

Non-Proliferation and State Succession

The Demise of the USSR and the Nuclear Aftermath in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine

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Introduction

Decisions by states to relinquish nuclear arsenals are exceedingly rare. Besides South Africa, which dismantled its indigenously developed nuclear weapons program in the early 1990s and joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the only countries that had nuclear weapons on their territory and decided to give them up are Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. Despite attracting some scholarly attention early on, the history of post-Soviet proliferation and disarmament remains regrettably understudied.¹ Part of the reason for the lack of attention is that these cases of nuclear proliferation through state collapse and inheritance do not fit comfortably in datasets alongside traditional nuclear aspirants whose programs moved from deliberation to exploration to pursuit to acquisition. The post-Soviet nuclear predicament reversed the usual sequence: first came the Soviet weapons, then the newly independent states, and then their decision-making on what to do with their inheritance.

1. In the mid-to-late 1990s, several accounts of Ukraine's relinquishment of its nuclear missiles appeared, including Mark Kramer, "Neorealism, Nuclear Proliferation, and East-Central European Strategies," *International Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (September 1998), pp. 383–453, reprinted in expanded form in Ethan B. Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno, eds., *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 385–464; William Potter, "The Politics of Nuclear Renunciation: The Cases of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine," Occasional Paper No. 22, Henry L. Stimson Center, Washington, DC, April 1995; Mitchell Reiss, *Bridled Ambition: Why Countries Constrain Their Nuclear Capabilities* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995); and Steven Miller, "The Former Soviet Union," in Mitchell Reiss and Robert Litwak, eds., *Nuclear Proliferation after the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1994), ch. 4. Since 2010, additional accounts of Ukraine's nuclear disarmament have appeared, including Steven Pifer, *The Trilateral Process: The United States, Ukraine, Russia and Nuclear Weapons* (Washington, DC: Brookings Arms Control Series, May 2011); and Yuri Kostenko, *Ukraine's Nuclear Disarmament: A History* (Cambridge, MA: Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University, 2020).

Another challenge is that Belarusian, Kazakhstani, and Ukrainian nuclear inheritances stemmed from the same cause—the collapse of the USSR—and ended in the same outcome: their eventual accession to the NPT and denuclearization. Thus, it is tempting to treat them as a single case of post-Soviet nuclear disarmament. Such an approach would obscure important differences in the three states’ nuclear capabilities and debates and in the dynamics of their nuclear renunciation. Whereas Belarus and Ukraine started on a path to independent statehood with a declared intention to become nuclear-free states, Kazakhstan announced no such anti-nuclear preferences. Belarus and—after a short hesitation—Kazakhstan quickly agreed to join the NPT, but in Ukraine some important figures sharply contested Russia’s claimed monopoly on the Soviet nuclear inheritance and insisted that Ukraine was also a legitimate “owner” of nuclear weapons on its soil and should take a tough line in negotiations with the United States and Russia. Thus, in each of the three cases, a different set of motivations and inducements contributed to bringing about nuclear renunciation.

In all three cases, the unequivocal position of the United States, the dominant global power, was that no new nuclear-weapons states should emerge out of the Soviet collapse. Such a position also coincided with Russia’s interests, and the two nuclear powers acted in concert. One might assume that the pressure of the world’s most powerful states would be sufficient to induce the post-Soviet nuclear inheritors to disarm. There is no denying that U.S. and Russian policies mattered. Yet a singular focus on great-power coercion obscures the fact that Belarus did not need to be coerced at all and that Ukraine’s claims of “ownership” did not amount to an attempt to retain a nuclear deterrent. The singular focus also underestimates the role of the broader international context—the nuclear *Zeitgeist*, so to speak—in which post-Soviet disarmament transpired: the end of the Cold War, unprecedented successes in strategic arms control, and the existence of a robust nuclear non-proliferation regime and non-nuclear norms.

This article reconstructs the story of the nuclear disarmament of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, drawing on extensive archival research and oral history interviews in the former Soviet Union as well as in the United States. In doing so, it aims to provide a nuanced analysis of this important episode in the legacy of the Cold War, while highlighting similarities and points of divergence among the three states that renounced nuclear weapons. The article distills the factors that contributed to the pattern and outcome of post-Soviet nuclear renunciation: emerging national security narratives, domestic political structures, and U.S. leadership. The article also shows that, among the reasons for the successful disarmament of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and

Ukraine, the international nonproliferation regime and the normative framing for legitimate nuclear possession it provided made a salient—and thus far underappreciated—contribution to the disarmament outcome.

Preventing Soviet Nuclear Collapse

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 presented the world with an unprecedented nuclear proliferation challenge. Some 29,000 nuclear weapons, including 10,000 warheads deployed on more than 1,000 strategic delivery vehicles, were scattered across the vast Eurasian landmass under the sovereign power of four newly independent states: Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine.² Although Russia inherited more than two thirds of the Soviet nuclear arsenal, the cache of nuclear armaments in the non-Russian republics was immense. Ukraine inherited the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal, comprising 176 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), including 130 SS-19s and 46 SS-24s, armed with 1,240 nuclear warheads; 44 long-range strategic aircraft armed with about 600 AS-15 nuclear-tipped air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs); and some 2,600 tactical nuclear weapons.³ Kazakhstan inherited the world's fourth-largest nuclear capability, including 104 SS-18 ICBMs armed with a total of 1,040 warheads; and 40 strategic aircraft armed with 370 AS-15 ALCMs.⁴ Belarus inherited 81 SS-25 land-mobile ICBMs, each armed with a single warhead, and more than 100 tactical nuclear weapons.⁵

The three newly independent states also inherited research reactors, stockpiles of highly enriched uranium (HEU), uranium mines, facilities for heavy water production and nuclear fuel fabrication, and such critical elements of

2. Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Global Nuclear Weapons Inventories, 1945–2013," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 69, No. 5 (2013), pp. 75–81. Before August 1991, tactical nuclear weapons were deployed in every Soviet republic, with the possible exception of Kyrgyzstan.

3. Potter, "The Politics of Nuclear Renunciation"; Pifer, *The Trilateral Process*; and Zaloga, "Armed Forces in Ukraine," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (March 1992), pp. 131–136. The precise number of ALCMs on Ukraine's territory is difficult to establish and varies, depending on the account, from 588 to more than 1,000. The term "tactical" in reference to smaller yield, shorter-range or battlefield nuclear weapons has largely been discredited insofar as the use of even a small nuclear weapon would have strategic consequences. For convenience' sake, however, I will keep the term "tactical" that was used by political actors at the time.

4. Potter, "The Politics of Nuclear Renunciation," p. 5.

5. Steven J. Zaloga, "Strategic Forces of the SNG," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, February 1992, p. 84; Vasili Semashko, "Yadernoe oruzhie v Belarusi: Sekretov net?"; and "Interview with the First Minister of Defense of the Republic of Belarus Pavel Kozlovskii," *Delovaya gazeta* (Minsk), 1 January 2006.

the Soviet nuclear weapons complex as the nuclear test range in Semipalatinsk (now Semei), Kazakhstan, and the Pivdenne design bureau and ICBM factory that produced SS-18s and SS-24s in Dnipropetrovsk (now Dnipro), Ukraine.⁶ Even though the non-Russian republics lacked key elements of a full-fledged nuclear weapons program, the inheritance of Kazakhstan, and especially Ukraine, amounted to a generous starter package for any aspiring proliferator.

This unprecedented instance of nuclear proliferation through a shift of political authority over the territory on which nuclear weapons were deployed had two aspects. One was the danger of “loose nukes” and a “brain drain”; that is, the risk posed by potentially lax controls over nuclear weapons, materials, installations, and personnel across the vast Soviet territory, now gripped by political instability and economic hardship, which was conducive to illicit nuclear-related trade with nuclear aspirants in the Middle East and elsewhere.⁷

This nuclear security challenge emerged as a major focus of U.S. policy and international concern in the fall of 1991 as the Soviet Union was disintegrating. Concern was by no means limited to the non-Russian republics and in many ways was even stronger about Russia. The U.S. administration of President George H. W. Bush responded quickly by announcing, on 27 September 1991, a set of unilateral arms control measures that became known as the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs), which provided, among other things, for the immediate withdrawal of most tactical nuclear weapons from their deployment sites in Europe to central storage facilities and the destruction of many of them.⁸ A week later, on 5 October, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev announced similar reciprocal measures.⁹ According to a former Soviet strategic forces commander, the Soviet military had begun secretly withdrawing tactical nuclear weapons from Eastern Europe, the Baltics, Central Asia,

6. The Pivdenne design bureau and Pivdenmash missile factory are also known by their Russian names: Yuzhoe and Yuzhmash.

7. On the problems posed by former Soviet nuclear weapons scientists, see Mark Kramer, “Demilitarizing Russia’s Weapons Scientists: The Challenge,” in Henry Sikolski and Thomas Riisager, eds., *Beyond Nunn-Lugar: Curbing the Next Wave of Strategic Weapons Proliferation from Russia* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2002), pp. 115–199.

8. See Susan J. Koch, *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991–1992* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, September 2012).

9. “Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between President G. Bush and President M. Gorbachev,” 5 October 1991, in National Security Archive (NSArchive), collections on U.S.-Soviet relations, 1991. The full text of Gorbachev’s response to PNIs was published in *Izvestiya* two days later. “Otvét Prezidenta SSSR na initsiativu Dzhordzha Busha po yadernomu oruzhiyu Zayavlenie M. Gorbacheva po sovetскому televideniyu,” *Izvestiya* (Moscow), 7 October 1991, pp. 1–2. A second round of PNIs was adopted by President Bush and Russian President Boris Yeltsin in January 1992.

and the Caucasus in the late 1980s, transferring the weapons to central storage facilities in Russia.¹⁰ The PNIs provided overt political support, couched in bilateral U.S.-Soviet arms control terms, to continue doing so in the face of possible pushback by the breakaway republics.

In addition, a bipartisan initiative sponsored by Senators Sam Nunn (D-GA) and Richard Lugar (R-IN) prompted the U.S. Congress in November 1991 to adopt the Soviet Nuclear Threat Reduction Act, later renamed the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Act, which appropriated \$400 million annually from the U.S. defense budget to provide technical assistance to the former Soviet Union for nuclear disarmament, security, and military conversion.¹¹ In an address to the U.S. Congress in November 1991, Senator Nunn stated bluntly: “We . . . have the potential for the greatest proliferation in history of weapons from the world’s largest military arsenal to Third World countries, including those ruled by the Saddam Husseins of the future.”¹² President Bush signed the CTR Act into law on 12 December 1991.

A related concern was the hundreds of tons of HEU that would be released from the dismantled Soviet tactical and strategic warheads under the pending U.S.-Soviet arms control efforts. The economically pressed Soviet and then Russian government had neither sufficient storage facilities nor the capacity to use such large quantities of weapons-grade uranium. In the fall of 1991, Thomas Neff, a physicist of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) proposed that the Soviet HEU could be blended down and sold to the United States for use as civilian nuclear fuel, allowing the United States to ensure that the disarmament process moved along and that Russia would benefit by obtaining much-needed hard currency for its economy.¹³ By 1993, Neff’s idea had become a U.S.-Russian program known as “Megatons to Megawatts,” which ran until 2013. Under the program, the

10. Viktor Esin, interview, 21 December 2012. General Esin served as Chief of the Operations Directorate of the General Staff of the Strategic Missile Forces of the Soviet Union, and then of the Russian Federation, from 1989 to 1994.

11. Nunn’s and Lugar’s concern about the nuclear proliferation risks of events in the USSR was shaped to a significant degree by a report produced by Harvard University’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. See Ashton B. Carter et al., *Soviet Nuclear Fission: Control of the Nuclear Arsenal in a Disintegrating Soviet Union*, CSIA Studies in International Security (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Kennedy School, November 1991).

12. “Statement by Senator Nunn, ‘Soviet Defense Conversion and Demilitarization,’” in U.S. Congress, 102nd Cong. 1st Sess., *Congressional Record* 137, No. 167 (13 November 1991), S16486, p. 7.

13. Thomas L. Neff, “A Grand Uranium Bargain,” *The New York Times*, 24 October 1991, p. A4; and Anne-Marie Corley, “A Farewell to Arms,” *MIT Technology Review*, 19 August 2014, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/529861/a-farewell-to-arms/>.

United States purchased roughly 500 metric tons of Soviet HEU for some \$17 billion.¹⁴

There was another aspect of the nuclear issue that was more elusive but potentially more consequential for the global nuclear order: the emergence of new nuclear states from among the post-Soviet successors. The collapse of a nuclear superpower, a recognized nuclear-weapons state (NWS) under the NPT, had no historical precedent.¹⁵ Although the Russian Federation was internationally recognized in late 1991 as the legal successor state to the Soviet Union, the other former Soviet republics apart from the Baltic states also considered themselves legal successors of the USSR. Several of the former republics promptly asserted sovereign jurisdiction and control over military assets left on their territory by the defunct Soviet Union.

In Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, the numerous military assets and units included those associated with the Soviet strategic arms complex. The status of these nuclear armaments and units was ambiguous: Whose weapons were located on the territory of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine? Who would and should control them? Which country should succeed the Soviet Union with regard to bilateral arms control treaties such as the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START)? What legitimate claims could these new states make regarding their nuclear inheritance?

The United States and its allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) quickly recognized this proliferation challenge and emphasized to the former republics that diplomatic recognition of their independence came with conditions that included a pledge to disarm and join the NPT as non-nuclear-weapons states (NNWSs).¹⁶ In an address at Princeton University on 12 December 1991, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker spelled out the Bush administration's policy stance:

[W]e do not want to see new nuclear weapons states emerge as a result of the transformation of the Soviet Union. Of course, we want to see the START Treaty ratified and implemented. But we also want to see Soviet nuclear weapons remain under safe, responsible, and reliable control with a single unified authority.

14. "Agreement between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Russian Federation Concerning the Disposition of Highly Enriched Uranium Extracted from Nuclear Weapons," 18 February 1993, https://fissilematerials.org/library/1993/02/agreement_between_the_governme.html/.

15. The NPT recognizes five nuclear weapon states: the United States, USSR/Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China.

16. James A. Baker III, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989–1992* (New York: G. P. Putman & Sons, 1995), p. 560; and Thomas Graham, Jr., telephone interview, 18 March 2016.

