A Realist View from Moscow:
Identity and Threat Perception in the
Writings of Sergei A. Karaganov (2003–2019)

Boris Barkanov

Abstract: Using narrative analysis and self-categorization theory (SCT), I explore how and why views about Russian–American relations and threat perceptions regarding the United States changed between 2003–2019 in the public work of Sergei A. Karaganov, an influential Russian realist intellectual whose perspective is in many ways representative of Russian elite foreign policy thinking. Karaganov's views about Europe and Ukraine are also discussed. His views are categorized using a revised cultures of anarchy framework. I find that developments between 2005–2008, and especially Ukraine's NATO fast tracking, corresponded to a gradual shift from a rivalry between partners (2003–2004) to a rivalry between adversaries (2005–2008), as well as growing perceptions of threat. Initially, the Obama Reset again produced a partner-rivalry (2008–2010/11) and diminished threat perceptions. But limitations and difficulties that became evident later (2010/11–2014) resulted in an adversary-rivalry relationship and greater threat perception once again. Surprisingly, Karaganov's view of the relationship and threat perceptions did not change immediately after the Maidan revolution. But threat perception increased significantly after autumn 2014, when an enemy conception emerged following American/European economic sanctions. The year 2014 also saw the beginning of a major strategic reorientation for Russia, which Karaganov reconceived as a Eurasian power focused on Asia. This conception persisted despite the election of Donald Trump as president. SCT hypotheses are developed to explain these developments. The contribution is threefold: documenting the evolution of the narrative of an important Russian foreign policy analyst; elaborating the cultures of anarchy framework;

and advancing SCT theoretically through its application to an understudied identity group, Russian realists.

This article explores how threat perception changed during the period 2003–2019 in the public work of Sergei A. Karaganov, an establishment intellectual in Russia who is a realist. It focuses on how and why his views of the Russian–American relationship and threat perceptions relative to the United States have shifted. His changing views about Europe and Ukraine are also discussed. The narrative is recovered inductively from Karaganov's public texts using a narrative analysis interpretive methodology that focuses on plots, subplots, sequence, and consequence (Chatterje-Doody 2014; Bacon 2015). Threat perception and Karaganov's view of the Russian–American relationship or role conception are inferred from his narrative and are analyzed using a modified cultures of anarchy framework (enmity, rivalry, friendship; Wendt 1994, 1999). I elaborate the latter by distinguishing between two types of rivals: partners and adversaries. The contribution to the literatures on Russian foreign policy and international relations is three-fold: 1) to document the narrative of an influential foreign policy commentator/participant whose thinking is in many ways representative of Russian elite foreign policy thinking; 2) to further elaborate the cultures of anarchy framework; and 3) to advance research on identity theoretically and conceptually by inductively developing hypotheses about the relationship between foreign policy stimuli, in-group/out-group schema, identity categorization, and threat-perception for realists in Russia, a group that has not been studied through this lens.

This work differs from previous studies of Russian state narratives as expressed in official policy documents and speeches (Bacon 2012, 2015; Chatterje-Doody 2014; Smith 2016). Choosing one individual's public writing reflects the interest in "bringing the people back in" which has been justified by the centrality of individuals and their intersubjective discourses in the process of social construction (Rousseau 2006: 8–9).

Karaganov was chosen because he is an influential commentator (Kuchins and Zevelev 2012: 189) and occasional