

Pop-Up Case: Negotiating Ukrainian Security in 1993

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

Use the following historical case to spark discussion and help students to think through what they would do if they were decision makers. See the back of the page for some inspiration for how to structure your conversation.

The Situation:

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

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

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

U.S. policymakers sought to convince Ukraine that its best chance for security lay in building closer ties with the West, but emphasized that it could not do so as long as it possessed nuclear weapons. Facing the choice between disarmament and total isolation, Ukrainian leaders signaled their willingness to disarm in exchange for a Russian promise to respect Ukrainian sovereignty, and a strong guarantee of Ukrainian security from the United States. Preventing nuclear proliferation was Washington's top priority, but the security guarantee Kyiv wanted was risky. It could deter Russian aggression, but if it failed and Russia attacked anyway, the United States could find itself in a conflict with a fellow nuclear power. Improving security in Europe now could increase the risk of conflict later. Wary of these risks, many in the Clinton administration questioned whether assurances—which stopped short of a binding guarantee—could be offered instead, so that in the event of a Russian attack the United States would have the flexibility to respond with sanctions or military aid instead of armed force. Some policymakers worried, however, that offering mere assurances—rather than the guarantee Ukraine wanted—would be insufficient to convince the country to disarm. Meanwhile, negotiations between Ukraine and Russia dragged on, and the threat grew that Ukraine would just walk away and keep its nuclear weapons. The Clinton administration had to decide whether and how it would help secure Ukraine's nuclear disarmament.

Additional Resources:

1. "[Possible Consequences of Alternative Approaches to the Implementation of Ukraine's Nuclear Policy](#)" (February 2, 1993)
2. "[Telephone conversation between U.S. President Bill Clinton and Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk](#) (June 12, 1993)
3. "[Ukraine Finds Nuclear Arms Bring a Measure of Respect](#)," *New York Times* (January 7, 1993)



Decision Point: Set in September 1993

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

NSC members should consider the following policy options:

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

Like Model Diplomacy? Try a full case at modeldiplomacy.cfr.org.

Pop-Up Case Guidelines

Pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies on current events that put students in the shoes of policymakers facing the most pressing issues in international relations. There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips [here](#) and [here](#)). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

Gauge reaction:

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

Think-Pair-Share:

This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook (“think”), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes (“pair”), and then have students report out to the whole group (“share”), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.

Whiparound:

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.



Simple NSC simulation:

If you would like to simulate a simplified version of a more realistic policy debate, you can appoint yourself (or a randomly chosen student) president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones) and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president.

NSC simulation with assigned opinions:

While assigning individual roles for a brief case study is complicated, you could assign opinions. For example, assign one-third of the class to be isolationist, one-third to favor a military response, and one-third to favor a diplomatic response. Let the groups caucus for a few minutes, then present their policy options and debate them, leaving the final decision up to you (or a student) as president.

Note: In our experience, simulations are often most productive if students imagine they are advising a generic president rather than a specific one.

Like Model Diplomacy? Try a full case at modeldiplomacy.cfr.org.