The precise nature of that authority is for Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and any common entity to determine. A single authority could, of course, be based on collective decision-making on the use of nuclear weapons. We are, however, opposed to the proliferation of any additional independent command authority or control over nuclear weapons. For those republics who seek complete independence, we expect them to adhere to the Non-Proliferation Treaty as non-nuclear weapons states, to agree to full-scope IAEA safeguards, and to implement effective export controls on nuclear material and related technologies.¹⁷

This U.S. position, however, was not based on traditional understandings of security competition between states. True, the strategic weapons in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine had been targeted against the United States. Yet, in December 1991, no one in Washington seriously feared that Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine or the nuclear weapons located on their territory would pose a security threat to the U.S. homeland.¹⁸ On the contrary, the republics left no doubt, as Secretary Baker noted, that they had an “intense desire to satisfy the United States.”¹⁹ U.S. National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft and Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney initially even welcomed the diffusion of nuclear weapons outside Russia as a way to break up the old Soviet strategic arms complex and to bolster the fragile independence of these states from Moscow.²⁰

Regional security concerns had a mixed impact on U.S. policymaking. The U.S. State Department hoped to avert a nuclear rivalry between Moscow and its neighbors.²¹ Given the concomitant disintegration processes and potential for ethnic violence and civil war, Secretary Baker worried that the Soviet collapse could turn into a “Yugoslavia with nukes.”²² A more optimistic view was taken by the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), which deemed it highly unlikely that a war would break out between Russia and Ukraine, even if the non-Russian republics were to establish

17. U.S. Department of State, Office of the Assistant Secretary/Spokesman, “America and the Collapse of the Soviet Empire: What Has to Be Done,” Address by Secretary of State James A. Baker III at Princeton University, 12 December 1991.

18. Pifer, *The Trilateral Process*, p. 10.

19. Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, p. 583.

20. Brent Scowcroft, interview, 15 November 1966, in *The Collapse of the Soviet Union: The Oral History of Independent Ukraine—1988–1991*, available online at <https://oralhistory.org.ua/>. Many thanks to the anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

21. Pifer, *The Trilateral Process*, p. 10.

22. Keith Bradsher, “Noting Soviet Eclipse, Baker Sees Arms Risks,” *The New York Times*, 9 December 1991, p. A3.

independent control over the nuclear weapons on their territory.²³ Although the potential for regional conflict remained, it soon became clear that the dissolution of the USSR would follow a pattern different from that of Yugoslavia.

Even so, the focus on nuclear nonproliferation, championed by the State Department and supported by decades of U.S. efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons around the world, came to dominate the U.S. government's interactions with the newly independent states. The primary reason for this focus was the specter of the emergence of new nuclear-weapon states and the dire consequences such a development could have for the international nonproliferation regime. One of the NPT's five recognized nuclear possessors had ceased to exist, and now a host of newly independent states might seek at least a share of the Soviet nuclear legacy. Any such claims, or the refusal of Soviet nuclear successor-states to join the regime, were seen as endangering the global nuclear order.²⁴ Moreover, post-Soviet proliferation came at a crucial time for the NPT itself. The 1995 NPT Review Conference was to determine the possible indefinite extension of the treaty. The United States and its allies were eager to secure the indefinite and unconditional extension of the treaty.²⁵

In Moscow, the response to Soviet nuclear disintegration was mixed. Military commanders, led by the Soviet Union's final minister of defense, Marshal Evgenii Shaposhnikov, wanted to preserve a common military-strategic space in the former Soviet Union, which would not necessitate the removal of nuclear weapons from the non-Russian territories as long as the weapons remained under Moscow's control.²⁶ Some Russian observers argued that the republics should be allowed to keep the weapons as long as they contributed to the cost of maintaining and dismantling them independently.²⁷ Russian President Boris Yeltsin, however, stated that the way to deal with the

23. Greg Thielmann, "The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project," interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 4 November 2004, p. 89, <https://adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Thielmann,%20Greg.toc.pdf>.

24. U.S. Department of State, "Report of the NPT Depository Meeting of September 13, 1991," 24 September 1991, in U.S. Department of State, Freedom of Information Act Virtual Reading Room (VRR), Case No. M-2008-02837, available online at <https://foia.state.gov/>; and U.S. Department of State, "NPT Depository Meeting: Draft Agenda and Talking Points," 19 February 1992, in VRR, Case No. M-2008-02837.

25. Thomas Graham, Jr., *Disarmament Sketches: Three Decades of Arms Control and International Law* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2002), pp. 258–259.

26. Evgenii Shaposhnikov, *Vybor: Zapiski glavnokomanduyushchego* (Moscow: Independent Publishing House "PIK," 1993), pp. 80–81.

27. Vladimir Kuznechevskiy, "Ukrainian, Kazakh Nuclear Arms Stance Scored. 'You Want Nuclear Weapons? Take Them. But Pay for Them Yourself,'" *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 15 November 1991, in U.S. Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), Soviet Union, FBIS-SOV-91-225, 15 November 1991, p. 17.

former Soviet nuclear arsenal was to have all nuclear weapons transferred from the non-Russian republics to Russia, a position that echoed that of the United States.²⁸ In the wake of the Soviet collapse, Russian officials zealously guarded their country's status as the sole nuclear successor to the USSR and denied that other former Soviet republics had any legitimate claims to the Soviet nuclear legacy. Russian leaders and the U.S. government cooperated closely in pushing for the nuclear disarmament of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine.

By December 1991, there was some reason to believe that the non-Russian successors would comply with Western expectations to disarm and join the NPT as non-nuclear weapon states. In no small part because of the nuclear sensitivities caused by the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear power accident that gravely affected Ukraine and Belarus, the parliaments of the two republics had adopted declarations of sovereignty in 1990 that affirmed their intention to become nuclear-free states.²⁹ Ukraine further confirmed its non-nuclear intentions in an aptly named "Statement on the Non-Nuclear Status of Ukraine," passed by its parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, in October 1991, that was ostensibly aimed at securing international diplomatic recognition of Ukraine's independent statehood.³⁰ Even though Kazakhstan did not make a comparable formal declaration, its leader, Nursultan Nazarbaev, gave personal assurances to Secretary Baker during the latter's December 1991 visit to Almaty that Kazakhstan would join the NPT as soon as it was admitted to the United Nations (UN).³¹

That same month, the former Soviet republics made arrangements to preserve the integrity of the nuclear command and control system under the newly created Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). On 21 December in Almaty, the member-states of the CIS (i.e., all the former Soviet republics except for the Baltic states, which never joined the CIS, and Georgia, which did not join until 1993) signed the so-called Almaty Declaration pledging to maintain "joint command of military-strategic forces and single control over

28. "Yeltsin Offers to Transfer Nukes from the Ukraine to Russia," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem), 29 August 1991, p. 4.

29. See Verkhovna Rada of the Ukrainian SSR, "Deklaratsiia pro derzhavnyi suverenitet Ukrainy," 55-XII, 16 July 1990, <http://zakon1.rada.gov.ua/cgi-bin/laws/main.cgi?nreg=55-12>; and Vyarkhouny Savet of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, "Deklaratsiia o gosudarstvennom suverenitete Respubliki Belarus," No. 193-XII, 27 July 1990, <https://pravo.by/>.

30. Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, "Zayava pro Bez'yadernyi status Ukrainy," 1697-XII, 24 October 1991, <http://zakon2.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1697-12>.

31. "Memorandum of Conversation between President Bush and President Yeltsin at Camp David," 1 February 1992, p. 8, in NSArchive. Ukraine and Belarus have formally been members of the UN since its founding in 1945.

nuclear weapons.”³² Furthermore, the four republics with nuclear weapons on their territory—Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine—signed a separate Agreement on Joint Measures on Nuclear Weapons, whereby the non-Russian republics committed to transfer all tactical weapons to Russia for their dismantlement “under joint supervision” before 1 July 1992, and Belarus and Ukraine—but not Kazakhstan—committed to join the NPT as non-weapon states.³³

These CIS arrangements for the preservation of the integrity of the old Soviet system of nuclear command-and-control were both a technical necessity and an acceptable temporary political solution. Launch authority rested with Russian President Yeltsin and the commander-in-chief of the CIS Joint Armed Forces, Marshal Shaposhnikov.³⁴ The Soviet strategic arms complex, and especially the Strategic Missile Forces that commanded all ICBMs, were developed and deployed as a single system, with chains of command and lengthy underground cables supporting communications and operational control leading directly to Moscow. The system could not simply have been divided up along the new state borders, and such a step, even if feasible, would have been extremely controversial. One political consideration in the transfer of nuclear control to new sovereign states was that it would have constituted *de facto* nuclear proliferation. Another aspect was that preserving the unified command-and-control of strategic nuclear forces bolstered the likelihood of keeping the military-strategic space of the former Soviet domain intact.

On military and defense matters, the former Soviet republics (aside from the Baltic states) fell into two categories: Ukraine, Moldova, Azerbaijan, and Georgia sought to create national armed forces from remnants of the Soviet military units deployed on their territory. By contrast, Russia, Belarus, Armenia, and Kazakhstan, together with the rest of the Central Asian republics, favored the preservation of a single army and a single military-strategic space.³⁵ Although the preservation of a common military force became increasingly untenable after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, there remained a possibility of a Russian-led military alliance with a Russian-operated nuclear deterrent and military bases in the former Soviet domains.

32. “Alma-Atinskaya deklaratsiya,” 21 December 1991, <http://cis.minsk.by/>. Alma-Ata was renamed Almaty in 1993. For simplicity and clarity, I use Almaty throughout the text.

33. Article 5.1, “Soglashenie o sovместnykh merakh v otnoshenii yadernogo oruzhiya” 21 December 1991, available online at <http://cis.minsk.by/>.

34. James A. Baker III, “Notes from One-on-One Meeting with Boris Yeltsin, St. Catherine’s Hall, Moscow,” 16 December 1991, in Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, James A. Baker III Papers, Box (B.) 110, Folder (F) 10.

35. Shaposhnikov, *Vybor*, p. 116.

For Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, one aspect in deciding the fate of their nuclear inheritance would inevitably be tied to determining their policy toward this potential alliance.

The Succession vs. Proliferation Dilemma

Despite the initial CIS cooperative arrangements and pledges, it soon became clear that the road to disarmament and NPT accession for the Soviet successor states would not be straightforward. At the crux of the post-Soviet nuclear predicament lay a tension between claims by the non-Russian republics of legal succession to the USSR and the imperative of nuclear nonproliferation.

That Russia should succeed the Soviet Union as the permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear weapon state under the NPT went uncontested. On 13 January 1992, the Russian Foreign Ministry simply circulated a diplomatic note to foreign governments requesting that “the Russian Federation be considered as the Party in all international treaties in force in place of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.”³⁶ At the meeting of the NPT depositary states on 27 February 1992 in Vienna, the issue of depositary succession topped the agenda. The United States acknowledged the receipt of the Russian note and, concurring, simply expressed hope that “the previous close relationship between the US, UK, and USSR depositaries in coordinating NPT activities, including preparation for NPT Review Conferences, will continue with the Russian Federation.”³⁷

Reconciling state succession with proliferation was more challenging in relation to U.S.-Soviet arms control treaties, however. Nowhere was this tension more evident than in the process of ratification and implementation of START. Signed by the United States and the USSR on 31 July 1991 in Moscow after nine years of laborious negotiations, START provided for reductions of up to 40 percent in strategic nuclear armaments on both sides. The sudden dissolution of the USSR left the treaty unratified and left unanswered questions about how to bring START into force and who would carry out the Soviet Union’s obligations under the treaty.

In January 1992, the Bush administration dispatched an interagency team led by U.S. Undersecretary of State for International Security Reginald Bartholomew to Moscow, Kyiv, Minsk, and Almaty to discuss the

36. Cited in George Bunn and John B. Rhineland, “The Arms Control Obligations of the Former Soviet Union,” *Virginia Journal of International Law*, Vol. 33, No. 323 (1992/1993), pp. 324–325.

37. U.S. Department of State, “NPT Depositary Meeting: Draft Agenda and Talking Points.”

implementation of the Soviet Union's arms control obligations, including bringing START into force. The treaty had already been submitted to the U.S. Congress in November 1991 as a U.S.-Soviet document. Bartholomew communicated to the non-Russian states the U.S. preference to preserve the original bilateral nature of START, which meant that only the Russian parliament should ratify the treaty, and the three non-Russian states would then conclude separate implementation agreements with Russia.³⁸ Yet Bartholomew urged that the same "legal approach" need not be used for all treaties; for instance, the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty should be seen as multilateral, with treaty-limited forces divided among the new states.³⁹

This U.S. position on START encountered pushback in all three non-Russian capitals. Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine wanted to assert their newly found sovereign prerogatives and, to differing degrees, were sensitive to their unequal treatment compared to Russia in the U.S. approach. The three newly independent states insisted that, as successor states to the Soviet Union, they should become full-fledged parties to START on a par with Russia and that their parliaments should have the chance to debate and ratify the treaty. According to Ambassador Thomas Graham, Jr., who at the time was general counsel for the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) and part of Bartholomew's delegation, the Ukrainian side was particularly insistent.⁴⁰ Yet even the U.S. delegation's interlocutors in Belarus, who proved extremely cooperative in every other regard on nuclear issues, objected to being excluded from START ratification.⁴¹

Not surprisingly, Russia opposed the multilateralization of START. At a meeting of the foreign ministers of Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus on 11 April 1992, aimed at settling the START succession issue, Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev insisted that the treaty concerned Russia alone: "If Ukraine is a nuclear-free state and in the near future becomes a member of the [NPT] as a nuclear-free state, then it is absolutely unclear how it can be a

38. "State Department Talking Point for January 15–21 Bartholomew Mission to Moscow, Kiev, Almaty and Minsk," 10 January 1992, in NSArchive.

39. *Ibid.* This was the approach adopted in regard to the CFE, with the bulk of difficult adjustments to accommodate the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union negotiated within the NATO-led North Atlantic Cooperation Council. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

40. Graham, *Disarmament Sketches*, p. 134.

41. "Minutes of the Meetings with US Undersecretary of State R. Bartholomew," 20 January 1992, in National Archive of the Republic of Belarus, Fond (F) 968, Opis' (Op.) 1, Delo (D.) 4152, List (L.) 71.

side in the treaty on strategic offensive arms, which just deals with the nuclear arsenal.”⁴²

This was not strictly correct. START limited only delivery vehicles and launchers, such as missiles and bombers, and the number of nuclear warheads was estimated based on the number each side declared as attributed to these systems. (Devising a robust and reliable verification regime was easier for missiles and bombers than for nuclear warheads.) At the same time, all of the systems limited by START were nuclear-armed systems possessed by nuclear superpowers. Thus, satisfying Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus in their demands to join a major strategic arms control treaty as successors of the USSR risked legitimizing their inheritance of nuclear armaments as Soviet successors, thus casting them into a dangerously ambiguous territory in relation to the NPT.

In this sense, the issue of Soviet arms control obligations was trapped in a conundrum. Because the purpose of the NPT was to prevent the emergence of new nuclear-weapon states, the non-Russian republics could not be regarded as non-weapon states under the treaty. At the same time, START, concluded between nuclear possessors, could not enter into force without their participation and cooperation for the simple reason that the missiles and bombers in question were on their sovereign territory. Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine could simply deny access to U.S. inspection teams and prevent or complicate efforts to remove the weapons if the United States and Russia attempted to bypass them. In 1990, already contemplating the possible legal consequences of the Soviet collapse for arms control treaties, the U.S. government had concluded that whatever rules of legal succession applied, one of the principal concerns would be “the effect of the disintegration of the Soviet Union upon START’s verification regime.”⁴³ Hence, the demands of Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan to become parties to START had to be given credence.

