

NSI's Jelena Vidojević in conversation with Sergey Karaganov

This exclusive interview is part of **Missing Voices: Critical Thinking in Times of Polycrisis**, a discussion series presented by the New South Institute (NSI).

The series seeks to offer a necessary and fresh contribution to current global debates on the future of the global order, bringing together diverse voices and perspectives that have often been marginalised, oversimplified, or silenced altogether. Here, NSI's Jelena Vidojević is in conversation with Professor Sergey Karaganov.



Sergey Karaganov

Sergey Alexandrovich Karaganov is a Professor Emeritus, Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs, National Research University–Higher School of Economics; Honorary Chairman of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy; Head of the Situational Analysis Program. Karaganov was a close associate of Yevgeny Primakov, and has been Presidential Advisor to both Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin.

Q Jelena Vidojević: There is widespread agreement that the liberal international order is in crisis. However, there is less consensus on the principal causes of this crisis or the early warning signs that indicated that the 'Western model is broken'. What were these early indicators, and what factors have contributed most to the current turbulence?

A Sergey Karaganov: We can say that, until the 16th century, the world was multipolar, but after the 16th and 17th centuries it became Western-centric. Western military superiority served as the basis for a system of Western, at that time European, cultural and political colonialism and economic dominance. When colonialism began to crumble, it was replaced by neocolonialism, also called a liberal globalist system. But neocolonialism kept crumbling, too, because its foundation has been constantly cracking.

The crisis of the liberal international order, or rather the West's crisis, began more than a hundred years ago, after the West had unleashed a monstrous world war (World War I) against itself. It shook many norms and foundations of Western society. Oswald Spengler described this quite eloquently in his book *"The Decline of the West,"* which sometimes is called *"The Decline of Europe."*¹

“Russia to some extent was probably key to the liberal order crisis, but I am sure that neither Soviet nor Russian leaders fully understood what they were actually doing. They worried about the country's security and, driven by traditional Russian internationalism, supported anti-colonial movements and countries that were called the “Third World” at that time. ”

In the early 1920s Russia, which became the Soviet Union, broke away from the Western system and started, among other things, supporting anti-colonial and national liberation movements. But that period was not yet associated with the crisis of the Western and liberal systems, although it coincided with the deepest crisis of the 1930s and World War II, which were also largely caused by contradictions within the West.

A new phase began in the 1950s and 60s, when the Soviet Union, not being fully aware of the consequences of its actions but worrying about its own security, created nuclear weapons and knocked out the foundation from the 500-year-old Western dominance in the international system. This foundation had rested on Europe's/the West's militarytechnical and military-organisational superiority.

In the 1960s, the West started losing wars, and decolonisation began. The West was no longer able to impose its will by force. The Korean War was lost, as was the French war in Vietnam, followed by the United States' defeat in Vietnam, and the oil embargo.

Structural contradictions began to pile up in the West, and especially in Europe. Europe was stagnating from the late 1960s, and in the 1970s and 80s, it seemed that the West had fallen into decline. But then the Soviet Union collapsed and stopped playing its role as a competitor to the Western systems of global domination. The West rejoiced and forgot about its problems, especially since it received a powerful boost from one and a half to two billion low-paid workers from and huge markets that had opened up for it in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe and, of course, China.

But in the 2000s, realising that it would not be able to integrate into the Western system on acceptable, sovereign, terms, Russia decided to restore its military strength. and it did. The liberal international order slid into a new crisis which coincided with the moral degradation of Western capitalism which had been founded on certain ethical, primarily Protestant, Christian values. A model based on endless enrichment and ever-growing consumption prevailed, thus damaging the very fabric of life - planet Earth.

Russia to some extent was probably the key to the liberal order crisis, but I am sure that neither Soviet nor Russian leaders fully understood what they were actually doing. They worried about the country's security and, driven by traditional Russian internationalism, supported anti-colonial movements and countries that were called the "Third World" at that time. Let me say this again: an acute crisis broke out a long time ago, its most acute phase began in the 1970s/80s, but this was interrupted by a temporary victory of the Western model, after which the crisis accelerated and has since been gaining momentum.

¹ <https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupid?key=olbp41658>.

