

Empty Promises: The Denuclearization of Ukraine and its Effects Twenty Years Later

Paisley Ann Meyer

University of Illinois Urbana Champaign

Abstract

The annexation of Crimea and continued Russian aggression into Ukraine's eastern border directly defied the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. Under this agreement, Ukraine was given sovereignty and territorial assurances, and in return, it gave back its nuclear arsenal to Russia. This paper explores why this decision was made and explains how this action benefited Ukraine. It explores Ukrainian relations with Russia and Western democracies in the early 1990s, and it shows how Ukraine was economically dependent on the continued support of these states. The purpose of this paper is to counter the argument some Ukrainian politicians and numerous journalists began making following Crimea's annexation, stating that Ukraine would have been better off relying on nuclear deterrence than international agreements.

Empty Promises: The Denuclearization of Ukraine and its Effects Twenty Years Later

Paisley Ann Meyer

In 1991, Ukraine became independent from Russia and inherited thousands of nuclear warheads. In 1994, Ukraine signed the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty (NPT) as a non-nuclear state, and by 1996, it had returned the last of those warheads to Russia, upholding its commitments to the NPT (Nuclear weapons timeline, 2017). The state with the third largest stockpile of nuclear weapons at the time had been convinced to completely disarm in just five years. Ukraine giving up strategically advantageous technology like nuclear weapons suggests that, in some circumstances, the benefits of becoming a non-nuclear state must outweigh the security benefits of keeping its stockpile. In this paper, I explore why Ukraine decided to become a nuclear-free state and how these “benefits” now relate to Ukraine’s territorial integrity. Because Russian actions have violated the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, many Ukrainians now believe the decision to disarm ultimately proved counterproductive to maintaining Ukrainian security; however, the belief that nuclear deterrence instead of disarmament would have protected the state from military incursion is misguided and flawed.

A Brief Historical Overview of Early Nuclear Treaties relating to Ukraine

Ukrainian relations with Russia have been complicated since Ukraine declared its independence. When the Soviet Union collapsed, 15% of its nuclear arsenal was in the hands of the newly-formed Ukrainian state, enabling it to become a nuclear power if Ukraine created new launch codes. Despite arguments that the weapons were necessary to protect Ukrainian sovereignty, the government was persuaded to return them to Russia (Umland, 2016). Ironically, Ukraine continued to find itself subjected to Russia’s dominating presence. Russia’s belief that they are responsible for protecting Russian speakers outside their border conflicts with Ukraine’s assertions that as a sovereign state it alone holds a responsibility for people within its borders. These conflicting policies meant the Budapest Memorandum was ultimately too little support for this ideological issue (Turbokav, 2001).

Relations between Russia and Ukraine had to be clarified by extending some of the former treaties between the USSR and the US to cover issues that involved former bloc states. The Budapest Memorandum came from negotiations with Ukraine for the Lisbon Protocol to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) in 1992. START was an arms reduction treaty originally signed in 1991 by the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR). After the USSR collapsed, an addition to this treaty (the Lisbon Protocol) was needed to extend this treaty to the new states of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine. The Lisbon Protocol called for them to give up the nuclear weapons in their possession “in the shortest possible time and shall begin immediately to take all necessary action to this end” (Protocol to the Treaty, 1992). These nuclear weapons were to be returned to Russia, the successor state of the USSR. By signing the Lisbon Protocol, these states were also agreeing to become non-nuclear states under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

However, Ukraine hesitated to ratify the treaty without reassurances that it would maintain its national sovereignty. According to Turbokav (2001), Senior Fellow and expert on Russia, Ukraine, and European relations at Uppsala Universit t in Sweden, the concept of independence was almost brand new to Ukrainians when the Soviet Union fell, but the issue of sovereignty quickly became the focal point. The 1994 Budapest Memorandum was created to address these concerns and provided Ukraine with the assurance it needed to sign onto the Lisbon Protocol. The memorandum gave Ukraine guarantees from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia that they would uphold the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of

Ukraine, only using weapons against the state in matters of self-defense. With these promises, Ukraine followed through with becoming a denuclearized state and signed as a non-nuclear weapons state to the NPT (Memorandum on Security Assurances, 1994).

Adding Ukraine as a party to the NPT was a victory for diplomacy and international cooperation. Created in 1968 and extended indefinitely in 1995, the NPT separates the world into nuclear weapon and non-nuclear weapons states, making the development and procurement of nuclear weapons outside of the US, the UK, France, China, and Russia illegal under international law (Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, 1968). Despite the illegality, several states have refused to sign the treaty and developed their nuclear weapons programs. Given the fact that some states have openly defied international law to obtain the perceived security benefits of nuclear deterrence, Ukraine's willingness to disarm despite tensions with its nuclear neighbor, Russia, was no small diplomatic victory.

