be seen as a standard operating model straight from Russia's own playbook on deterrence. This said, it looks as if it is in Russia's own interests to prolong the rhetorical, non-forceful coercion and intimidation and, thus, avoid the escalation from words to action for as long as possible – especially with regard to nuclear escalation. A common understanding of Mutual Assured Destruction still holds, wherefore no Russian preemptive nuclear strike *a lá Karaganov* is required to prove a point.

¹⁹⁰ Putin has imposed Martial Law in the four occupied regions.

¹⁹¹ Kokošin, A. (2021).

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