Realizing this, the U.S. Department of State drafted a protocol to START in April 1992 to multilateralize the treaty. On 23 May 1992, the foreign ministers of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Ukraine, and the United States met in Lisbon, Portugal, to sign the annex, which became known as the Lisbon Protocol. Article I of the protocol states that Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and

42. “‘Discrepancy’ in Ukraine’s Claim Eyed,” *Radio Mayak*, 12 April 1992, in FBIS, FBIS-SOV-92-071.

43. “Memorandum of Acting Assistant General Counsel of the U.S. Department of Defense Geoffrey R. Greiveldinger for Deputy Assistant Secretaries of Defense ‘Possible Legal Consequences for a START Agreement of a Break-Up of the Soviet Union in Two or More States,’” 29 October 1990, in George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, B. CF01060, F. 008.

Ukraine, “as successor states of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in connection with the Treaty,” will assume the Soviet obligations under the treaty.⁴⁴ At the same time, Article V of the protocol obligates Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine to adhere to the NPT “as non-nuclear states Parties in the shortest possible time” in accordance with their constitutional practices.⁴⁵ Lest the obligations under the protocol be interpreted as reductions, not complete disarmament, the United States insisted that the heads of state of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine attach letters committing their states to eliminate *all* nuclear armaments, warheads, and launchers from their territories within the seven years provided for START implementation.⁴⁶

The Lisbon Protocol and the attached letters were an ingenious solution to a difficult international political and legal problem. For the non-Russian republics, the significance of the protocol was that it elevated their international standing and duly acknowledged their sovereignty by making them parties to an important arms control treaty. At the same time, the Lisbon Protocol became the first international treaty-based legal instrument to record the commitment of the non-Russian Soviet successors to join the NPT as non-weapons states, subject only to unilateral declarations of intent or ambiguous CIS agreements, with Kazakhstan abstaining even from those. The Lisbon Protocol elevated these commitments by making them an integral part of a high-profile strategic arms control treaty.

Still, the Lisbon Protocol did not manage to resolve the underlying questions: to whom the nuclear weapons stationed in the non-Russian successor states belonged pending their dismantlement and what claims these states, before joining the NPT, could make regarding the armaments. Divergences in interpretation of these questions soon became apparent. In a separate statement attached to the protocol, Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev stressed that Russia considered Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan “non-nuclear weapon states at the moment of the signing of the Protocol.”⁴⁷ A Ukrainian note denied Russia any special status in the matter of Soviet succession and claimed that Ukraine, as one of the legal successors of the Soviet Union, had a

44. “Protocol to the Treaty between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms,” Lisbon, 23 May 1992, available online at <http://www.state.gov/>.

45. *Ibid.*

46. The texts of all three letters are reprinted in *Arms Control Today*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (June 1992), pp. 35–36.

47. “Written Statement by the Russian Side at the Signing of the Protocol to the START Treaty on 23 May 1992 in Lisbon,” in *ibid.*, p. 36.

legitimate right to possess nuclear weapons, which it nevertheless voluntarily renounced.⁴⁸

The multilateralization of START meant that the treaty with its attending annexes would have to be deliberated and ratified by the legislatures of the five signatory states. However, the paths of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine toward ratification of the START-Lisbon package and accession to the NPT turned out to be very different.

By the end of 1992, Kazakhstan was the only non-Russian Soviet successor to have ratified START (doing so in June 1992), but it had not yet voted on the NPT. Belarus was slated to consider both treaties in early February 1993. No complications with the ratification process were expected. On 1 October 1992 the U.S. Senate voted 93 to 6 to give its consent for ratification of START together with the Lisbon Protocol. The resolution of ratification specified that the letters of Belarussian, Kazakhstani, and Ukrainian heads of state, submitted at the signing of the Lisbon Protocol, "being obligations legally binding only in the event of ratification of the START Treaty, are of the same force and effect as the provisions of the Treaty," as were the obligations outlined in Article V of the protocol that the three non-Russian successors should join the NPT as non-nuclear weapon states.⁴⁹ A month later, on 4 November, the Russian legislature voted to ratify START, specifically conditioning the exchange of ratification instruments upon the accession of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine to the NPT.⁵⁰ These caveats were meant to foreclose any ambiguities stemming from admitting the non-Russian successors to START and to ensure that the presidential letters had equal legal force with the letter of the treaty.

Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk submitted the START-Lisbon package to the Rada in early November 1992. It soon became apparent, however, that the Rada had no intention of rubber-stamping what the executive had signed in Portugal. The Rada postponed consideration of the Lisbon package indefinitely, instead of handing it over for further study to standing

48. The content of the note was described by the chief of the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry's disarmament department, Valeriy Kuchinskyi, "Za bezpeku bez konfrontacii," *Polityka i chas*, No. 9–10 (October 1992), p. 38.

49. "Resolution of Ratification of the Treaty between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms 102-02," U.S. Congress, 1 October 1992, available online at <https://www.congress.gov/>.

50. Verkhovnyi Sovet of the Russian Federation, "Postanovleniie: O ratifikatsii dogovora mezhdru Soyuzom Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik i Soedinennymi Shtatami Ameriki o sokrashchenii i organichenii strategichestikh nastupatel'nykh vooruzhenii," N 3798-1, 4 November 1992, available online at <https://docs.cntd.ru/>.

parliamentary committees and to the special working group created to study START and NPT accession.

The next few sections recount the nuclear debates in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine and their divergent paths toward NPT accession. The three states pursued different responses to the challenge of reconciling their nuclear inheritances with their domestic political and security demands, their relations with Russia, and the expectations of the United States and the international community that they should disarm and join the NPT. Even though these demands became the focus of U.S. and Russian foreign policies toward the non-Russian nuclear successors, the accession debates were also framed by the existing international normative structures; namely, the NPT and the strategic arms control architecture.

Belarus: Small Country, Big Burden

By size and population, no country suffered more than Belarus (then the Belorussian SSR) from the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in April 1986, situated in Ukraine some ten kilometers from the Belorussian border. The prevailing weather conditions and wind sent most of the radioactive cloud released from the reactor's melted core northwest into Belorussia, covering about 70 percent and contaminating about 20 percent of its territory and adversely affecting some 20 percent of its population.⁵¹ The deficient response by the republican and central authorities to the disaster added to the general popular dissatisfaction with the dysfunction of the Soviet system. Many members of the Belorussian anti-Communist opposition, elected to the parliament in the first open, multiparty election in March 1990, were activists who endeavored to raise international awareness and funds to help the victims of Chernobyl.⁵²

In July 1990, this new parliament joined the “parade of sovereignties” sweeping through the Soviet Union and adopted its own declaration of state sovereignty, which, echoing Ukraine's declaration passed a week earlier, stated that Belarus aimed “to make its territory a nuclear-free zone and the republic—a neutral state.”⁵³ Because Belarus and Ukraine had been members

51. David R. Marples, *Belarus: From Soviet Rule to Nuclear Catastrophe* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 42; and Tatiana Tiurina, “Neutrality, Maybe,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (February 1994), pp. 37–38.

52. Marples, *Belarus*, pp. 69–70.

53. Vyarkhouny Savet of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, “Deklaratsiya o gosudarstvennom suverenitete Respubliki Belarus.”

of the UN since 1945, they even made a bid to join the NPT as non-nuclear weapon states in the run-up to the NPT Review Conference in Geneva in August 1990.⁵⁴ The bid was rejected by Moscow, which argued that joining the NPT would have required the two former Soviet republics to accept International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards.⁵⁵ Belarus and Ukraine did, however, participate in the 1990 NPT Review Conference as observers.⁵⁶

Aspirations of neutrality and denuclearization by what was still a constitutive part of a nuclear superpower had significant political and strategic repercussions. In a statement delivered to the 45th session of the UN General Assembly on 23 October 1990, Belarusian Foreign Minister Petr Kravchanka reaffirmed Belarus's desire to become a "nuclear-free zone" and join the NPT.⁵⁷ He even proposed the creation of a "nuclear-free belt" in central Europe.⁵⁸

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 left Belarusian nuclear preferences unchanged, including a proposal for a nuclear-free zone "from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea that would include Belarus, the three Baltic states, and Ukraine."⁵⁹ In January 1992, addressing the meeting of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in Prague, Kravchanka even called for expanding the zone's geography to "include the Scandinavian countries in Northern Europe, [and] embrace the Baltic area as well as the states of Central and Eastern Europe."⁶⁰

The importance of Chernobyl in spurring this anti-nuclear entrepreneurship is beyond doubt. Belarus's calls for a nuclear-free zone were accompanied by repeated pleas for international assistance in tackling the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster. Kravchanka was deeply committed to the issue. A young Communist party official and a historian by training who became

54. Potter claims the Belorussian SSR made two earlier attempts to join the NPT, one in the early 1980s and another in 1988, both dismissed by Moscow. See Potter, "The Politics of Nuclear Renunciation," p. 13.

55. Roland Timerbaev, *Rossiya i yadernoe neraspraneniie, 1945–1968* (Moscow: Nauka, 1999), p. 326. Timerbaev, the Soviet negotiator of the NPT, cites the same reason for why the Ukrainian and Belorussian Soviet Republics, officially members of the UN, were not allowed to join the NPT when it opened for signature in 1968.

56. Potter, "The Politics of Nuclear Renunciation," p. 13.

57. "Statement by Pyotr Kravchanka, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Byelorussian SSR, Provisional Verbatim Record of the 32nd Meeting, 45th Session of the UN General Assembly, A/45/PV.32," 23 October 1990, pp. 31–35, available online at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/>.

58. *Ibid.*

59. "Statement by Pyotr Kravchanka, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus. Provisional Verbatim Record of the 11th Meeting, 46th Session of the UN General Assembly. A/46/PV.11," 26 September 1991, p. 68, available online at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/>.

60. Quoted in Jan Zaprudnik, *Belarus: At the Crossroads of History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1993), pp. 205–206.

foreign minister in July 1990, he worked intensively to raise the profile of the Chernobyl issue in international arenas and to attract international assistance to deal with its consequences.⁶¹

This mission enjoyed the broad support of the Belarusian public and its leaders, including the speaker of the Belarusian parliament, Stanislau Shushkevich.⁶² A nuclear scientist by training, Shushkevich was head of the Department of Nuclear Physics at Belarusian State University at the time of the Chernobyl accident, and he entered politics through Chernobyl activism. Shushkevich considered Chernobyl, along with World War II and the Soviet war in Afghanistan, as historic traumas that continued to haunt Belarusian society, and he believed that retention of nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory “would simply prolong the process of recovery from these syndromes.”⁶³

Like their counterparts in Ukraine and Kazakhstan, Belarusian leaders were mindful of their ambiguous nuclear predicament in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Some were also eager to affirm their country’s fledgling sovereignty. In January 1992, Deputy Foreign Minister Uladzimir Syan’ko told Bartholomew that Belarus, as a country that had “suffered most from nuclear materials,” was strongly committed to maintaining joint CIS control over nuclear weapons, “until they leave the [Belarusian] territory forever.”⁶⁴ Yet he stressed that Belarus, now a sovereign state, wanted to take part in all decisions concerning nuclear weapons on its territory until they were dismantled.⁶⁵ Belarus thus joined Ukraine and Kazakhstan in their demands to multilateralize START and grasped the significance of being recognized as an equal successor state in respect of the treaty. Kravchanka in his memoirs claims that the signature of the Lisbon Protocol endowed Belarus with *de jure* nuclear status for the eight months until it joined the NPT.⁶⁶

Some Belarusian military leaders, including Defense Minister Pavel Kazlousky, were committed to denuclearization but advocated a more assertive approach and demanded a “sensible, civilized, political deal” from the West in return for the “military-strategic stability” that Belarus’s disarmament would

61. Petr Kravchenko, *Belarus na rasputie, ili pravda o Belovezhskom Soglashenii: Zapiski diplomata i politika* (Moscow: Vremia, 2006), pp. 43, 51.

62. Marples, *Belarus*, p. 156 n. 24; and Zaprudnik, *Belarus*, p. 166.

63. Shushkevich, interview with William Potter, 3 October 1994, recounted in Potter, “The Politics of Nuclear Renunciation,” p. 32.

64. “Minutes of the Meetings with US Undersecretary of State R. Bartholomew,” 20 January 1992, p. 55.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

66. Kravchenko, *Belarus na rasputie*, p. 334.

deliver for Europe and the world.⁶⁷ Kazlousky thought Belarus should wait before declaring neutrality and transferring nuclear weapons to Russia.⁶⁸ Yet this position stemmed not from a desire for an independent nuclear deterrent but from a preference for continuity in maintaining a common strategic-military space with Russia.

Belarus's Soviet experience, in which Russia was the Soviet big brother, had much in common with its experience as an independent state. Political forces that could have upset this continuity lacked sufficient voice and influence. Moderate nationalists of the Belarusian National Front (BNF), who clamored for the country's political independence from Moscow and viewed Russia as a historical oppressor, took only 10 percent of the seats in the Belarusian parliament in March 1990.⁶⁹ The Communists had an overwhelming majority in the parliament and were quite conservative compared to their counterparts in Ukraine and even Russia. One Russian observer called them a "Bolshevik majority" that maintained strict party discipline and stood by many Communist ideological mantras.⁷⁰ This majority drew little distinction between Soviet, Russian, and Belarusian identity. As one parliamentarian, Vasil Dalgalyeu stated, "Russia and [Belarus] are a single body."⁷¹

Furthermore, Belarus, with its position on the western flank of the USSR, which had been an invasion route for the German army offensive in World War II, was one of the most militarized Soviet republics. The sprawling former Soviet military infrastructure located on Belarus's territory laid a heavy financial burden on such a small republic. As the multilateral CIS format was failing, Belarus turned directly to Russia to alleviate this burden. For both economic and political reasons, Belarusian political leaders and the military thus did not attempt to contest the subordination of strategic units on their territory to Russia. Strategic missile divisions in Lida, Mozyr, and Postavy, with 81 SS-25 land-mobile ICBMs, remained under the CIS Joint Strategic Command. All tactical nuclear weapons were removed from Belarus in the spring

67. "New Defense Minister Views Military Policy," *Belarusian Radio One Network*, in FBIS-92-081, 23 April 1992, p. 21.

68. "Kozlovskiy on Status of Troops and Disarmament," *Izvestiya*, in FBIS-USR-92-183, 17 September 1992, p. 37.

69. Marples, *Belarus*, p. 122; George Sanford, "Nation, State and Independence in Belarus," *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1997), p. 237; and Zaprudnik, *Belarus*, p. 149. Because of low voter turnout, some fifteen seats remained unfilled even after several run-off elections. By comparison, in Ukraine, the oppositional forces took a quarter of parliamentary seats.

70. Nikolay Matukovskiy, "Bolshevik Majority in Belorussian Parliament Hampers the Resolution of Many Problems Important for the Republic," *Izvestiya*, in FBIS-USR-92-033, 7 March 1992, p. 27.