Q Jelena Vidojević: What do you see as the defining characteristics of the emerging "post-Western" world? How will power dynamics, economic structures, and geopolitical alliances change in this new era? Additionally, do you believe the existing global governance institutions will remain relevant, or will they need to be reformed—or even replaced—to reflect the shifting balance of power?

A Sergey Karaganov: There are two answers to your question.

First, the existing global governance institutions are clearly inadequate for the most part. This primarily applies to the IMF², the World Bank, and to a large extent to UN³-related institutions. So we need to think about how to replace them and with what. But there is no need to destroy them prematurely, which would only add to the chaos.

My simple recipe for now is that we should create parallel institutions within the SCO⁴, BRICS⁵, the World Majority, as we prefer to call the Global South, while also engaging willing participants in the West on some key international development issues. These include, for example, the consequences of climatic changes and man-made disasters, food shortages, epidemics, and the spread of bioweapons. I can name many more issues that require immediate attention, but which cannot be solved within the existing system.

But again, we should not immediately scrap the entire UN system. We may need UN institutions again, perhaps in 15 to 20 or more years from now, if we do not slide into a big world war. The main problem of the UN is not its Charter, but the fact that over the past several decades, due to a number of circumstances, primarily the location of its headquarters in New York, Geneva, and Vienna, it has become saddled by officials from Western countries or officials who align themselves with the West and not with the World Majority. Nevertheless, although this system is weakening and becoming less and less legitimate, it should not be destroyed. Instead, parallel systems should be created.

Secondly, about the defining characteristics of the new world order. I'm not clairvoyant, of course. But it is quite clear to me that after a long period (I think it will last 10 to 15 years, even though it is almost impossible to predict now) we will see a multipolar and fairly free world where nations and civilisations can flourish, with no hegemonies around, since the old ones will step aside, and new ones will have no chance to emerge. That's why I really like that world. I may not live to see it, but that's another matter. It won't be pro-Western. It will be free, I hope.

But freedom is a very expensive commodity, and we will have to pay for it. To achieve it, we will have to

²International Monetary Fund

³United Nations

⁴Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

⁵Brazil, Russia, Indian, China and South Africa

work hard. This is why all countries, peoples, and every person need to try to go through this turbulent period as smoothly as possible to prevent the world from sliding into a large-scale war and avoid the disintegration of nations. This is quite a difficult period, but this is something to think about.

Q Jelena Vidojević: How has the SMO⁶ in Ukraine served as a turning point for Russia—not only in its engagement with the West but, more significantly, in its "rediscovery" of the Global South, or what you and your colleagues refer to as the "World Majority"?

A Sergey Karaganov: The SMO - in fact, a war with the West in Ukraine - has significantly affected all aspects of Russia's politics. This operation has accelerated the eastward shift in the Russian economy and Russian foreign policy thinking. Trade turnover with China, India, and other Asian countries has increased sharply. Trade with Africa is recovering. It is also very important that Russia's ongoing turn towards the World Majority has sped up dramatically. Russia has finally realised that this is where the future sources of growth and the most promising partners are.

But this turn to the World Majority was conceived and commenced long before the SMO. We wrote and talked about it several years before it. A few years ago, my colleagues and I released a report on the new policy towards the World Majority,⁷ and five or six years before that, a report on the new policy towards Africa. So we were prepared. And now objective circumstances are fast-tracking our alignment with the World Majority. Moreover, Russia is beginning to recognise at last, that we are part of this majority, we are its military-strategic core and foundation. We were not among the colonial powers.

The Soviet Union actively advocated liberation from colonialism and neocolonialism, and by undermining the West's military superiority, we began to free the World Majority from the old West's domination. In addition, in Russia, we see growing interest in the culture of the Eastern, Latin American, and African countries, and people-to-people contacts are expanding, which is very encouraging. We are going back to the very good Russian tradition of high internationalism, and cultural, religious and ethnic openness. Let me remind you that in the 18th century we were almost the only country where an ethnic Ethiopian had the rank of general. He was a beloved associate and disciple of Peter the Great. Russia's greatest poet, Pushkin (and we say that Pushkin is our everything, the founder of the modern Russian literary language), was the grandson of this native of Africa.