The original premise of the NPT was to stop both the horizontal and vertical proliferation of nuclear weapons, ending the development of new nuclear weapons programs and limiting the growth of existing stockpiles. The nuclear weapon counts from 1968 to the present day give credibility that the treaty has reduced the global nuclear threat. In 1968, there were just over 39,000 nuclear weapons in the world between six states. As of 2010, this number was estimated to be around 18,000 across eight states. Since the signing of the treaty, nuclear weapon counts have been halved, but the total number of nuclear weapons in 1968 was far from the peak. Weapons counts peaked at 70,000 in 1986, but by the time Ukraine became independent from Russia, the total number of nuclear weapons was starting to finally see significant declines (between 1991-1994 total counts dropped from 55,000 to 41,000). The Cold War had ended, and the nuclear era seemed to be ending (Norris & Kristensen, 2010).

Security Strategies: Nuclear Deterrence or Nuclear Free

Applying Game Theory to Nuclear Disarmament

As the Stag Hunt model (see Jervis 1978 for full explanation of the model) demonstrates, the preferred course of action for Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine was for them to cooperate and to sign on to the NPT, rather than independently developing their own nuclear programs. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the last thing the world wanted was for these states to keep their nuclear stockpiles. Nuclear weapons and disarmament are a classic example of a security dilemma and a breakdown of the Stag Hunt concept. In an ideal world, all states would sign the NPT and work towards being nuclear weapons free. A nuclear-free world (the stag) would provide all states with the benefit of not needing to expand their nuclear stockpiles in competition with other states. However, diversion (the rabbits) from this objective by some states leads to nuclear arms races (the US and USSR during the Cold War). Those who chose to cooperate and work towards a nuclear-free world are left with the commitment to never develop an entire class of weapons (Jervis, 1978). Partial cooperation is not enough for the Stag Hunt to succeed, and if deviations from the NPT's original objective of reducing nuclear stockpiles persists, non-nuclear and nuclear weapons states will continue to operate under the threat of nuclear war.

Empty Promises: The Denuclearization of Ukraine and its Effects Twenty Years Later

Paisley Ann Meyer

Stag Hunt (Jervis, 1978)

Actor A:

Agree to NPT and Disarmament

Reject NPT and Disarmament

Actor B:	Agree to NPT and Disarmament	Stag: Nuclear-Free World (Gradual/ Eventual Disarmament)	Rabbits: Nuclear Arms Race (Vertical Proliferation)
	Reject NPT and Disarmament	Rabbits: Nuclear Arms Race (Vertical Proliferation)	Nothing: Development of New Nuclear Weapons States (Horizontal Proliferation)

Ukrainian Economy and European Dependence

At the time of its independence, Ukraine was one of the poorest Soviet bloc countries, with a GDP per capita of \$1307 and a shrinking economy according to Sutela (2012), a senior associate for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Until 1996, the country was facing negative growth rates of around ten to twenty-two percent, causing hyperinflation and halving the total GDP by 1994. It was not until 2001 that Ukraine's economy began to show improvement. This growth could be attributed to rising global metal prices, a major export for Ukraine, and continued cheap oil prices from Russia (Sutela, 2012).

Unlike some former Soviet bloc countries, Ukraine did not cut ties with Russia, and Ukraine's debt grew tremendously as it continued to rely on Russian gas and oil. This dependency was used by Russia as political leverage against the state. Needing to separate itself, Ukraine began "walking the line" between Western democracies and Russia, creating relations with both camps was viewed politically in Ukraine's national interests (Turbokav, 2001). Ukraine's dependence on Russian exports and its desire to integrate with Western European countries—noting that that European Union was created in 1993—meant that the inherited nuclear arsenal could not be kept if interstate relations were to be created.