71. "Protokol No. 81: Stenogramma sessii Verkhovnoho Soveta Respubliki Belarus," 4 February 1993, in National Archive of the Republic of Belarus (NARB), F. 968, Op. 1, D. 3170, L. 126.

of 1992, with no special deal between Belarus and Russia to give Belarus any benefits in return.

Belarus cited its policy of neutrality when it abstained from the Tashkent Collective Security Treaty signed in May 1992 by most other post-Soviet states. But on 20 July 1992, Belarusian and Russian representatives met to sign a package of some twenty agreements, among them the Treaty on Coordinating Activity in the Military Sphere. The treaty essentially codified a type of military cooperation that obliged the two parties not to permit their territories to be used by third parties for armed aggression and hostile activity against the other.⁷² Within this cooperative framework, the parties codified the transfer of the three strategic missile divisions, with all attendant infrastructure, to Russian jurisdiction and agreed on a two-year schedule for the removal of the ICBMs from Belarus.⁷³

On 4 February 1993, Belarus became the first of the three non-Russian nuclear successors to vote to join the NPT. It made no demands for compensation or security guarantees in exchange for nuclear renunciation before this decision. Indeed, during parliamentary debate on the START-Lisbon package and the NPT, Kravchanka argued that such demands were superfluous and emphasized the meaning of the NPT ratification for Belarus's place in the world:

The ratification of [the NPT] means that Belarus as a non-nuclear state will be in the custody of the international community, the UN, and other distinguished international organizations. Based on this and also considering the great attention that the world is paying to the position of Belarus, and considering also that today Belarus, to my deepest conviction, cannot be a nuclear state either theoretically or practically, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Government are submitting for ratification these . . . international treaties. I am convinced that [their ratification] will be a significant step to advance the international standing of our motherland.⁷⁴

Speaker Shushkevich, too, stressed what he saw as the reality of the (nuclear) situation: "We cannot use these weapons on our territory for defense purposes because we do not control them. In a certain sense, all of this

72. "Dogovor o koordinatsii deyatelnosti v voennoi oblasti": Dokumenty po vstreche pravitelstv Respubliki Belarus i Rossiiskoi Federatsii 20 Iyulya 1992 goda," 20 July 1992, in NARB, F. 968, Op. 11, D. 14, Ll. 28–34.

73. *Ibid.*

74. "Protokol No. 81," 4 February 1993. All translations from Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian are mine, unless otherwise noted.

is a farce because I authoritatively tell you now: we have nothing to do with these weapons.”⁷⁵

The few voices of opposition that emerged when the Belarusian parliament discussed START and the NPT were from representatives of the old guard who argued that retaining Russian nuclear armaments on Belarusian territory was a way to maintain the vestiges of the old Soviet unity and also make sure that Belarus had great-power protection.⁷⁶ The attention of the nationalists of the BSF, however, was mostly focused on the Belarusian-Russian military cooperation agreements that underwent parliamentary review at the same time. They argued that the agreement violated Belarus’s neutrality and non-allied status.⁷⁷ Despite these objections, the Belarusian-Russian treaties were ratified, as were START and the NPT.

Belarusian instruments of NPT ratification were deposited with the United States during Speaker Shushkevich’s first official visit to Washington in July 1993. At this time, as a reward for Belarus’s contribution to nonproliferation, Shushkevich also received a U.S. commitment for an initial installment of \$59 million in CTR technical assistance funds for disarmament, conversion, and nuclear safety and security projects.⁷⁸

The general nuclear aversion and the social trauma caused by the Chernobyl disaster continued to wield strong influence over Belarusian political life and ensured that Belarus’s stance on denuclearization would endure. Institutional continuity, preference for slow, incremental change, and cooperative arrangements within the post-Soviet space became the hallmarks of Belarus’s transition to independent statehood and ensured that its initial preference to relinquish nuclear weapons was neither challenged nor disrupted. In the words of U.S. Ambassador James Goodby, who led the negotiation of CTR agreements with Belarus and other post-Soviet states, getting Belarus to disarm and join the NPT was like “kicking open an open door.”⁷⁹

The implementation of the disarmament commitment did run into a problem in 1994, once Belarus elected a new leader, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who ran on a platform of strengthening political and military ties with Russia. In July 1995, with only a year left in the withdrawal schedule, President Lukashenka suspended the withdrawal of the eighteen

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.

78. Stanislav Shushkevich, *Moya zhizn, krusheniie i voskresheniie SSSR* (Moscow: Rossiiskaya Politicheskaya Entsiklopediya, 2012), pp. 225–227.

79. James E Goodby, interview, Washington, DC, 21 October 2016.

remaining SS-25 ICBMs. Lukashenka announced the move during a visit to the strategic forces divisions in Lida, claiming that the decision by the former Belarusian leaders to send the weapons to Russia had been a political mistake and that, because the two countries were now drawing closer on all fronts and their full unification was not far off, the SS-25s should stay where they were.⁸⁰

The resumption of the transfer of missiles required Moscow's intervention. On 9 December 1995, Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev arrived in Minsk to settle the issue of strategic missiles and pledge closer Russian-Belarusian defense collaboration.⁸¹ After another delay, the transfer of the SS-25s ultimately resumed and was completed by November 1996.⁸² Belarus's strategic drift toward Moscow and NATO's decision to expand eastward contributed to the souring of Minsk's relations with the United States and the slowing of CTR programs. Of the \$120 million available to Belarus under CTR, only \$77 million had been obligated by the end of 1996.⁸³

Thus, even though Belarus was the first to accede to the NPT, it became the last to rid its territory of all nuclear weapons. Yet, despite the delays in the implementation of the Belarusian disarmament and disagreements over CTR technical assistance, Belarus never harbored independent nuclear ambitions. The issue of nuclear weapons was wrapped in the structure of its relationship with Russia. In Belarus, nuclear weapons were viewed primarily as a burden that Russia helped alleviate and then remove altogether and, briefly, as a lever to achieve a deeper security commitment from Russia.

Kazakhstan: The Art of the Possible

Like Belarus and Ukraine, Kazakhstan had its share of nuclear grievances at the threshold of its independence. Kazakhstan was the site of the USSR's premier nuclear test range at Semipalatinsk, where, on 29 August 1949, the Soviet Union had carried out its first nuclear test. Through 1989, some 456 nuclear tests were conducted there, including 116 above ground, among them

80. Viktor Litovkin, "President Lukashenka Has Suspended the Withdrawal of the Russian Strategic Forces from Belarus," *Izvestiya*, in FBIS, FBIS-SOV-95-129, 6 July 1995, p. 23.

81. "Agreement Signed on Missile Withdrawal," *Interfax*, in FBIS, FBIS-SOV-95-237, 9 December 1995, p. 15.

82. Kravchenko, *Belarus na rasputie*, p. 327.

83. Office of the Coordinator of the U.S. Assistance to the NIS, "U.S. Government Assistance to and Cooperative Activities with the New Independent State of the Former Soviet Union: FY 1996 Annual Report," January 1997, p. 13, available online at <https://www.fpa.org/>.

the first Soviet explosion of a hydrogen bomb in 1955.⁸⁴ By the late 1980s, Semipalatinsk became Kazakhstan's Chernobyl, a site of great ecological and humanitarian degradation and a focus of growing discontent among the local population and the intelligentsia in the capital. These sentiments prompted the creation in 1989 of the anti-nuclear-testing advocacy movement "Nevada-Semipalatinsk," led by the Kazakhstani poet Olzhas Suleimenov.⁸⁵ The movement ultimately succeeded in achieving the closure of the nuclear weapons test site, decreed by the president of Kazakhstan on 29 August 1991, the date of the 42nd anniversary of the first Soviet nuclear test conducted there. The closure was done, however, with Moscow's concurrence.⁸⁶ Yet unlike in Ukraine and Belarus, where Chernobyl activism was associated with anti-establishment, pro-independence movements, Suleimenov and the "Nevada-Semipalatinsk" movement were closely aligned with Kazakhstan's establishment and its leader, Nursultan Nazarbaev.

Hailing from humble beginnings but endowed with great charisma, ambition, and political skill, Nazarbaev rose quickly in the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, guided his republic through the turbulent Soviet collapse and post-Soviet transition, and remained its president for nearly three decades. Nazarbaev deftly managed Kazakhstan's nascent nationalist forces, co-opting some of their messages but preventing them from gaining much political power. Although he sought greater economic autonomy for his republic, he remained committed to Gorbachev's reforms and the preservation of a common political and strategic space within the Soviet Union. Under Nazarbaev's leadership, Kazakhstan only reluctantly followed other Soviet republics along the road to sovereignty and became the last of the lot to declare independence on 16 December 1991.

Hence, it is not surprising that Kazakhstan formulated no stance on nuclear weapons prior to its independence. The shift of power in Moscow from Gorbachev to Yeltsin following the failed coup of August 1991 greatly troubled Nazarbaev. He was staunchly opposed to having the Russian government take control of government agencies, institutions, and strategic-political space previously belonging to an entity that included Kazakhstan. This included the fate of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. In an interview in November 1991,

84. Vladimir Shepel, ed., *Kazakhstan za bez'yadernyi mir: Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Almaty: Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2011), p. 4. Aboveground tests ceased following the signature by the Soviet Union in 1963 of the Limited Test Ban Treaty.

85. Martha Brill Olcott, *The Kazakhs* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1995), p. 257.

86. President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Ukaz 'O zakrytii Semipalatinskogo Ispytatel'nogo Yadernogo Poligona,'" 29 August 1991, in Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (APRK), F. 7, Op. 1, D. 172, Ll. 81–82.

Nazarbaev floated the idea of a dual-key arrangement for the control of Soviet nuclear weapons:

Kazakhstan does not claim the role of a nuclear power on either the global or the regional level. At the same time, it is not going to become a nuclear hostage of the center or Russia if it unilaterally proclaims itself as the successor to the Union in the military field. The solution to the problem lies in establishing dual control over nuclear weapons.⁸⁷

When the Kazakhstani parliament passed its declaration of independence in December 1991, the issue of Kazakhstan's new nuclear predicament received scant attention. Only the preamble avowed Kazakhstan's commitment to the "principles of nuclear nonproliferation."⁸⁸ No doubt, this vague reference was a bow to U.S. concerns about proliferation, which by that time had been made clear to Kazakhstan. Yet Kazakhstan's official position regarding its nuclear inheritance remained ambiguous. Kazakhstan did not join Ukraine and Belarus in their commitment to accede to the NPT as non-nuclear weapon states in the CIS Almaty Agreement on nuclear arms of 21 December 1991.

By December 1991, Nazarbaev had met on several occasions with Secretary Baker, who stressed the U.S. position that no new nuclear-armed states should emerge from the Soviet collapse. The two developed a cordial personal relationship; Baker regarded Nazarbaev as an "extremely intelligent and capable" leader who knew how to get things done.⁸⁹ Baker reported that he had received personal assurances from Nazarbaev that Kazakhstan would denuclearize and join the NPT.⁹⁰ In exchange, Nazarbaev requested U.S. support for Kazakhstan's accession to the UN and the CSCE.⁹¹ Despite the absence of an official Kazakhstani pledge to denuclearize, the United States agreed, granting diplomatic recognition on 25 December 1991, the same date the other Soviet republics were recognized.

Nazarbaev's other pronouncements, however, seemed inconsistent with his message to Baker. At a press conference after his meeting with Baker on 18 December, Nazarbaev stated that Kazakhstan would remain a nuclear weapon

87. "Nazarbayev Comments in TRUD on Arms, Yeltsin," *TASS*, in FBIS-SOV-91-218, 9 November 1991, p. 29.

88. Verkhovnyi Sovet of Kazakhstan, *Konstitutsionnyi zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan o gosudarstvennoi nezavisimosti Respubliki Kazakhstan*, 16 December 1991, available online at <http://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/Z910004400>.

89. Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, p. 538.

90. "Memorandum of Conversation between President Bush and President Yeltsin at Camp David," 1 February 1992, p. 8.

91. *Ibid.*

state as long as Russia did and voiced reservations about Yeltsin's recent proposal that Russia should inherit the USSR's UN Security Council seat.⁹² Instead, he maintained, the seat should go to the CIS, which he hoped would morph into something like a confederation.⁹³ During a meeting in January 1992 with French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas, who inquired whether Kazakhstan intended to join the NPT and in what capacity, Nazarbaev exclaimed, "Of course [we will join the NPT] as a nuclear [state]! The first test of nuclear weapons in Kazakhstan was carried out in 1949. And from that time on, there were nuclear weapons here."⁹⁴

Nazarbaev's mention of the date of testing was a clear reference to the NPT's criterion for a nuclear-weapons state as "one which has manufactured and exploded a nuclear weapon or other nuclear explosive device before 1 January 1967."⁹⁵ Throughout the spring of 1992, Kazakhstan continued to use this reference to advance its claim to be a "temporary nuclear state."

The position was further elaborated in internal policy documents. Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry memorandum of 9 April 1992 and the 4 May report of the Center for Strategic Studies affiliated with the Office of the President was titled "Kazakhstan—The Legal Successor to the NPT as a Nuclear State."⁹⁶ The memorandum argued that because nuclear weapons had been deployed on Kazakhstan's soil long before 1967 and because the republic was a successor state of the USSR, Kazakhstan was a "nuclear weapons state," in accordance with the NPT.⁹⁷ But the memorandum also stressed that Kazakhstan's intention to become a "nuclear-free zone" meant that the country was in effect only a "temporary," if rightful, nuclear state. By maintaining this status for some time, Kazakhstan could "fully secure its interests as a sovereign state [and] an independent subject of international law. In addition, the

92. David Hoffman, "Kazakhstan Keeping Nuclear Arms, Republic's President Tells Baker," *The Washington Post*, 18 December 1991, p. A8.

93. "Nazarbayev on Nuclear Weapons," *Interfax*, in FBIS-SOV-91-243, 18 December 1991, p. 17.

94. "Minutes of the Meeting of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev with Minister of Foreign Affairs of France Roland Dumas," 25 January 1992, in APRK, F. 5-N, Op. 1, D. 217, Ll. 1–19.

95. Article IX, Point 3, "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons," 1968, available online at <http://www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Nuclear/NPTtext.shtml>.

96. "Report of U. Kassenov, Director of the Center for Strategic Studies to Vice President E. Asanbayev 'Kazakhstan—Pravonaslednik SSSR po DNYaO kak yadernaya derzhava,'" 4 May 1992, in APRK, F. 5-N, Op. 1, D. 338.

97. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Memorandum 'Main Provisions of the Foreign Policy Concept,'" 9 April 1992, in APRK, F. 75-N, Op. 1, D. 21, Ll. 154–155; described in Anuar Ayazbekov, "Kazakhstan's Nuclear Decision Making, 1991–92," *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2014), pp. 149–168 (translation from Russian by A. Ayazbekov).

