

Mini Simulation

Negotiating Ukrainian Security in 1993

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Overview

After the [Soviet Union](#) collapsed, Ukraine inherited the third-largest nuclear arsenal in the world. Fearing the risks of nuclear proliferation, the United States and Russia alike sought to negotiate Ukraine's [disarmament](#). However, Ukraine wanted guarantees against future Russian aggression in exchange. How should the United States have managed dismantling Ukraine's Nuclear arsenal while safeguarding against renewed conflict in Europe?

Students will understand that the breakup of the nuclear-armed Soviet Union posed new challenges to European Security and efforts to limit nuclear proliferation.

Students will understand that Ukraine's security concerns about Russia began almost as soon as the country exited the Soviet Union.

The Situation

In December 1991, Ukraine declared its independence. This paved the way for the [Soviet Union](#)'s complete dissolution weeks later. As the fifteen countries that had once comprised the Soviet Union plunged into economic and political turmoil, a new challenge emerged. The Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal, comprising some 35,000 weapons, was now spread across four countries: Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine. Ukraine, in particular, found itself in possession of the world's third-largest stock of nuclear weapons.

Russia, the most powerful of the former Soviet states, advocated for the other countries to transfer their arsenals to it. Belarus and Kazakhstan quickly did so, but Ukraine hesitated. Kyiv wanted to emerge on equal footing with Moscow in the post-Soviet world. Ukraine also feared for its security. Russia had dominated Ukraine for centuries. Ukraine had already faced pressure to cede the Crimean Peninsula back to Russia, and debates over how to divide the former Soviet Black Sea Fleet were growing contentious. Facing the looming threat of reconquest, Kyiv was reluctant to give up its strongest deterrent without another way of guaranteeing its safety.

The idea of adding a new nuclear state, especially such an unstable one, sparked intense concern in the West. For the moment, Ukraine could not actually use its nuclear weapons—Russia still held the launch codes needed to operate them. Still, analysts in Washington feared that Ukraine could gain control in a matter of months. In the meantime, Ukraine's weapons were vulnerable to being stolen or sold. Even if they remained in Ukraine, a mishandled weapon or accidental launch could have disastrous consequences. The United States therefore determined that disarming Ukraine was a national security priority.

U.S. policymakers sought to convince Ukraine that its best chance for security lay in building closer ties with the West. However, the United States emphasized that Ukraine could not do so as long as it possessed nuclear weapons. Facing the choice between [disarmament](#) and total isolation, Ukrainian leaders signaled their willingness to disarm in exchange for a Russian promise to respect Ukrainian [sovereignty](#). They also sought a strong guarantee of Ukrainian security from the United States. Preventing nuclear proliferation was Washington's top priority. However, the security guarantee Kyiv wanted was risky. It could deter Russian aggression, but if it failed and Russia attacked anyway, the United States could find itself in a conflict with a fellow nuclear power. Improving security in Europe now could increase the risk of conflict later. Wary of these risks, many in the Clinton

administration questioned whether assurances—which stopped short of a binding guarantee—could be offered instead. In the event of a Russian attack the United States would have the flexibility to respond with [sanctions](#) or military aid instead of armed force. Some policymakers worried that offering mere assurances—rather than the guarantee Ukraine wanted—would be insufficient to convince the country to disarm. Meanwhile, negotiations between Ukraine and Russia dragged on. The threat grew that Ukraine would just walk away and keep its nuclear weapons. The Clinton administration had to decide whether and how it would help secure Ukraine’s nuclear disarmament.

Decision Point

Set in September 1993

The latest round of [bilateral](#) negotiations between Russia and Ukraine over the future of Ukraine’s nuclear arsenal has broken down. Facing the prospect of further delay or, worse yet, a complete failure of the talks, President Clinton has called a meeting of his National Security Council (NSC) to discuss whether and how the United States should enter negotiations. NSC members need to consider how to convince Ukraine to relinquish its arsenal, how to address Ukrainian security concerns, and what level of commitment the United States is willing to provide to limit nuclear proliferation and bolster stability in post-[Cold War](#) Europe.

NSC members should consider the following policy options:

- *Lead trilateral talks among the United States, Russia, and Ukraine, and offer a binding guarantee to defend Ukraine in the event of future Russian aggression in exchange for Ukraine’s [disarmament](#).* This option provides Ukraine with the strongest confidence in its security but could commit the United States to the possibility of entering a military conflict with Russia in the future.
- *Lead trilateral talks among the United States, Russia, and Ukraine and negotiate with Russia to jointly offer an assurance to respect Ukraine’s [sovereignty](#) and address potential aggression.* This represents a weaker commitment to Ukraine’s defense than a guarantee. It could allow the United States to avoid an obligation to enter a conflict with nuclear-armed Russia. However, it also does less to ensure Ukraine’s long-term security. Such an assurance could be insufficient to convince Ukraine to disarm.
- *Endorse continued bilateral negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, but remain uninvolved.* This option avoids any commitment to upholding Ukraine’s security but also bears the highest risk. If negotiations fail, Ukraine could remain a nuclear weapons state, endangering stability and security in Europe.

["Possible Consequences of Alternative Approaches to the Implementation of Ukrai... National Security Archive Telephone Conversation between President Clinton and Ukrainian President Leonid... National Security Archive "Ukraine Finds Nuclear Arms Brings a Measure of Respect" \(January 7, 1993\) New York Times](#)