

Mini Simulation

Trusting Security Assurances

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Overview

Ukraine gave up its nuclear arsenal in exchange for security assurances. Two decades later, those assurances failed to prevent a Russian invasion. The failure to assure Ukrainian [sovereignty](#) raises questions for other would-be nuclear powers about the reliability of outside security assurances. Moreover, it opens the door for non-nuclearized states to pursue a nuclear program to provide the best guarantee of their future security. How should a hypothetical country under threat decide its nuclear future?

Students will understand that countries act in numerous ways to convince other governments not to develop nuclear weapons of their own. These efforts include offering security assurances to ease their fears of an outside attack.

Students will understand that if countries feel they are unable to rely on outside assurances for their security, they could be driven to develop nuclear weapons to increase their own protection.

The Situation

Nuclear weapons can offer considerable security to countries that possess them; attacking a country that has nuclear weapons bears a far greater risk than attacking a country that lacks them. Yet most countries agree that more nuclear weapons in the world means a higher likelihood that one will eventually be used, with catastrophic consequences. Given this risk, governments worldwide have worked to limit the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Diplomatic efforts, such as the [Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty \(NPT\)](#), have secured agreements from member countries that possess nuclear weapons to reduce their stockpiles. The NPT also ensures that non-nuclearized states do not develop weapons capabilities in the first place.

The NPT has strengthened global [norms](#) against developing nuclear weapons. Yet the agreement is voluntary. Countries that fear for their security or wish to exert greater geopolitical power can exit the NPT at their will. Nonmember countries can then pursue a nuclear weapons program, as North Korea did in 2003. Doing so can result in international isolation or coercive action, such as [sanctions](#) or even covert attacks. However, some countries could feel so threatened that they are willing to risk those consequences. In these cases, major powers can ease a country's fears by offering security assurances—commitments that they will not attack the country or will help defend it from attack. However, security assurances are typically contingent on denuclearization and the complete rejection of nuclear ambitions. For instance, the United States (a nuclear-armed country) maintains a so-called [nuclear umbrella](#) by providing its nonnuclear allies with binding defense guarantees. These security assurances reduce the incentive for nonnuclear U.S. allies to develop their own deterrents.

The combination of convincing countries they are safe without nuclear weapons and threatening penalties for those that pursue them has prompted numerous governments to abandon their nuclear programs. However, recent events could change that calculus. As harsh as the penalties are, no country has faced direct military action over its nuclear development. Moreover, several leaders have abandoned their nuclear programs only to come under threat later. Facing sanctions and international isolation, Iraq dismantled its nuclear program in the 1990s. A decade later, Saddam Hussein faced a U.S.-led invasion in 2003. Similarly, Libya agreed to disarm in 2003 and faced a [civil war](#) and a North Atlantic Treaty Organization–led intervention less than a decade later. Most recently in the news, Ukraine relinquished its sizable nuclear arsenal in 1994 in exchange for security assurances from the United States,

Russia, and the United Kingdom. Those assurances were ineffective: in 2014 and 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. The United States has provided significant aid to Ukraine with weapons and funds. However, U.S. support has stopped short of direct military intervention, in part over reluctance to enter conflict with a nuclear-armed Russia. The invasion underscores that nuclear-armed countries can act with a degree of impunity. Moreover, it shows that security assurances for nonnuclear countries are only as strong as their provider's willingness and ability to follow through. Countries looking on could therefore conclude that they cannot trust outside assurances for their security. Nonnuclear countries might calculate that the penalties for developing a nuclear program are less costly than the risk of invasion.

Decision Point

Schirmland occupies a geopolitically insecure position. Raketburg, the country's nearest neighbor and a nuclear-armed power, has intermittently made threats against it. In the past, Schirmlanders explored developing a nuclear program to deter potential aggression. However, the country disavowed any nuclear ambitions in exchange for assurances that the United States, a close military partner, would defend Schirmland if it were attacked. Recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has driven Schirmlanders to reconsider how strongly they can rely on U.S. assurances to safeguard their country. The country is currently revisiting whether developing a nuclear deterrent could provide a stronger guarantee. Schirmland's president has called a cabinet meeting to decide whether the country should continue to trust in U.S. security assurances or chart a new course and develop nuclear weapons. As they deliberate, cabinet members will need to weigh the risks to their security against the consequences of breaking their existing nuclear commitments.

Cabinet members should consider the following options:

- *Develop nuclear weapons.* This would provide Schirmland with a strong deterrent against aggression and eliminate the need to rely on outside assurances for security. However, developing a nuclear weapons program could result in widespread international condemnation and isolation. It would further take time, potentially years, during which other countries could aggressively [sanction](#) Schirmland—or even take military action—to derail its nuclear development.
- *Start creating a nuclear weapon but stop short of finishing it.* Being able to produce a nuclear weapon within mere months could grant some of the benefits of a nuclear deterrent without risking the worst consequences. However, even if Schirmland avoids violating nuclear commitments, skirting the line of the NPT could be seen as turning away from reliance on U.S. security cooperation. This could sour relations with the United States, making their security assurances even less reliable, while leaving Schirmland exposed to an attack.
- *Continue to rely on U.S. security assurances as a deterrent.* This option avoids all consequences of nuclear development but does little to strengthen Schirmland's confidence in its security.

[South Africa: Why Countries Acquire and Abandon Nuclear Bombs](#) CFR Education

[Ukraine Gave up a Giant Nuclear Arsenal 30 Years Ago. Today There Are Regrets](#) New York Times

[In South Korea, Ukraine War Revives the Nuclear Question](#) New York Times