Republic, in the foreseeable future, would be able to keep powerful leversages over global processes, alongside leading powers.”⁹⁸

This claim came at a time when the Bush administration was expending efforts to bring START into force by formalizing succession to the treaty on the former Soviet side. In a phone call with Nazarbaev on 16 April, Secretary Baker emphasized that there was no “third way” out, no basis for a “temporary” nuclear state under the NPT, and that the United States and the West felt strongly about the NPT and the inadmissibility of the emergence of new nuclear states from the Soviet collapse.⁹⁹

Nazarbaev and Ukrainian President Kravchuk were expected in Washington for official visits in May 1992. The Bush administration was anxious to use these occasions to resolve the issue of START and open the way for the Senate’s consent to ratification. In late April, Washington sent a draft protocol on the multilateralization of START to Almaty for Nazarbaev’s consideration. In response, Nazarbaev tried to decouple the issue of START from that of the NPT. He wrote to Baker that the article obligating the non-Russian successors to join the NPT should be removed: “This article does not correspond to the topic of the [START] Treaty because it deals with a completely different international treaty, the NPT. Perhaps we could have two separate protocols for two separate treaties.”¹⁰⁰ Bringing up the NPT in a START protocol, Nazarbaev maintained, could complicate ratification of the latter by the republic’s parliament.¹⁰¹ But bringing up the NPT in the START protocol was exactly the point for the United States: it would ensure that the non-Russian states not only reduced strategic nuclear arms in proportion to START limits but would eliminate them altogether.

In late April 1992, as Nazarbaev prepared for a visit to Washington, he took the issue of nuclear weapons to the press. During a press conference and several interviews with local and Western media, his main message was that Kazakhstan was a temporary nuclear-weapons state, albeit one on the path to disarmament, and that the United States should recognize this status.¹⁰² In a lengthy interview with Russia’s *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, Nazarbaev expounded:

98. *Ibid.*, Ll. 154–155.

99. “James Baker’s Talking Points for Call to Nazarbayev,” 16 April 1992, in Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, James A. Baker III Papers, F. 3, B. 111.

100. “Letter of President N. Nazarbayev to the Secretary J. Baker,” 29 April 1992, in APRK, F. 5-N, Op. 1, D. 289.

101. *Ibid.*

102. “Cable from American Embassy Alma Ata, ‘Kazakhstan and Nazarbayev Go Public on the Nuclear Issue,’” 29 April 1992, in NSArchive.

As far as nuclear weapons are concerned, we signed a document in Alma-Ata according to which Ukraine and Byelarus are nuclear-free, and Russia and Kazakhstan keep their nuclear weapons. Article 9 of the [NPT] declares that a state that manufactured and exploded nuclear weapons . . . before 1967 is a nuclear state. Kazakhstan has tested nuclear weapons since 1949 and has participated to one degree or another in the development and manufacture of nuclear weapons components . . . long before 1967. Thus Kazakhstan cannot be considered a nuclear-free state.¹⁰³

Nazarbaev's assertiveness did not reflect an earnest attempt to retain an operational nuclear deterrent. Although Kazakhstan had a more advanced nuclear fuel cycle than did Ukraine, with plentiful uranium ore and a fuel fabrication plant, it still lacked enrichment and reprocessing capacities and, unlike Ukraine, could not produce any launch vehicles, missiles, or planes. The overwhelming majority of the officer corps in Kazakhstan, especially in the Strategic Missile Forces and Strategic Aviation, were Slavs, and the new Kazakhstani state could not rely on their loyalty.¹⁰⁴ Finally, to maintain a deterrent, a state must target an adversary. Who that adversary would be for Kazakhstan was unclear. Nazarbaev occasionally emphasized Kazakhstan's unsettling security predicament of bordering two nuclear states—Russia and China.¹⁰⁵ Yet Kazakhstan's SS-18 ICBMs were targeted at the United States, a country Nazarbaev was keen to court. But with no indigenous missile industry, seizing and retargeting the ICBMs would have been a nearly impossible feat.

What, then, lay behind Kazakhstan's nuclear assertiveness during the spring of 1992? Nazarbaev's attempt to delay committing to the NPT while insisting on Kazakhstan's temporary nuclear status—with reference to the NPT—might have been aimed at maintaining a hedge by postponing resolution of the nuclear issue. It also might have been a strategy to gain leverage in negotiations with the United States for Nazarbaev's May visit, particularly in obtaining security commitments from the United States. In a letter dated 16 May to Bush, Nazarbaev expressed his expectation that the United States would pledge to come to "the immediate assistance should Kazakhstan become a victim of use or threat of force."¹⁰⁶ Finally, as was the case with

103. "Cable from FM FBIS, 'President Nazarbayev Interviewed,'" 6 May 1992, in NSArchive.

104. Vladimir Ardaev, "AWOL," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 49, No. 8 (October 1993), p. 36.

105. Michael Dobbs, "Kazakh Sets Conditions on A-Arms; Nazarbayev Seeks Powers' Guarantees," *The Washington Post*, 6 May 1992, p. A5.

106. "Letter of President N. Nazarbayev to President G. Bush," 16 May 1992, in Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, F. 5-N, Op. 1, D. 289.

Ukraine, Nazarbaev realized that the nuclear issue was of utmost importance to the United States and that temporary retention of nuclear arms on Kazakhstan's territory, even if under Russia's control, would also mean the continued attention of the United States to Kazakhstan and its economic and political plight.

Even as Nazarbaev was asserting Kazakhstan's leverage on the nuclear issue and demanding security commitments from the United States, he pursued an active foreign policy in the post-Soviet realm. Kazakhstan became the driving force behind the conclusion of the Tashkent Collective Security Treaty with Russia and other post-Soviet republics, signed on 15 May 1992. Moreover, Kazakhstan was preparing to sign a Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance with Russia, which included commitments to each other's territorial integrity, cooperation on defense within "a common military-strategic space," and joint use of military bases.¹⁰⁷

In the letter to President Bush, Nazarbaev stated that, with the signing of the Tashkent Treaty, the national security situation of Kazakhstan had qualitatively changed and that the country would join the NPT as a non-weapons state.¹⁰⁸ Nazarbaev, nevertheless, raised one last issue. Citing the strategic alliance with Russia, he argued that nuclear weapons could remain on Kazakhstan's soil under Russian control after Kazakhstan joined the NPT. Nazarbaev presented this position to the U.S. administration during his visit to Washington on 18 May 1992 and even brought with him a representative of the Russian General Staff to help address nuclear-specific questions.¹⁰⁹

Even though stationing Russian-controlled nuclear arms on Kazakhstan's territory would not violate the NPT and mirrored a U.S. practice of stationing its nuclear weapons on the territory of allies, the Bush administration judged that in such tumultuous times it was best to remove all nuclear arms from republics other than Russia while the prospect of doing so remained high.¹¹⁰ Kazakhstan was singled out from among the post-Soviet nuclear successors because of its connections to the Islamic world. In early 1992, a series of reports emerged alleging that Kazakhstan had sold some nuclear components

107. Verkhovnyi Sovet of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Postanovleniie 'O ratifikatsii Dogovora o Druzhe, Sotrudnichestve i Vzaimnoi Pomoshchi mezhdru Respublikoi Kazakhstan i Rossiiskoi Federatsiiei,'" 2 July 1992, available online at <http://adilet.zan.kz/>.

108. "Letter of President N. Nazarbayev to President G. Bush," 16 May 1992.

109. Nursultan Nazarbayev, *My Life, My Time and the Future . . .*, trans. by Peter Conradi (Guildford, UK: Pilkington Press, 1998), p. 148.

110. Graham, interview.

to Iran.¹¹¹ Nazarbaev and the Kazakhstani government vigorously denied these reports as provocations.¹¹² Later on, however, Nazarbaev himself admitted that representatives from Iran and “some Arab states” had visited Kazakhstan in early 1992 and expressed interest in the missiles.¹¹³ These reports, whether accurate or not, bolstered U.S. resolve to settle questions about the post-Soviet nuclear legacy as quickly as possible.¹¹⁴

U.S. security guarantees of the sort Nazarbaev had hoped to obtain proved elusive. The United States would not pledge anything beyond the NPT-related positive and negative security assurances it extended to all NPT non-nuclear weapon states.¹¹⁵ Nazarbaev’s attempt to exploit the nuclear issue ultimately proved futile. His maneuvers came up against the NPT regime, which could not accommodate a “temporary” nuclear status, against the U.S. nuclear nonproliferation policy, and against Kazakhstan’s ultimate desire to maintain friendly ties with the United States and to attract U.S. investment dollars. Nazarbaev’s other task during his Washington visit had been to sign a deal with Chevron.¹¹⁶ The U.S. oil giant was looking to invest \$50 billion over 40 years into developing one of the biggest oil fields in the world at Tengiz on the Caspian Sea.¹¹⁷

Ever a pragmatist, Nazarbaev conceded. He signed a letter committing Kazakhstan to “the elimination of all kinds of nuclear weapons, including strategic offensive weapons, located on its territory, over a period of seven years in accordance with the START Treaty.”¹¹⁸ The letter was attached to the Lisbon Protocol and treated by the United States as having equal force with the letter of the treaty and the protocol. In a meeting with President Bush on

111. “Weekly Notes Soviet Atomic Scientists in Iran,” *RIA*, in FBIS-SOV-92-011-A, 7 January 1992, p. 22; “Soviet A-Bombs ‘Sold to Iran,’” *Daily Mail* (London), 24 January 1992; John Laffin, “Iran and a Nuclear ‘Gift of the Gods,’” *Daily Mail*, 25 January 1992, p. 7; and “STERN Claims Nuclear Weapons Sent to Iran,” *DPA*, in FBIS-WEU-92-051, 15 March 1992, p. 31.

112. “Ministry Denies Nuclear Proliferation Reports [Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan: The Nuclear Bluff],” *Ekspres*, in FBIS-SOV-92-041, 29 January 1992, p. 32.

113. Nazarbayev, *My Life, My Time and the Future*, p. 149.

114. Graham, *Disarmament Sketches*, p. 135. According to Graham, Nazarbaev brought up the issue himself during the meeting with Reginald Bartholomew in January 1992.

115. “James Baker’s Talking Points for Call to Nazarbayev,” 16 April 1992.

116. “White House Memorandum, ‘Meeting with President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan,’” 18 May 1992, in NSArchive.

117. The deal was finalized in April 1993 with the creation of the joint venture Tengizchevroil, in which Chevron owned 50 percent, another U.S. company, Exxon Mobile, owned 25 percent, Russian oil company Lukoil owned 5 percent, and the Kazakh government owned the remaining 20 percent.

118. “Letter from Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev to President Bush,” 19 May 1992, in NSArchive.

19 May, Nazarbaev underlined his hopes for close relations with the United States, having reached agreement on the nuclear issue: "Our task is security and democracy. We have resources. . . . We want American companies to come over and invest. . . . We want your military to come over and train our military. . . . I want a grand and powerful US presence."¹¹⁹

Back in Almaty, for those who followed Nazarbaev's assertive public stance on nuclear weapons in the lead-up to his Washington trip, the sudden decision to relinquish any claims to nuclear arms without getting much in return must have seemed like a capitulation. Nationalist opposition forces staged a protest in front of the parliament urging legislators not to ratify the NPT.¹²⁰ One of the staunchest critics of denuclearization, former Foreign Minister Mikhail Isinailiev, had met with Nazarbaev prior to his visit to the United States and pleaded with him not to yield to Russian and U.S. pressure if he cared to see Kazakhstan retain its statehood.¹²¹

To stave off this criticism, Nazarbaev stressed that the Tashkent Treaty, complete with the Russian "nuclear umbrella," was Kazakhstan's best security guarantee and that, for their part, U.S. officials confirmed that any country that voluntarily relinquished nuclear weapons would be under the protection of the international community.¹²² Underscoring the dangers of nuclear arms, the Kazakh government released a cache of declassified documents about the results of nuclear tests at Semipalatinsk.¹²³ Nazarbaev highlighted this theme:

Scores of our people have suffered as a result of nuclear tests conducted in Kazakhstan for decades. [This is] a serious reason for the striving of the people of Kazakhstan to eliminate weapons of mass destruction both on their own soil and in other countries.¹²⁴

On 2 July 1992, the Kazakhstani parliament ratified the START-Lisbon package, making Kazakhstan the first of its signatories to do so.¹²⁵ It held off, however, with the accession to the NPT. The Kazakh government was

119. "Memorandum of Conversation between President Bush, President Nazarbayev, and Secretary of State Baker," 19 May 1992, in NSArchive.

120. "Kazakh Opposition Urges Treaty Rejection," *Interfax*, in FBIS-SOV-92-102, 25 May 1992, p. 37.

121. Mikhail Isinailiev, *Na gnani . . . epokh* (Almaty: Gylym, 1998), p. 114.

122. "Nazarbayev on Arms Treaty, Collective Security," *Russian Television Network*, in FBIS-SOV-92-101, 24 May 1992, p. 34.

123. Oleg Stefashin, "Semipalatinsk Tests Information Declassified," *Izvestiya*, in FBIS-SOV-92-104, 20 May 1994, p. 17.

124. "Kazakh Opposition Urges Treaty Rejection."

125. A treaty of friendship with Russia was ratified on the same day.

mindful of the growing controversy around Ukraine's nuclear gambit and wanted to make sure that all concessions negotiated by Ukraine would apply to Kazakhstan as well. Finally, during the visit of U.S. Vice President-elect Al Gore on 13 December 1993, Kazakhstan's parliament voted overwhelmingly, with only one voice against, to accede to the NPT.¹²⁶

The figure of Nazarbaev loomed large in Kazakhstani post-Soviet politics, and nuclear decision-making was no exception. Nazarbaev's pragmatic style and political longevity ensured that, despite the controversy around a "temporary" nuclear status, Kazakhstan was successful in building on its disarmament credentials. It went on to cooperate with the United States on many nuclear security projects, including the daring Project Sapphire, which involved the clandestine removal of 500 kilograms of HEU from the Ulba Metallurgical Plant in Ust'-Kamenogorsk in northern Kazakhstan. Over the years it became an active member of the nonproliferation regime, having led the establishment of the Nuclear-Free Zone in Central Asia in 2006, and, with the IAEA, establishing an LEU fuel bank to guarantee fuel to states in compliance with their safeguards obligations.¹²⁷

Ukraine: Negotiating a Nuclear Exception

As in Belarus, the issue of nuclear weapons in Ukraine made its political debut in the Declaration of State Sovereignty adopted on 16 July 1990. Article IX of the declaration affirmed Ukraine's intention "to become, in the future, a permanently neutral state, which does not participate in military alliances and adheres to three non-nuclear principles: not to receive, manufacture, or acquire nuclear weapons."¹²⁸

126. Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Postanovleniie 'O vnesenii na ratifikatsiyu v Verkhovnyi Sovet Respubliki Kazakhstan Dogovora o Nerasprostraneniі Iadernogo Oruzhiia,' N. 1223, 8 December 1993, available online at <http://adilet.zan.kz/>; and Mark D. Skoostsky, "An Annotated Chronology of Post-Soviet Nuclear Disarmament 1991–1994," *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Spring–Summer 1995), p. 82.

