

## Pop-Up Case: Trusting Security Assurances

*Ukraine gave up its nuclear arsenal in exchange for security assurances. Yet those assurances failed to prevent a Russian invasion, raising questions for other would-be nuclear powers about the reliability of outside security assurances and whether pursuing a nuclear program provides the best guarantee of their future security. How should a hypothetical country under threat decide its nuclear future?*

Use the following *hypothetical* case to spark discussion and help students to think through what they would do in policymakers' shoes. See the back of the page for some inspiration for how to structure your conversation.

### The Situation:

Nuclear weapons can offer considerable security to countries that possess them; attacking a country that has nuclear weapons bears a far greater risk than attacking a country that lacks them. Yet most countries agree that more nuclear weapons in the world means a higher likelihood that one will eventually be used, with catastrophic consequences. Given this risk, governments worldwide have worked to limit the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Diplomatic efforts, such as the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), have secured agreements from member countries to either reduce the number of nuclear arms they possess or to not develop them in the first place.

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

The combination of convincing countries they are safe without nuclear weapons and threatening penalties for those that pursue them has prompted numerous governments to abandon their nuclear programs. However, recent events could change that calculus. As harsh as the penalties are, no country has faced direct military action over its nuclear development. Moreover, several leaders have abandoned their nuclear programs only to come under threat later. Facing sanctions and international isolation, Iraq dismantled its nuclear program in the 1990s only to face a U.S.-led invasion in 2003. Similarly, Libya agreed to disarm in 2003 and faced a civil war and a North Atlantic Treaty Organization-led intervention less than a decade later. Most recently in the news, Ukraine relinquished its sizable nuclear arsenal in 1994 in exchange for security assurances from the United States, Russia, and the United Kingdom. Those assurances were ineffective: in 2014 and 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. The United States, although aiding Ukraine with weapons and funds, has stopped short of direct military intervention, in part over reluctance to enter conflict with a nuclear-armed Russia. The invasion underscores both that nuclear-armed countries can act with a degree of impunity and that security assurances for nonnuclear countries are only as strong as their provider's willingness and ability to follow through. Countries looking on could therefore conclude that they cannot trust outside assurances for their security and that developing a nuclear program, or at least building the capacity to do so quickly, could be more worth the risks than they previously thought.

### Additional Resources:

1. [South Africa: Why Countries Acquire and Abandon Nuclear Bombs \(World101\)](#)
2. [Ukraine Gave Up a Giant Nuclear Arsenal 30 Years Ago. Today There Are Regrets \(New York Times\)](#)
3. [In South Korea, Ukraine War Revives the Nuclear Question \(New York Times\)](#)



### Decision Point:

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

#### NSC members should consider the following policy options:

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

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## 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. As an alternative, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g. interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent-less urgent, etc.), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board indicating 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 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”). Have students then 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 must speak and simply does so in the order they’re 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 simply have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.



### Simple Cabinet Simulation:

Appoint yourself (or a student) to be 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. The president should ask questions and ultimately make a decision and explain their choice.

### Cabinet Simulation With Assigned Opinions:

While assigning individual roles for a brief case study is complicated, you could assign the class opinions. For example, divide your class into three groups, and assign each group one of the policy options presented in the case. Let the groups caucus for a few minutes, then present their policy options and debate them, leaving the final decision up to you (or another student) as president.

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