The SMO has had a positive impact on domestic policy in Russia and on our economy. I dare say that these internal changes, spurred by this military operation, were one of its main goals, apart, of course, from

⁶ Special Military Operation

⁷ <https://cceis.hse.ru/pubs/share/direct/883012618.pdf>

stopping NATO's⁸ eastward expansion, which risked an inevitable world war. The economy, which was previously nearly stagnating, is now growing more quickly. We are investing in science, especially the technical sciences, again. The war is helping cleanse the Russian elite and society of Westernism and Western centrism, which have become a sign of backwardness. Western sanctions are helping us get rid of the comprador bourgeoisie and its intellectual servants. There is perhaps an even more important result: Russia is returning to its "true self". It is experiencing a moral and spiritual upsurge. In other words, we are in a state of multidimensional economic, cultural, and spiritual Renaissance. It is so regrettable, of course, that we have to pay for this revival with the blood of our best sons. But we shall win. This revival will stay with us, as will the shift towards the East and the Global South, especially since we constantly emphasise that we are the military-political core of this World Majority. We are liberating the World Majority from the Western yoke.

Q Jelena Vidojević: One of the key revelations at the outset of the war in Ukraine was the depth of "Russia-related anxieties" among European elites—and, to some extent, the public. To what extent do you see these concerns as historically ingrained, rooted in long-standing geopolitical narratives? Or is it a reaction to more recent events and strategic developments? Given the current tensions, do you see a realistic pathway for Russia to normalise relations with most of the West in the mid-term, or have the fractures become too deep for reconciliation in the foreseeable future?

A Sergey Karaganov: Russophobia has always been very strong, particularly in Europe and to a lesser extent in the United States. It was a kind of racism, although the Slavs are similar in skin color to Romano-Germans. It was cultural racism, a sense of some superiority, because at a certain point in history, due to the Mongol invasion, Russia lagged in technological development. But the main reason for this Russophobia was the fact that Russia had always won its battles with Europe.

We fought wars with Europe for about eight centuries and always came out victorious. Particularly traumatic for all of Europe was its defeat by Russia in World War II, which we call the Great Patriotic War. Almost all European countries, with the exception of Yugoslavia and Greece, supplied weapons, equipment, and food to the German army. Moreover, almost all European countries provided soldiers. Tens of thousands of Italians, tens of thousands of Romanians, and even the French fought against us. Up to a quarter, if not a third, of the German Wehrmacht and the SS were non-German Europeans.

We say that we defeated German fascism in 1945, but in reality, it was a victory over Europe. Back then, out of generosity and due to euphoria from the victory, we were saying that we had won together with the Allies.

⁸ North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

It is true, we defeated continental Europe together with the Americans and the Brits.

But now the muddy waves of Russophobia are rising in Europe again. Another and much deeper reason for the current wave of hatred is that the present European elites are losing on all fronts. Inequality is increasing, the economy is slowing down, and the so-called “green agenda” that Europeans imposed on the world for their own benefit has failed. European societies are sinking into deep moral corruption, **which** makes them “outcasts” for most other nations. I am referring to all these newest very strange post-human or anti-human values that have sprung up in European societies and which they have been trying to impose on other countries. These include ultra feminism, LGBT culture, denial of history, transhumanism, and so on.

To this I must add a dramatic rise in inequality, the decline of the middle class across Europe over the past 30 years, and the monstrous and evil mistake made by the European elites, who, seeking to undermine trade unions and lower the cost of their own labour, let in several waves of migrants in the 1960s and now cannot cope with them. To cover up these continuous failures and legitimise their power (they should have been thrown out of power), they have been whipping up the fear of military threat from Russia for more than 10 years.

Now this fear of military threat is turning into nothing short of military hysteria. Europeans are being prepared for war, which is really shocking for us and all normal people. For the third time in a little over a hundred years, they are pushing themselves towards suicide. We must remember that Europe is a source of all of humankind’s troubles, including two world wars. They have learned nothing and once again are heading for a new world war. I hope that Russia will be able to stop the world from gambling with a third world war and rein in these elites. But there is a tough road ahead.

Q Jelena Vidojević: We are currently witnessing what appears to be a growing divide within the West regarding its approach to Russia and the future of the war in Ukraine. Paradoxically, it is the USA⁹ that has shown a greater willingness to explore the possibility of negotiations or a peace settlement with Russia, while many EU¹⁰ leaders remain, at best, hesitant and, at worst, outright resistant to such discussions. What do you believe is driving this divergence in strategy? Is it a reflection of differing geopolitical priorities, economic interests, or internal political pressures within the USA and the EU? And what implications might this split have for the future of Western cohesion in addressing the conflict?