127. For the incredible story of the removal of HEU from Kazakhstan, see John A. Tirpak, "Project Sapphire," *Air Force Magazine*, August 1995, pp. 13–15; William Potter, "The Changing Nuclear Threat: The 'Sapphire' File," *Transitions Online*, 17 November 1995, in NSA; and David Hoffman, "How U.S. Removed Half a Ton of Uranium From Kazakhstan," *The Washington Post*, 21 September 2009, pp. A1, A13.

128. Verkhovna Rada of the Ukrainian SSR, "Deklaratsiya pro derzhavnyi suverenitet Ukrainy." Some material presented in this section appeared in Mariana Budjeryn, "The Power of the NPT: International Norms and Ukraine's Nuclear Disarmament," *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (June 2015), pp. 203–237.

The non-nuclear clause was proposed by Ivan Drach, a leader of the national-democratic Rukh party. Although the Ukrainian Communist Party still held the majority, opposition parties took about a quarter of the Rada seats in the first multiparty election in March 1990 and became a formidable voice in Ukraine's political landscape of the early 1990s. Years later, Drach recalled the "Chernobyl mood" that defined the times.¹²⁹ As in Belarus, the Chernobyl disaster and what it revealed about the dysfunction of the Soviet system became an important rallying point for opposition forces to pursue independence from Moscow. Yet to a greater extent than in Belarus, "anti-nuclear" in Ukraine became associated with "anti-Soviet": Moscow's nuclear policies were perceived as threatening the destruction of Ukraine and therefore posing not only an environmental but also a national concern.¹³⁰

Even though Chernobyl-inspired anti-nuclear sentiment was of great importance, it was not the only factor spurring Ukraine's initial nuclear renunciation. Ukraine's pro-independence elites arrived at an understanding that severing ties with Moscow would be impossible as long as Ukraine remained within a common military-strategic space. The diplomat Volodymyr Vasylenko, who was also a member of Rukh and one of the drafters of Ukraine's Declaration of Sovereignty, explained, "you could not have a nuclear force that would not be linked to Russian nuclear forces, given the technology and control systems. By being a nuclear power we could not attain full independence."¹³¹ Thus, the nuclear question in Ukraine was tied to considerations of sovereignty and statehood from the very beginning. When Ukraine and Belarus jointly attempted to sign onto the NPT in 1990, the effort was intended not only to provide moral support for the nonproliferation regime but also "to remind the outer world of [Ukraine's] existence," according to Ukraine's ambassador to the UN, Viktor Batiuk.¹³²

Ukraine's independence came sooner and more unexpectedly than even Vasylenko and his Rukh colleagues might have anticipated. The abortive coup in Moscow on 19–21 August, staged by Soviet hardliners aiming to consolidate the USSR, achieved the opposite.¹³³ On 24 August Ukraine declared its

129. Ivan Drach, interview, Kyiv, 22 May 2013.

130. Jane Dawson, *Eco-Nationalism: Anti-Nuclear Activism and National Identity in Russia, Lithuania, and Ukraine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 78.

131. John Lloyd and Chrystia Freeland, "A Painful Birth," *Financial Times* (London), 25 February 1992, p. 6.

132. Victor Batiuk, "Ukraine's Non-Nuclear Option," Research Paper No. 14, UN Institute for Disarmament Research, New York, 1992, p. 3.

133. Mark Kramer, "The Dissolution of the Soviet Union: A Case Study of Discontinuous Change," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Winter 2021–2022), pp. 188–218.

independence, other republics followed, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union became irreversible.¹³⁴ After declaring independence, the Rada voted to subordinate all military units to Ukrainian jurisdiction and then asserted Ukraine's ownership of all Soviet assets left on its territory.¹³⁵ Ukraine moved quickly to form its own ministry of defense and national armed forces out of some 750,000 Soviet troops stationed in Ukraine. What this meant for the 43rd Strategic Missile Army, the 46th Air Army, and their nuclear armaments was far from clear.

The founding of the CIS and its Joint Strategic Command, to which all strategic nuclear forces in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine were formally subordinated, provided a politically acceptable solution. For Ukraine, however, participation in the military structures of the CIS was seen as only a temporary arrangement. Vasylenko's concern that Russia might use common defense arrangements to keep Ukraine in its political orbit was still valid: Ukraine's first defense minister, Kostyantyn Morozov, was grappling with the reality of having some military units on Ukraine's territory subordinated to the CIS and Moscow. Not only was this complicating the process of building the Ukrainian armed forces, but it was also at odds with Ukraine's proclaimed neutrality.¹³⁶ This logic guided Ukrainian President Kravchuk in December 1991 when he agreed, as part of the CIS arrangements, to remove all tactical nuclear weapons by June 1992 and eliminate all strategic nuclear weapons by 1994.¹³⁷

Yet after the declaration of Ukraine's independence in August 1991, the nuclear stance of Rukh, the political force that had led the way in demanding a non-nuclear status, began to shift. Ukraine's national-democrats perceived Russia as Ukraine's historical oppressor. The disintegration of the USSR presented them with an opportunity to break the perceived historical pattern of Russian domination and to reformulate ties with Russia, a fellow aspiring democracy, on the basis of equality, even if only formally. This applied as well to the issue of succession and the status of Soviet military assets. Efforts to

134. Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, "Akt proholoshennia nezalezhnosti Ukraïny," 1427-XII, 24 August 1991, available online at <http://zakon.rada.gov.ua/cgi-bin/laws/main.cgi?nreg=1427-12>.

135. Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, "Postanova pro viis'kovi formuvannia na Ukraïni," 1434-XII, 24 August 1991, available online at <http://zakon2.rada.gov.ua/>; and Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, "Zakon Ukraïny pro pidpriemstva, ustanovy ta orhanizatsii Soyuznoho Pidporiadruvannya, Roztashovani na terytorii Ukraïny," 1540-XII, 10 September 1991, available online at <http://zakon3.rada.gov.ua/>.

136. "Kostyantyn Morozov Collection, 1991–1996: Interview Transcripts," n.d., in Ukrainian Research Institute Library, Harvard University, Tape 8, 7; and Kostyantyn Morozov, interview, Washington, DC, 5 December 2017.

137. "Soglasheniie mezhdū gosudarstvami-uchastnikami Sodruzhestva Nezavisimikh Gosudarstv po strategicheskim silam," 30 December 1991, available online at <http://cis.minsk.by/>.

reconcile the Kyiv government's insistence on equality in the Soviet succession with the international nonproliferation regime determined the fate of Ukraine's nuclear inheritance.

An early harbinger of this revised nuclear narrative came in September 1991 in response to Yeltsin's suggestions that all Soviet nuclear weapons should be transferred to Russia. Vyacheslav Chornovil, another prominent Rukh leader, published a statement claiming that Ukraine, "like Russia and Kazakhstan and other republics," was "the rightful heir to all material and technical resources, including weapons, of the former Soviet Union."¹³⁸ He thought it "odd" that one state should be transferring its nuclear arsenal to another and argued that the issue of nuclear weapons must be decided through treaties and agreements between nuclear states: "This is precisely the route Ukraine will take toward the gradual and complete elimination of its nuclear arsenal."¹³⁹

No sooner had the Soviet Union ceased to exist than strains in Ukrainian-Russian relations emerged, most prominently around the issue of Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet based there. The ambiguity of CIS military arrangements also became a problem. Conflicting loyalties and overlapping chains of command sparked several military incidents. On 13 February 1992, six SU-24M bombers were flown from Ukraine's Starokonstantyniv airbase to Russia, never to return.¹⁴⁰ Reports surfaced that some of the bases under CIS command had been looted, their property sold off under the table.¹⁴¹ By April 1992, Defense Minister Morozov reported to the Rada that the process of creating independent Ukrainian armed forces was proving much more difficult than anticipated because of obstruction by the CIS command.¹⁴²

The tug-of-war between the CIS command and Ukraine's nascent defense establishment over the division of military assets spilled over into the nuclear realm. In late February 1992, Kravchuk suddenly suspended the transfer of tactical nuclear weapons from Ukraine to Russia. In a public announcement

138. "Vyacheslav Chornovil pro bez'yadernyi status Ukraïny," *Molod Uknajiny* (Kyiv), 12 September 1991.

139. *Ibid.*

140. "Telegram of President L. Kravchuk to President B. Yeltsin," 17 February 1992, in Central State Archive of Supreme Bodies of Power and Governance of Ukraine (TsDAVOU), F. 5233, Op. 1, D. 76.

141. For instance, during a Rada session in April, a member of parliament reported the degradation of a base near the town of Krynychky in Dnipropetrovs'k oblast in eastern Ukraine and the looting of the surface-to-air anti-aircraft cruise missiles "ZUR" stationed there. See Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, "Stenohrama plenarnoho zasidanniya: Zasadannie sorok tretie," 8 April 1992, p. 88, <http://portal.rada.gov.ua/>.

142. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

on 12 March 1992, he explained that the reason for the halt was the lack of a guarantee that the warheads were being destroyed in Russia.¹⁴³ The move was followed by a presidential decree that ordered Ukraine's Defense Ministry to take steps immediately to assert "direct" control over all armed forces on Ukraine's territory and "administrative" control over the strategic forces.¹⁴⁴ In a telegram to CIS member-states, Kravchuk cited the interference of certain Russian officials and the CIS command in Ukraine's internal affairs.¹⁴⁵

On 2 April 1992, as tensions waxed acute, Kravchuk convened a meeting of Ukraine's Defense Council for the first high-level expert discussion of Ukraine's nuclear policy, attended by senior defense and foreign policy officials as well as nuclear scientists and military-industrial personnel. Among those taking part was Yuri Kostenko, Ukraine's minister of environment and nuclear security and the leader of the parliamentary working group responsible for the development of Ukraine's conception of national security. He later recalled that the meeting focused on realistic and safe disarmament procedures that would meet Ukraine's national interests, rather than the possibilities of gaining operational control over the armaments.¹⁴⁶ Nuclear experts argued that the 1994 deadline for the dismantlement of strategic missile systems, stipulated in the CIS agreements, would not allow the process to be conducted safely.¹⁴⁷

Some also argued that Ukraine should dismantle nuclear warheads on its own territory and blend down fissile material contained in them for use in its nuclear power reactors.¹⁴⁸ The chief designer of the Pivdenne missile design bureau, Stanislav Konyukhov, argued that Ukraine should not rush to dismantle the 46 SS-24s, which had been designed and produced in Ukraine. He stressed that Ukraine could gain important leverage from the maintenance Pivdenmash provided for missile systems deployed in Russia, especially SS-18s. The provision of this servicing, Konyukhov said, would allow Ukraine to obtain the necessary Russian maintenance for nuclear warheads in Ukraine.¹⁴⁹

143. Serge Schmemmann, "Ukraine Halting A-Arms Shift to Russia," *The New York Times*, 13 March 1992, p. A7.

144. President of Ukraine, "Ukaz pro nevidkladni zakhody po budivnytstvu Zbroinykh Syl Ukrainy," April 1992, Doc. No. 209/925, available online at <http://zakon2.rada.gov.ua/>.

145. "Telegram of President L. Kravchuk to the Heads of Commonwealth States," 5 April 1992, in TSDAVOU, F. 5233, Op. 1, D. 42.

146. Kostenko, *Ukraine's Nuclear Disarmament*, p. 64.

147. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

148. *Ibid.*, pp. 65–66.

149. *Ibid.*, pp. 66–67.

Konyukhov's proposal, however, stopped short of advocating a nuclear deterrent. He averred that Ukraine should eventually phase out its SS-24s and replace them with high-precision conventional weaponry that his bureau would develop.¹⁵⁰ The issue of nuclear command-and-control was raised only briefly when Yakov Aizenberg, the director of Khartron, a Kharkiv-based designer of missile guidance and targeting systems, confirmed that a "blocking button" desired by Ukraine could not be integrated into the command-and-control system without Russian acquiescence.¹⁵¹

Ukraine's decision to suspend the transfer of tactical nuclear weapons alarmed the United States, although U.S. officials sensed, correctly, that the suspension was motivated not by a desire to keep the weapons but by an effort to use them for political leverage in forging a more equitable relationship with Russia and obtaining Western security guarantees.¹⁵² On 9 April, in support of Kravchuk's move, the Ukrainian parliament adopted a resolution, "On Additional Measures for Ensuring Ukraine's Attainment of Non-Nuclear Status," which called for international oversight of the dismantlement of warheads withdrawn from Ukraine and mandated the development of "technical means" to ensure the non-use of strategic nuclear weapons from Ukraine's territory.¹⁵³ The Rada also, for the first time, demanded security guarantees as a condition for nuclear disarmament.¹⁵⁴

On 10 April, after Kravchuk and Yeltsin agreed to a bilateral warhead dismantlement verification procedure, the transfer of tactical weapons resumed, and it was completed by the June deadline.¹⁵⁵ Under Kravchuk's decree, however, the Defense Ministry established the Center for Administrative Control of the Strategic Nuclear Forces of Ukraine, ostensibly responsible for overseeing all aspects of operations for strategic nuclear units in Ukraine aside from command-and-control. Some of the troops in the strategic forces began to take the Ukrainian military oath.¹⁵⁶

150. *Ibid.*

151. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

152. "Cable from Defense Intelligence Agency, 'Defense Intelligence Report ODB 27-92, Ukraine-Nuclear Withdrawal Suspension,'" 27 March 1992, in NSArchive.

153. Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, "Postanova pro dodatkovii zakhody shchodo zabezpechennia nabutia Ukrainoiu bez'iadernoho statusu," 9 April 1992, Doc. No. 2264-12, available online at <http://zakon4.rada.gov.ua/>.

154. *Ibid.*

155. Leonid Kravchuk, interview, Kyiv, 25 April 2017.

156. Details on the administration of the Ukrainian military oath to strategic missile and aviation troops remain sparse. Strategic aviation troops in Uzin and Priluky were under the Ukrainian oath by mid-1992, as were many units of the Strategic Missile Forces in Pervomaisk and Khmelnytsk.

March and April 1992 thus marked the beginning of Kyiv's more assertive stance on the nuclear issue and also demonstrated that Ukraine was willing to implement policies to back its words. Although Ukraine never formally reneged on its commitment to denuclearize and join the NPT, it formulated a claim in 1992–1993 to rightful “ownership” of nuclear weapons on its territory. Ukraine's ratification of the START-Lisbon package and accession to the NPT came only after the United States agreed to provide financial compensation for the fissile material contained in Ukrainian missile warheads and after the United States, Britain, and Russia agreed to provide security guarantees to Ukraine.