The more realistic reality is that if Ukraine had chosen to keep its nuclear weapons, it would have likely faced economic sanctioning from rather than expanded trade with, the West. If it had refused to give the nuclear weapons back to Russia, it likely would have faced serious economic sanctions, facing consequences like those faced by India, Pakistan, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the Republic of Korea (ROK), and others. In the case of the ROK, economic sanctioning was successful in stopping further nuclear weapons developments. For India and Pakistan, sanctions were lifted respectively for the following

reasons: becoming a major economic power and aiding in the fight against terrorist organizations. The DPRK has been operating under extremely harsh sanctions as it continues to develop its nuclear program, a choice that has led to a crippled economy that relies heavily on domestic production (Ichimasa, 2017). The notable exception to this pattern was that Israel obtained nuclear weapons in 1967, making it the sixth nuclear power and the first to not be recognized by the NPT. However, it did not face economic retaliation. This can most aptly attribute to two things: the NPT was still being acceded by many countries in this year, and Israel pledge to the US not to use the weapons as a diplomatic tool. With the acceptance of the US and their very early development, economic retaliation from major world powers never occurred, though many Middle Eastern countries today use Israel's nuclear arsenal as reasoning for their own economic restrictions on Israel and her citizens (Johnson, 2010). By the 1990s, the NPT had been in place for decades, and no major power at the time was willing to turn a blind eye to Ukraine's keeping a third of the former Soviet nuclear arsenal. The pressure from the international community to sign the NPT and return those weapons would have been too strong.

As seen in the analysis of its economic health in the early nineties, Ukraine was not in a position of power economically. Had economic sanctions been applied to Ukraine, the state likely would have fallen to the same pressures the ROK did in the 1970s. Ukraine did not have any political or economic leverage that would encourage sanctions to be lifted. It also was also too economically dependent on Russia for energy; cutting off economic ties with Russia would mean cutting off 90% of its oil and gas usage (Sutela, 2012). For a state that was aspiring to one day become further integrated with the West and seeking an end to the hyperinflation and economic declines of the early 90s, maintaining the nuclear arsenal would have been a politically and economically suicidal move.

Effectiveness of Deterrence

Ukrainian disarmament is an instance used to illustrate that international cooperation towards nuclear disarmament is possible, but deterrence rather than disarmament continues to be the strategy held by nuclear weapons states. Some would argue that the practice of nuclear deterrence has saved the world from WWIII, but Meyer and Sauer (2018) counter that this is not provable and can be more justifiably attributed to global economic interdependence and the memory of the horrors brought on by WWI and WWII. In 2014, some Ukrainian politicians began to call into question Ukraine's decision to disarm. These politicians and numerous new sources questioned the empty promises in the Budapest Memorandum rather than utilizing the fear of nuclear retaliation to deter future Russian incursion. One politician and his supporters believe that had Ukraine kept its nuclear weapons, Russia would have never been able to take Crimea or promote rebels in the Donbas region (Zurcher, 2014). What is largely ignored in this argument is that deterrence does not guarantee the protection and stability it implies, and to some it appears to promote destabilizing and suicidal philosophies like Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), which could harm the conflicting states in conflict and the rest of the world (Zurcher, 2014). An escalation of nuclear-level tensions can result in the destruction of the world, and deterrence only works for so long. When deterrence between states fail, it will be the people who suffer the most.

To further discredit the idea that maintaining a nuclear arsenal would have guaranteed Ukrainian security, Meyer and Sauer's (2018) point to conflicts like the Yom Kippur War, the Gulf War, and Pakistan's Kargil incursion as instances when having nuclear weapons technology

Empty Promises: The Denuclearization of Ukraine and its Effects Twenty Years Later

Paisley Ann Meyer

did not automatically protect states from conflict. In each of these instances, states involved had nuclear weapons, but deterrence did not protect them from conventional warfare. This calls into question whether deterrence is an entirely effective means of protecting a country.

One area where nuclear deterrence has shown little benefit is in the digital realm, with Russia being an international threat regarding Information Warfare. Research conducted by the Center for Research Analyses explained that Ukraine represents one of the first major areas where Russia used strategic cyber and information warfare to undermine state's authority and communications abilities within both the political and military sphere. Beginning with smaller cyber-attacks through phishing, distributed denial of service (DDoS), or malware, Russia was able to disrupt Ukrainian telecommunication, and the state's critical infrastructure has been further undermined by cyber-attacks to the power grids (Connell and Vogler, 2017). These attacks have allowed for Russia to create confusion and disorder within Ukraine without the use of conventional military operations. These kinds of attacks also make it difficult for deterrence to effectively protect Ukraine if it had maintained the nuclear weapons arsenal. Even major nuclear weapons states recognized by the NPT, like the United States, have been subject to Information Warfare tactics. The controversy over the extent Russia's disinformation campaign aided US President Donald Trump in winning the 2016 election is still a major point of concern. Having used Ukraine as a testing ground, Russia has been able to utilize its experiences to target major, more powerful international players like the US (Polyakova and Boyer, 2018). If these methods of disruption were able to potentially undermine a nuclear power like the US, then deterrence plays little to no role in protecting a state in the cyber sphere. With cyber and information warfare being the primary aspects of Russia's strategy in creating divisions in Ukraine, a nuclear arsenal would not have been an effective safeguard.