A Sergey Karaganov: The differences between European and American elites are obvious, and they are growing.

⁹ United States of America

¹⁰ European Union

At the beginning of this war, the American and European elites generally pursued identical interests. The Americans hoped to ruin Russia as a strategic adversary. Europeans wanted more to win the war and thus justify their existence or at least distract their societies from internal problems. But, as they have come to realise over the years that they cannot win this war, differences between the American and European elites began to emerge.

First and foremost, Russia has not only put up stiff resistance to NATO's aggression in Ukraine, but it has also indicated that if this aggression continues, sooner or later it will force Russia to use nuclear weapons against targets in Europe. Americans are changing their mind because they do not need a nuclear war in Europe. They understand what a nuclear war is like. They began to retreat already under Biden, although Biden adhered to extremely aggressive rhetoric. But even under his administration, military assistance to Ukraine began to decrease here and there.

For Europeans, the situation is much more complicated. While the Americans understand the danger of nuclear war and do not want it, the European elites have lost their senses. They live in a cloud of "strategic parasitism", they have lost the fear of war and responsibility to their peoples. So losing everything along the way, they are pushing their countries towards war, despite the risk of self-destruction.

In addition, the Americans have already achieved very important goals in this war. One of the goals was to prevent close alignment between Russia and Europe. They have been pursuing this goal since the 2000s when the Ukrainian card was played for the first time and the first coup d'état took place in Ukraine. The country was turned into a source of constant tension. The Americans had succeeded. In the early 2000s, Russian and many European leaders spoke about creating a single continental economic, political, and security space. The Americans did not want that. So they did their best to make sure that no such space could be created in the foreseeable future.

Also, one of the Americans' goals in unleashing this war in Ukraine was to increase their ability to rob Europe. America is losing the opportunity to rob the World Majority because the World Majority is becoming more independent as the United States becomes relatively weaker. So the USA makes up for this waning opportunity to plunder the World Majority by pulling off a daring robbery of Europe. Because of the war and all these super sanctions, because Europe has undercut its competitive advantages by rejecting Russian gas and Russian resources, the Americans are now both syphoning off European money and drawing European industry over to the United States. So the Americans have already won this war, but only against Europe. Now they would like to make a deal with Russia to somehow end this conflict and prevent it

from escalating to the level of nuclear war. But the Europeans have gone berserk and are running amok straight into the abyss.

Q Jelena Vidojević: In the report you co-authored, “Russia’s Policy Towards the World Majority”, BRICS and, to some extent, the SCO, are described as “the vanguard of the World Majority... with the potential to make rules, set standards, conduct policies, and create institutional alternatives to Western ones.” How do you respond to criticism, particularly from the far left, that BRICS is merely a platform for advancing national elites within global power structures rather than driving structural social transformation?

A Sergey Karaganov: Russia views the development of BRICS and the SCO as a way to prevent a complete collapse of the international system’s governability. Old institutions dominated by the West are dying away. The UN system has become very weak, it fails to perform most of its functions, and it is saddled by representatives of Western elites or pro-Western officials. I believe we should create parallel systems for the long period during which we will be establishing a new balance of power and a new institutional system, or restoring some elements of the old one.

Indeed, Russia has so far not proposed an alternative socio-economic model for international development. I believe that the criticism you mentioned is quite appropriate. This is a very difficult and complex issue, which we should address jointly with you.

I agree that modern globalist liberal capitalism has outlived its relative usefulness and is now outright harmful, firstly to nature, since it is based on ever-growing consumption, and secondly, due to the emphasis on endless consumption, the total transformation of people into consuming animals. The pursuit of profit and the information revolution are beginning to destroy the human himself. We need to work together with thinkers from the World Majority and with progressive intellectuals in the West to start devising an alternative model of development and try to implement it.

I believe that Russia is not active enough in this respect, and this is our weakness. I raised this question with our President when I talked with him at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum last year. I know that something is underway, but we need to work together on this. This should involve not only “left-wing” forces but also politicians and scientists who feel their responsibility for the future of humanity. The current model of capitalism is leading humankind to a dead end.