In September 1992, Kostenko and another Rada member, Volodymyr Tolubko, a retired general who had been commander of the 46th Missile Division in Pervomaïsk, attended an event at the Atlantic Council in Washington, DC, where the two argued that Ukraine's disarmament would be a lengthy process and that for the foreseeable future Ukraine would remain a “temporary nuclear power.”¹⁵⁷ Kostenko presented a paper titled “Ukraine's Nuclear Weapons: A Political, Legal and Economic Analysis of Disarmament,” which outlined conditions that had to be met before the Rada would vote on the treaty.¹⁵⁸ These included the recognition of Ukraine's rightful “ownership” of nuclear weapons on its territory, a firm commitment of U.S. technical assistance funds to cover the costs of disarmament, the return to Ukraine of highly-enriched uranium and plutonium extracted from the removed weapons for use in the Ukrainian nuclear energy industry or for resale, and the provision of robust security guarantees to Ukraine by the United States and other nuclear powers.¹⁵⁹

These statements and actions sparked concern in the West and anger in Russia. In December 1992, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry circulated a

Central nuclear warhead storage facilities, the so-called “Object S” facilities, of which there were four on Ukraine's territory, were guarded by service personnel under the Ukrainian oath by mid-1993. The top commanders of the missile forces remained under the old Soviet oath until early 1994. Steven Pifer, interview, 24 March 2015; Morozov, interview; and Mykola Filatov, interview, 31 July 2018. Ambassador Pifer worked at the State Department on the team of Strobe Talbott, Ambassador-at-Large for Russia and the NIS; General Morozov was Ukraine's first minister of defense in 1991–1993; General Filatov was the commander of the 46th Strategic Missile Division in Pervomaïsk in 1990–1994.

157. “Pis'mo predsedatelia komiteta VS RF po voprosam oborony i bezopasnosti Stepashina S. V. predsedateliu VS RF Khasbulatovu R. I.,” 23 September 1992, in State Archive of the Russian Federation, F. 10026, Op. 4, D. 3246.

158. Yuri Kostenko, “Yaderna zbroya Ukrainy: Blaho chy zlo: Polityko-pravovyi analiz rozzbroennya,” *Holos Ukrainy* (Kyiv), 29 August and 1 September 1992, pp. 3–5. The article appeared in two installments in two consecutive issues of *Holos Ukrainy*.

159. Kostenko, *Istoriia yadernoho rozzbroennya Ukrainy*, p. 93.

memorandum to Western embassies in Kyiv aimed at clarifying Ukraine's official nuclear stance. Fending off accusations that Ukraine was backtracking on its earlier commitments, the memorandum stated that the dissolution of the USSR had conferred on Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine "undeniable equal rights" to become nuclear-weapons states.¹⁶⁰ The document explained that because Ukraine did not intend to possess nuclear weapons, the government had refrained from trying to gain control over nuclear explosive devices, per Article II of the NPT. However, Ukraine had clear "ownership rights" to all components of nuclear warheads on its soil, both strategic and tactical.¹⁶¹ The memorandum thereby suggested that Ukraine was making the choice—a laudable one—not to come into full nuclear possession, and this choice was predicated on its commitment to nuclear disarmament, not on the lack of a legitimate claim to nuclear weapons on its soil.

For President Kravchuk and other Ukrainian policymakers, nuclear ownership meant not only recognition of Ukraine as a successor to the Soviet Union on par with Russia but also Ukraine's entitlement to fair compensation, financial and political, for surrendering what was rightfully Ukraine's. As one of the high-ranking Communist leaders in Ukraine during the Chernobyl debacle, Kravchuk was strongly against nuclear arms in general and stressed the long-term humanitarian significance of disarmament: "Nuclear weapons do not guarantee the salvation of human beings. The sooner humanity understands that they [nuclear weapons] need to be destroyed in all countries, the better for humanity."¹⁶² Besides, Kravchuk was generally apprehensive about nuclear safety, which Ukraine could not ensure without Russian participation.¹⁶³ But amid growing perceptions of a threat from Russia and vocal opposition in the Rada, Kravchuk, an able compromiser, had to make a decision that took the opposition's view into account.

This interpretation of nuclear "ownership" as a basis for compensation was taken as overly defeatist by a vociferous national-democratic faction in the Rada, led by Kostenko. An academic and an engineer by training, Kostenko insisted that Ukraine was a nuclear state in every sense and should hold on to a part of its nuclear inheritance as a political hedge until it could devise

160. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, "Memorandum Ministerstva Zakordonnykh Sprav Ukrainy," 11 December 1992, in Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine (AMZSU), F. 1, D. 6857, Ll. 241–246.

161. *Ibid.*

162. Transcript of President Kravchuk's interviews, 18 June 1993, in TSDAVOU, F. 5233, Op. 1, D. 289.

163. Kravchuk, interview.

other means of providing for its security.¹⁶⁴ Kostenko's position found support among Rada deputies who viewed Russia with suspicion, including the chair of the parliament's foreign relations committee, Dmytro Pavlychko, a renowned poet who, during parliamentary debate on the START-Lisbon package in June 1993, argued that Ukraine should retain its current status as the owner of nuclear weapons for as long as possible: "Without abandoning the intention, I stress—intention, not obligation—to become in the future a non-nuclear state, Ukraine must proceed [toward this goal] very slowly, very carefully lest it should harm, in haste and ineptitude, its interests."¹⁶⁵

Pavlychko dismissed the NPT as discriminatory toward Ukraine and as likely to expire in 1995.¹⁶⁶ He argued that Ukraine should not ratify the treaty but should only carry out proportional reductions under START, keeping for the time being the 46 SS-24 ICBMs manufactured in Ukraine at Pivdenmash.¹⁶⁷ During the same parliamentary discussion, Ukraine's prime minister, the former Pivdenmash director, and Kravchuk's future successor as president, Leonid Kuchma, also favored the retention of the SS-24s and advocated declaring Ukraine a temporary nuclear state.¹⁶⁸ Despite these statements, there is no indication that Kostenko, Pavlychko, or Kuchma regarded Ukraine's nuclear inheritance in military terms. All of them maintained that Ukraine would eventually disarm completely through additional treaties and in conjunction with reductions by other nuclear possessors.¹⁶⁹

Whether any serious thought was given to the option of a long-term deterrent remains doubtful. Whatever the case, such voices were few and far between. One of the few people who spoke of nuclear deterrence openly was General Tolubko. At the end of 1992, he published a series of articles arguing that retaining a nuclear deterrent would be more economical than modernizing a large conventional army.¹⁷⁰ Subsequently, Tolubko elaborated his position in a memorandum he sent to Ukrainian political leaders in July 1993 proposing that Ukraine openly declare itself a nuclear state and retain the

164. Yuriy Kostenko, interview, Kyiv, 25 April 2017.

165. Dmytro Pavlychko, *Holosy moho zhyattya: Statti, vystupy, intervu, dokumenty* (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2013), p. 420.

166. *Ibid.*

167. *Ibid.*

168. Kostenko, *Ukraine's Nuclear Disarmament*, pp. 195–196; and "Ukraine: A Nuclear State," *The Economist* (London), 12 June 1993, p. 34.

169. For Rada deputies, this was not a radical approach, for it essentially echoed the two-stage disarmament process envisioned in the October 1991 "Statement on the Non-Nuclear Status of Ukraine."

170. Volodymyr Tolubko, "V interesakh bezpeky chy nazad do falanhy?," *Holos Ukrainy* (Kyiv), 10 November 1992.

SS-24s as a nuclear deterrent.¹⁷¹ Yet he noted that this would be possible only in close cooperation with Russia in the nuclear sphere because Ukraine's economic and time constraints meant it was in no position to develop a nuclear program independently.¹⁷² Moreover, referring to the United States, Tolubko stated that Ukraine's joint operation of nuclear arms with Russia would protect it from the architects of the "new world order" and ensure that the fate of "Grenada, Yugoslavia, and Iraq" would not befall independent Ukraine.¹⁷³

Implying that the United States, not Russia, had to be deterred by nuclear weapons was clearly a point of major divergence between Tolubko, on the one hand, and leading politicians, on the other. The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry quickly responded to Tolubko's proposal: "Given today's state of relations with Russia . . . it is obvious that Moscow could acquiesce in [joint operation of Ukraine's nuclear armaments] only on condition of a close political and military union."¹⁷⁴ The implication was that Tolubko's proposal was conceivable only within a collective security system with Russia, precisely the thing most Ukrainian leaders were trying to avoid. The Foreign Ministry also criticized Tolubko and other advocates of protracted denuclearization in the Rada for failing to appreciate the international repercussions, including isolation and sanctions, that the nuclear option would inevitably have for Ukraine.¹⁷⁵

In an important memorandum to Ukrainian political leaders in February 1993, the Foreign Ministry evaluated Ukraine's nuclear options and came down strongly in favor of nuclear renunciation.¹⁷⁶ The ministry argued that any benefits of retaining nuclear weapons were dubious and that the international consequences for Ukraine would be overwhelmingly negative. Ukraine would become a "violator of the international nonproliferation regime" and set a dangerous precedent for other nuclear threshold states.¹⁷⁷

171. Volodymyr Tolubko, "Yadernoe oruzhie, kosmos, flot: Reshenie voprosov ne terpit promedleniya," 1 July 1993, in AMZSU, F. 1, D. 7058, Ll. 99–106.

172. Ibid.

173. Ibid.

174. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, "Memorandum 21-830 Pershoho zastupnyka Ministra zakordonnykh sprav M. P. Makarevycha Vitse-prem'ier-ministru Ukraïiny V. M. Shmarovu," in AMZSU, 27 July 1993, F. 1, D. 7058.

175. Ibid.

176. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, "Analitychna dovidka 'Mozhlyvi naslidky al'ternatyvnykh pidkhodiv Ukraïiny do zdiïsnennia iadernoi polityky,'" 3 February 1993, in AMZSU, F. 1, D. 7045, Ll. 1–7.

177. Ibid.

Any claim of entitlement to the Soviet nuclear legacy, even the moderate positions of Kravchuk and the diplomats, proved difficult to reconcile with the international regime for nuclear proliferation, which had no provisions for “temporary” nuclear-weapons states, as Kazakhstan had found out, or for “nuclear ownership,” as Ukraine was beginning to understand. Assertions about maintaining nuclear ownership or nuclear possession were met with suspicion and dismay in the West. In Moscow, such claims were depicted as announcements of nuclear-weapon status.¹⁷⁸

After two rounds in January and March 1993, the Ukrainian-Russian negotiations over the dismantlement and removal of strategic nuclear forces came to a halt. Not surprisingly, the sticking point was Russia’s refusal to recognize Ukraine’s claims to Soviet succession in the nuclear realm.¹⁷⁹ Beyond seeking formal equality with Russia, Ukrainian officials raised the claim of nuclear succession to substantiate compensation for the value of HEU contained both in the strategic nuclear warheads to be withdrawn and the tactical nuclear weapons that had been withdrawn in the first half of 1992. When Kravchuk and Yeltsin resolved to continue nuclear negotiations at the highest level, Yeltsin agreed to discuss compensation for the HEU contained in strategic (although not tactical) nuclear weapons—but as a gesture of Russia’s goodwill, not as a matter of Ukraine’s entitlement.¹⁸⁰

A Russian-Ukrainian summit on 3 September 1993 in the Crimean town of Massandra that was intended to settle the general protocol and procedures for dismantling nuclear weapons ended in failure because of the lack of trust on both sides. At the signing, the Ukrainians realized that the protocol, drafted by the Russian side, stated that “all” nuclear warheads stationed in Ukraine would be transferred within the 24-month period, whereas the Ukrainian side wanted the document to read “nuclear warheads covered by [START],” which would exclude the 46 SS-24 ICBMs.¹⁸¹ The discord over this issue indicated that Ukrainian officials were pursuing the Rada’s vision of a two-stage

178. Yuri Dubinin, “Ukraine’s Nuclear Ambitions: Reminiscences of the Past,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 2 (April/June 2004), available online at <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/>.

179. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, “Pro kompleksne vyrishennia shyrokooho kola pytan’, pov’iazanykh z roztashovanoi na terytorii Ukrainy stratehichnoiui iadernoiui zbroieiu i taktychnymi iadernymi boiezariadamy, vyvedenymi vesnoiui 1992 roku z Ukrainy dlia iikh rozukomplektuvannia i znyshchennia,” March 1993, in AMZSU, F. 1, D. 7057, Ll. 23–25.

180. Office of the President of the Russian Federation, “Pis’mo Prezidentu Ukrainy L. M. Kravchuku,” 30 April 1993, in AMZSU, F. 1, D. 7063, Ll. 120–123.

181. Text of the protocol with different wording is available in John Lepingwell, “Negotiations over Nuclear Weapons: The Past as Prologue?” *RFL/RE Research Report*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (28 January 1994), p. 6.

disarmament process; that is, START reductions first, and the NPT and complete disarmament later.

Meanwhile, the incoming U.S. administration of Bill Clinton, after conducting a review of policy toward Russia and the CIS in the spring of 1993, decided to broaden engagement with Ukraine beyond the nuclear issue.¹⁸² In June, U.S. Defense Secretary Les Aspin and Ambassador-at-Large for Russia and the CIS Strobe Talbott visited Kyiv to outline this new strategy and propose a Charter of U.S.-Ukrainian Partnership. They also offered to mediate the Russian-Ukrainian nuclear negotiations and turn them into a trilateral process.

Up to this point, U.S.-Ukrainian interactions had focused primarily on the negotiation of the technical assistance projects under the CTR program, of which \$175 million had been earmarked for Ukraine in the fall of 1992. Ukrainian Deputy Foreign Minister Borys Tarasyuk had also been leading the negotiations on security guarantees from the United States and other nuclear powers as stipulated by the Rada in its April 1992 resolution. By the end of that year, however, it became clear that Ukraine would not succeed in extracting from the United States any guarantees beyond the negative and positive NPT-related security assurances, as well as general commitments to territorial integrity and abstention from the use or threat of force recorded in other multilateral documents, such as the UN Charter and the CSCE Helsinki Final Act.¹⁸³

Absent an agreement with Russia and guarantees from the United States, the Ukrainian Rada voted to ratify the START-Lisbon package on 18 November 1993, though with extensive reservations, the most important of which was rejection of Article V of the protocol obligating Ukraine to join the NPT. The Rada offered to lift these reservations if Ukraine received security guarantees and compensation for the relinquished nuclear weapons.¹⁸⁴

The Rada's action prompted the U.S. government to intensify its diplomatic effort. The negotiations that ensued between Russia, the United States, and Ukraine yielded the Trilateral Agreement signed by Presidents Clinton,

182. Pifer, *The Trilateral Process*, p. 18.

183. See Mariana Budjeryn, "The Breach: Ukraine's Territorial Integrity and the Budapest Memorandum," Issue Brief No. 3, Nuclear Proliferation International History Project, Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, DC, September 2014.

184. Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, "Postanova pro ratyfikatsiyu Dohovoru mizh Soyuzom Radians'kykh Sotsialistychnykh Respublik i Spoluchenyomy Shtatamy Ameryky pro skorochenniya i obmezheniia stratehichnykh nastupal'nykh ozbroen', pidpysano u Moskvi 31 lypnia 1991 roku, i Protokolu do nioho, pidpysano u Lisaboni vid imeni Ukrainy 23 travnya 1992 roku," 18 November 1993, Doc. No. 3624-12, available online at <http://zakon3.rada.gov.ua/>.