Ukraine's Decision with 20+ Years of Hindsight

The illusion that the Budapest Memorandum would protect Ukraine broke in twenty years. Russia showed it had no intention of respecting any of those promises as it annexed Crimea in 2014. By breaking this treaty and taking aggressive actions that directly violate the memorandum, Russia has hurt the likelihood of diplomatic nuclear disarmament being used successfully in the future. Non-nuclear states are not, however, ready to back down. The world is moving away from an era of accepting nuclear weapons as a form of security for a few states. Ukraine would not have been more secure if it kept its nuclear weapons, but looking at past treaties and the timing, one can understand that disarming was the more attractive option. As a new state, Ukraine needed international support to combat Russian influence, and the NPT is an attractive treaty in theory. However, Russian actions against Ukraine will continue to destroy the complacency states' have historically held towards the status quo on nuclear weapons, and this event will be used by other states to call into question why they should not only start a nuclear weapons program, but to ignore diplomatic solutions that may result in empty promises. The crucial take away from the violations to the Budapest Memorandum should not be that states would be better off with nuclear weapons to deter aggression, but that states should be held accountable when in violation of international agreements.

References

- Connell, M., & Vogler, S. (2017, March). Russia's Approach to Cyber Warfare. Retrieved February 24, 2019, from https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/DOP-2016-U-014231-1Rev.pdf
- Ichimasa, S. (2017). Nuclear Nonproliferation and Economic Sanctions: Can Non-Military Sanctions Stop Nuclear Proliferation? *NIDS Journal of Defense and Security*, 19(2), 59-79. Retrieved February 23, 2019, from http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/kiyo/pdf/2017/bulletin_e2017_4.pdf
- Jervis, R. (1978). Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma. *World Politics*, 30(2), 167-214. Retrieved December 7, 2018, from [http://www.sfu.ca/~kawasaki/Jervis Cooperation.pdf](http://www.sfu.ca/~kawasaki/Jervis%20Cooperation.pdf)
- Johnson, T. (2010). The Four Nuclear Outlier States. Retrieved April 23, 2019, from <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/four-nuclear-outlier-states>
- Memorandum on Security Assurances in connection with Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. (1994). Retrieved 2018, from <http://www.pircenter.org/media/content/files/12/13943175580.pdf>
- Meyer, P., & Sauer, T. (2018). The Nuclear Ban Treaty: A Sign of Global Impatience. *Survival*, 60(2), 61-72. doi:10.1080/00396338.2018.1448574
- Norris, R. S., & Kristensen, H. M. (2010). Global nuclear weapons inventories, 1945–2010. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 66(4), 77-83. doi:10.2968/066004008
- Nuclear weapons timeline. (2017). Retrieved December, 2018, from <http://www.icanw.org/the-facts/the-nuclear-age/>
- Polyakova, A., & Boyer, S. (2018, March). THE FUTURE OF POLITICAL WARFARE: RUSSIA, THE WEST, AND THE COMING AGE OF GLOBAL DIGITAL COMPETITION. Retrieved February 24, 2019, from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/fp_20180316_future_political_warfare.pdf
- Protocol to the Treaty between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Reduction and Limitations of Strategic Offensive Arms. (1992). Retrieved 2018, from <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/27389.pdf>
- Sutela, P. (2012, March 09). The Underachiever: Ukraine's Economy Since 1991. Retrieved from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/03/09/underachiever-ukraine-s-economy-since-1991-pub-47451>
- Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) – UNODA. (1968). Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/text>
- Turbokav, I. (2001). Apart from Russia or a part of Russia: A Sad Saga of Ukrainian-Russian Relations. *The Review of International Affairs*, 1(1), 70-84. Retrieved December 7, 2018, from <http://content.ebscohost.com/ContentServer.asp?T=P&P=AN&K=6875067&S=R&D=asn&EbscoContent=dGJyMNLe80SeprQ4wtvhOLCmr1CeqK9Ss6m4SLGWxWXS&ContentCustomer=dGJyMPGut1C3rLZNuePfgex44Dt6fIA>
- Umland, A. (2016). The Ukraine Example: Nuclear Disarmament Doesn't Pay. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 178(4), 45-49. doi:10.2139/ssrn.2790318
- Zurcher, A. (2014, March 20). Ukraine's nuclear regret? Retrieved December 7, 2018, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-echochambers-26676051>