Q Jelena Vidojević: What role does South Africa play in Russia's broader foreign policy strategy? Additionally, to what extent do economic, political, and security considerations shape Russia's engagement with South Africa, and how do you see this relationship evolving in the coming years?

A Sergey Karaganov: We see that our relations with South Africa are developing positively, we consider it a promising partner. Trade turnover is growing, and human contacts are expanding. We stand together on most international political issues, and we build BRICS together, so the only option is to go forward.

Perhaps we should pay more attention to the development of human, scientific, and educational ties. I know that more and more Russian students study in South Africa. We need to make additional effort to attract as many students as possible from South Africa and other African countries to study in Russia. Russia is a very agreeable country for Africans because there is no racism here. Some may feel that way, of course, but in principle, racism is alien to the Russian national character. I think that our African friends will feel very comfortable here, as did tens of thousands of African students who studied in the then Soviet Union, and who now probably make up the core of the friendly relationships we are building with African countries.

Q Jelena Vidojević: How do you assess the long-term viability of Russia's alignment with China, and what risks might such partnership pose?

A Sergey Karaganov: Russia and China are informal allies. We complement each other in many ways. The Chinese have a surplus of labour, and we have huge resources. We also share a very long border, and the good relationship we have built over the last decades has improved our security immensely on both sides of the border. We have sharply reduced the number of troops on the border and China has done the same. It has almost no large military contingents in the north. But this is not the most important thing.

Russia and China are cooperating very closely in the economic field. Ourselves and our Chinese friends are also working on a future international development model, which is still in its very early formative stage. Finally, the fact that Russia and China are de facto allies doubles the combined strategic power of each country.

It is difficult to imagine how China could have resisted pressure from the United States and the West if it did not have Russia's strategic power behind it. China and its economic power have greatly helped, are helping now and will help us in our confrontation with Europe. Russian and Chinese leaders have improved relations between the two countries after their thoughtless deterioration between the 1960s and 1980s. God

helped us by striking our Western neighbours, especially the Americans, with insanity. By simultaneously putting pressure on China and Russia, they have pushed the two friendly countries into an alliance, dramatically increasing the potential power of each of us alone, as well as our combined power.

Needless to say, there is a huge imbalance between Russia and China in terms of economic power. This causes some concern among some of our politicians and in society, but we are not worried that this imbalance will affect our relations now or in the foreseeable future.

Beijing is very careful in terms of Chinese labour migration to our country. There are many Chinese students and businessmen here, but there are practically no Chinese workers. About 15 years ago, we did special research and found out that there were not millions of Chinese in Russia, as the West had claimed in a bid to sow discord between our countries. There were actually fewer of them than there were Germans with German passports here. Today there are not as many Germans here, of course, but still **there are very few** Chinese in our country, and I would even like to see more of them here because of their cuisine. But we will have to think quite seriously about this imbalance in the long run.

With this imbalance in mind, we, and I, too, proposed the Greater Eurasia concept about seven or eight years ago. At first, our Chinese friends were a little jealous of this concept, but now we are building the Greater Eurasian Partnership together. The Greater Eurasian Partnership implies a system of cooperation, development and security for all of Eurasia, and at some point, perhaps even a system of security or soft security in the areas of food, medicine, response to natural and man-made disasters, and in the transport sector.

But this concept has an even deeper meaning. The Greater Eurasia concept implies that China, the undisputed leader in Eurasia, will be counterbalanced by other rising great powers standing alongside it such as Indonesia, then India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and, finally, Russia. So no one will fear China's hegemony. It was difficult for our Chinese friends to admit at first that this kind of counterbalancing was necessary. But now they understand that it is much better for them to be the first among equals than a hegemony everyone is afraid of. Well, we shall see what will happen in the next 10 to 15 years.

I think that our policy is aimed, on the one hand, at preventing the emergence of any threat from China, and on the other, at strengthening our relationship at all possible levels and making it the backbone of Greater Eurasia. Naturally, this backbone will sooner or later need the third support, India, and then the fourth and the fifth ones, that is, Iran and Arab countries. And then the center of the world will return to where it should be, to a great and peaceful Greater Eurasia. I am very happy and proud that I coined this term.

And all the best to you!