Kravchuk, and Yeltsin in Moscow on 14 January 1994.¹⁸⁵ The agreement outlined the basic parameters of the Ukraine nuclear deal, meeting some of the outstanding Ukrainian conditions, including an arrangement—recorded in a secret annex—whereby Russia would compensate Ukraine for the fissile material contained in all warheads transferred from its territory, including tactical arms, by supplying fuel assemblies for Ukraine’s nuclear power plants, the cost of which was to be covered by the United States through the “Megatons to Megawatts” program.¹⁸⁶ For Ukraine, this constituted recognition of its claim of ownership to the components of the nuclear warheads it was relinquishing. At Kravchuk’s urging, the Rada agreed to remove its conditions on START-Lisbon ratification, but it did not agree to permit Ukraine to join the NPT at that time.

The deepening political and economic crisis in Ukraine resulted in snap parliamentary and presidential elections, which further delayed Ukraine’s decision on the NPT. In July 1994, Ukrainians elected a new president, Kuchma, who earlier as prime minister had advocated for the retention of the SS-24s. In his first phone call with Clinton, he reassured the U.S. president that Ukraine would meet its obligations under the trilateral accord and reported that 40 ICBM silos had already been dismantled and 307 strategic nuclear warheads transported to Russia.¹⁸⁷

On 2 August, however, Kuchma made an unexpected visit, along with his ministers, to the 46th Strategic Missile division in Pervomaisk. There he confirmed his intention to keep the 46 SS-24s, albeit with a conventional payload.¹⁸⁸ Whether this represented a hedging strategy, an attempt to save Ukraine’s missile-building industry, or a gamble to increase Ukraine’s leverage vis-à-vis the United States remains unclear. As the former Pivdenmash director, Kuchma was better versed in strategic nuclear matters than his predecessor. So was his national security adviser, Volodymyr Horbulin, who hailed from the same Dnipro-based military-industrial-political elite as Kuchma. In

185. The U.S. diplomatic effort in December 1993 is recounted in Pifer, *The Trilateral Process*; and Ashton B. Carter and Bill Perry, *Preventative Defense: A New Security Strategy for America* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

186. The formula for converting the value of weapons HEU and plutonium into fuel LEU was worked out by Viktor Bar’yakhtar of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences and Viktor Mikhailov of Russia’s nuclear agency Rosatom and made possible by the fact that Ukrainian scientists had former Soviet security clearances and precise data of how much fissile material was contained in which warheads. Viktor Bar’yakhtar, interview, Kyiv, 2 April 2019.

187. “Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between President Clinton and President Kuchma of Ukraine,” 21 July 1994, in NSArchive.

188. Nikolai Filatov, interview, Kyiv, 9 August 2018. General Filatov at the time was the Commander of the 46th Strategic Missile Division.

later years, Horbulin recalled that the main challenge to any nuclear and strategic missile option for Ukraine was the lack of resources and time to turn the former Soviet strategic arsenal, dependent on Russia for maintenance, into an independent nuclear deterrent fit for Ukraine's strategic purposes.¹⁸⁹ The main benefit of disarmament, he said, was the paths it opened to cooperation with the West.¹⁹⁰ This cooperation was sorely needed, not least in the economic sphere, where reform, an end to hyperinflation, and stabilization of Ukraine's currency could be achieved only with the help of large-scale funding from the U.S.-dominated International Monetary Fund. In September 1994, Thomas Graham, Jr., of ACDA traveled to Kyiv to urge Ukrainian leaders to join the NPT—the “club of civilization”—and he found that they had already made up their minds.¹⁹¹

The Ukrainians nevertheless continued to demand that the security commitments recorded in the trilateral statement be formalized in a separate high-level document, and the United States agreed.¹⁹² This gave President Kuchma additional political ammunition to convince the Rada to vote on joining the NPT, which it did on 16 November 1994. The instrument of ratification, however, still insisted that Ukraine was the “owner” of the weapons it was relinquishing and that the NPT did not adequately capture Ukraine's unique situation.¹⁹³ Ukrainian leaders were under no illusion about the inadequacy of security commitments their country would be receiving in return. As a hedge against that, Article 4 of the accession instrument stated that Ukraine would treat the use or threat of force against its territorial integrity and inviolability of borders, as well as economic coercion by a nuclear state, as “extraordinary circumstances that jeopardize its supreme interests,” a formulation taken verbatim from Article X of the NPT governing withdrawal from the treaty.¹⁹⁴ With CTR technical assistance funds, the process of disarmament moved ahead according to schedules worked out by the Russian and Ukrainian negotiators and carried out by military agencies. The last shipment of nuclear warheads

189. Volodymyr Horbulin, *Bez prava na pokayanie* (Kharkiv: Folio, 2009), pp. 42–46.

190. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

191. Graham, *Disarmament Sketches*, p. 142; Mariana Budjeryn and Matthew Bunn, “Budapest Memorandum at 25: Between Past and Future,” *Managing the Atom Project*, Belfer Center, Harvard University, Cambridge MA, March 2020, available online at <https://www.belfercenter.org/>.

192. Anatolii Zlenko, *Dyplomatiya i polityka: Ukraïna v protsesi Dynamichnykh Heopolitychnykh Zmin* (Kharkiv: Folio, 2003), p. 374; and James Timbie, interview, Washington, DC, 5 February 2018.

193. Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, “Zakon Ukraïny pro pryednannya Ukraïny do Dohovoru pro Nerozpovsyudzhennya Yadernoi Zbroii vid 1 Lypnia 1968 Roku,” 16 November 1994, Doc No. 248/94-VR, available online at <http://zakon2.rada.gov.ua/>.

194. *Ibid.*

left Ukraine's territory in May 1996, and the last missile silo was destroyed in 2001.

The Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine's Accession to the NPT was signed on the sidelines of the CSCE summit in Budapest, Hungary, on 5 December 1994, by President Kuchma and the heads of state of the three NPT depositary states—the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia. In addition to repeating verbatim the language on security assurances—translated as “guarantees” in Ukrainian (and Russian)—from the Trilateral Statement that included clauses from the UN Charter and the CSCE Helsinki Final Act of 1975, the Budapest Memorandum included a provision for consultations between parties if any issues arose in connection with the commitments recorded in the memorandum.¹⁹⁵

The consultations mechanism was invoked for the first time nearly twenty years later, in March 2014, as Russian troops without insignia were seizing control of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula, which Russian President Vladimir Putin then annexed and incorporated into the Russian Federation. A similar, but less successful, Russian military incursion ensued in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, resulting in a protracted armed conflict that was the prelude for Russia's all-out war against Ukraine beginning in February 2022. Although Ukraine's demand for security guarantees was motivated by fears of precisely these sorts of nightmare scenarios, the signing of the memorandum on 5 December 1994 gave rise to celebration in Russia, the United States, and its allies. Ukraine became the last of the three non-Russian nuclear successors to submit its instruments of NPT ratification, thereby also bringing START into force and opening the way for talks on further U.S.-Russian nuclear reductions under a START II treaty.

Conclusion: The Anatomy of Nuclear Renunciation

Nuclear decisions are multicausal. The analysis here of nuclear discourses in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine reveals that nuclear decisions are not monocausal and instead are influenced by a range of domestic and international factors: historical experiences, identity narratives, domestic economic and security considerations, leadership beliefs, institutional arrangements that give

195. “Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine's Accession to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” 5 December 1994, UN General Assembly, 49th Session, Agenda Item 62 and 70, General and Complete Disarmament, Maintenance of International Security, A/49/765, S/1994/1399, available online at <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/>.

voice to some political forces but not others, and the policies of powerful states and international normative structures such as the NPT. The goal of a nuclear decision-making exercise, as in the case of Ukraine, was to consider the broadest possible array of nuclear choices and their positive and negative consequences.

For historians, this interdependence and multicausality will come as no surprise. Yet for some social scientists who are keen on isolating, measuring, and determining the key drivers of nuclear proliferation and restraint, the evidence from the post-Soviet nuclear story suggests that a more productive focus might be on exploring the multiplicity of nonproliferation drivers, relationships, tensions, and synergies among them—for they are always interrelated—than to look for a single determinant.

Domestic political contexts matter. Despite the seeming similarity of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine and the same conditions under which they came to grapple with their nuclear choices—namely, the demise of the USSR and international pressure to give up their nuclear weapons—the paths the three states followed toward the NPT and nuclear disarmament were markedly different. Their emerging national security narratives and perceptions of threat played some role in shaping their disarmament policies, yet none of the states seriously considered retaining their weapons permanently as a deterrent. Their prior negative historical experiences, Chernobyl and Semipalatinsk, predisposed them to an anti-nuclear stance and remained a permanent feature of their nuclear discourses. Yet, even though their nuclear-related grievances were similar, they were channeled through different domestic political contexts and thus reverberated differently through the three nuclear discourses. Chernobyl was a salient factor in Belarus; with weak political opposition and continued reliance on Russia, there was nothing to disturb the hold of the anti-nuclear sentiment on Belarusian nuclear matters. In Ukraine, the trauma of Chernobyl contributed to the initial nuclear renunciation but soon was eclipsed by considerations of securing Ukraine's nascent statehood vis-à-vis Russia, with the national-democratic opposition's voice more prominent in the country's politics in general and nuclear matters in particular. In Kazakhstan, the legacy of nuclear testing at Semipalatinsk was a genuine factor, even if President Nazarbaev at times mobilized the Semipalatinsk experience strategically.

U.S. fears of proliferation could be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Counterintuitively, Washington's single-minded focus on the nuclear issue after 1991 proved a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it ensured that a set of bold and inventive policy initiatives, such as the PNIs and the CTR, were quickly adopted to neutralize an exigent proliferation threat. On the other hand, it

served to elevate the value of nuclear weapons in the eyes of the new post-Soviet states. High-level delegations from the United States and other Western countries came to previously obscure capitals and inquired first and foremost about the fate of nuclear weapons. Many post-Soviet leaders were amazed to find that the nuclear issue overshadowed the daunting economic, social, and political crises that besieged their countries. If nuclear weapons were so important to the United States, some of them concluded, they must be important for us, too, not least as a way to keep U.S. attention focused on our well-being and security. This was essentially the position of those who urged Ukrainian officials to prolong the country's denuclearization and, to an extent, those who were behind Kazakhstan's initial reluctance. Post-Soviet leaders turned Baker's "Yugoslavia with nukes" formula on its head, arguing that if Yugoslavia had had nuclear weapons, the West would not have permitted the country to descend into violent chaos.¹⁹⁶ This question—how to address nuclear proliferation challenges without unduly elevating the value and prestige of nuclear weapons as the sole issue on which a great power will engage with a state it would otherwise disregard—will remain a challenge for U.S. nonproliferation policy from Iran to North Korea.

The NPT matters. The NPT and the nonproliferation norm it represented and perpetuated framed and guided nuclear discourses in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine from beginning to end. The NPT provided the normative framework for nuclear possession and outlined criteria for legitimizing it. Even though Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine were not proliferators in the traditional sense (insofar as they did not initiate programs to build nuclear weapons and instead inherited nuclear armaments from a collapsed state), the mere fact that their predicament involved nuclear explosives put them into the normative territory governed by the NPT. Political actors in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, whose initial knowledge of the regime and its norms was limited, found themselves incapable of engaging with their interlocutors other than in terms and categories of the NPT. Both Ukrainian and Kazakhstani politicians attempted to frame the issue in terms of succession to the USSR, a nuclear-weapons state under the NPT. They argued that their newly independent countries had the right to share this status equally with Russia.

Without the NPT, such claims would have been much more potent. The succession rights of non-Russian former Soviet republics to Soviet conventional weaponry were beyond dispute, and Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine were also undoubtedly Soviet successors in the nuclear realm, as the START

196. "Trip Report: Discussions of CISAC Plutonium Study. Kiev, Ukraine, 30 May–3 June 1994," p. 15, in NSA, B. 111.

process clearly demonstrated. Yet because the NPT existed, legitimizing these succession rights as a permanent status or admitting the non-Russian states as additional nuclear-weapons states into the international nonproliferation regime was untenable because it would have been contrary to the object and purpose of the treaty. Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine inadvertently became cases of “potential nuclear proliferation,” a domain governed by the NPT, and officials in the three countries had to relate their claims to the terms of the treaty.

Officials in both Ukraine and Kazakhstan contended that the NPT did not adequately address their countries’ status as contributors to the Soviet nuclear program and successors of the USSR. Yet tempting though it was to dismiss the treaty as irrelevant or unfit for their situation, both governments attempted to reconcile their claims with the NPT. Ukraine did so by attempting to create a new category of nuclear “ownership” as distinct from “possession” under the NPT, and Kazakhstan did so by claiming “temporary” nuclear-weapons status and referring to the date of nuclear testing on Kazakh soil, an NPT criterion.

One might argue that the United States and Russia, which also happened to be NPT depositary states, were entitled to frame the post-Soviet nuclear predicament solely in terms of nuclear proliferation and to disregard arguments based on state succession or national security. But officials in Washington and Moscow, who had engaged in the NPT dialogue for many years, were in agreement on the necessity of getting Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine to denuclearize and join the NPT. The U.S. and other NATO governments made clear that they would not grant diplomatic recognition to the newly independent states unless those states committed themselves to join the NPT. Even if U.S. policymakers had been driven by a different security rationale—a rationale more sympathetic to Ukraine’s and Kazakhstan’s arguments of entitlement to nuclear weapons as legal successors of the USSR—they would have had to justify and substantiate domestically and internationally how such a position could be reconciled with the NPT and what precedent it would set for other states.

Conversely, without the normative backing of the prominent and nearly universal NPT, U.S.-Russian pressure on the Soviet nuclear successors might have backfired. This was particularly true of Ukraine, which had a greater capacity to establish operational control over its nuclear inheritance and a greater reason to fear Russia, a nuclear state. Although Ukraine would likely have balked if faced with concerted great-power pressure, in a world bereft of the NPT its disarmament might have taken longer and required greater and more sustained effort on the part of the United States.

Identity matters. The constitution of the space outside the regime also played a role in shaping the options post-Soviet states faced. Understanding what it means to be inside a regime also entails an idea of what it means to be outside it. In the early 1990s, when the post-Soviet states were deciding what to do about their nuclear inheritances, terms such as “pariah,” “rogue,” or “outlaw” were in use by the U.S. foreign policy establishment and internationally in reference to North Korea, Iraq, Iran, and Libya because of their suspected noncompliance with the nonproliferation regime. All four faced opprobrium and sanctions from the United States and the international community.¹⁹⁷ Decision-makers in Kyiv and Almaty had no reason to believe that they would be treated differently.

Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine all desired to join the “civilized” world on good terms, as aspiring democracies and good international citizens, and not as “pariah” states defying international rules and public opinion. The understanding that the refusal to denuclearize and join the NPT would confer on them an undesirable status was not only a message they received from the United States and Russia, their chief interlocutors in the nuclear domain, but also from the broader international public sphere. Kyiv and Almaty paid close attention to international media reports that depicted their nuclear reservations in a negative light. In the end, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine relinquished nuclear weapons not only because of the things they wanted to get in return but because of the kind of states they wanted to be.

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197. Robert Litwak, *Rogue States and U.S. Foreign Policy: Containment after the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2000), p. xiii.