

## Nuclear Weapons Wouldn't Have Saved Ukraine from Invasion. How Can We Expect Them to Save Our Planet?

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“Ukraine should never have given up its nuclear weapons.”

The first time I heard this statement, I was just six years old. That fateful week, then Ukrainian presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko became the victim of an assassination attempt. When I saw his face on TV, misshapen and swollen as a result of his poisoning, I grimaced. My father glanced at the screen and shook his head on the phone knowingly, murmuring to my grandfather in agreement. “If we had only kept the nukes, Russia would not dare to threaten our country today. We would be safe.”

Almost twenty years later, this exact sentiment continues to be echoed among many of my friends and family members. In their belief, nuclear weapons would have served as an infallible component of Ukraine's national security, a failsafe against any future Russian attack. I cannot blame any Ukrainian for this train of thought – prior to the signing of the Budapest Memorandum and the implementation of the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program, Ukraine had the world's third largest nuclear arsenal on its soil. Putting aside the technical challenges of integrating those nuclear weapons into Ukraine's command and control infrastructure, it seems logical that such a substantial deterrent would make any would-be adversary think twice before invading. Admittedly, for a long time, I agreed that keeping its nuclear weapons would have saved Ukraine. Here's why I was wrong.

One of the first things any international relations student learns is the logic of nuclear weapons and deterrence, as theorized by Thomas Schelling. A key principle of Schelling's logic is that of mutually assured destruction (MAD), the idea that states convinced of an existential threat by an adversary's nuclear arsenal are less likely to use their own nuclear weapons for fear of retaliation. Mutually assured destruction deadlocks nuclear-armed states into a form of fragile stability. Too afraid of the risk to their survival that escalation poses, both opponents choose to avoid nuclear war. Because of this balance, Schelling's concept of nuclear deterrence is sometimes credited with saving the world from nuclear annihilation during the Cold War.

If only things were so simple today.

I have no doubt that deterrence worked in the past. Because the world could not invent nuclear

weapons, it was the best option at the time. The alternative, an unbound nuclear arms race, would have certainly spiraled the world into damnation. The question is – will deterrence continue to save us in the future? No.

For one, the very same fragile ‘stability’ of nuclear deterrence has also doomed humanity to the unpredictable confines of the stability-instability paradox. Without clear communication and assessment of adversarial threats between nuclear states, this paradox breeds insecurity. Can such an international order, founded upon a logic of uncertainty, ever be truly safe?

Brinkmanship has also evolved. Advancements in technology have made ‘precise’ strikes through ‘low-yield’ tactical nuclear weapons an ever-expanding possibility. Russia has already threatened the use of these weapons throughout the war in Ukraine, with former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev stating that a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive would necessitate the use of nuclear weapons as recently as July 2023. Though proponents of these weapons insist that their use minimizes risk to civilians and the environment, the fact remains that these are weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, the use of tactical nuclear weapons may lower the barrier for strategic nuclear weapons use too.

There is more. Deterrence invariably depends upon the reasoning of an unpredictable subject: a leader, a tyrant, a national security council. This leads us to the other type of ‘mad’ that Schelling contemplates in his theories – the ‘madness’ of the irrational actor. What happens when we think an adversary will act in one way, but they surprise us by acting differently?

At the onset of the war, I remember the shock many felt. “Why would Putin do this? Doesn’t he understand the consequences?” The simple answer is: yes. He did. He still does. By choosing war, Putin believes that the territorial and political gains of invasion outweigh the consequences levied by the international community. The global community’s perceived irrationality of Russia’s choice to invade should raise some serious questions about the dangers of the stability-instability paradox and what a future with a nuclear-armed Ukraine could have looked like.

Russia’s contemporary leadership has no problem with sending droves of men – hundreds of thousands – into the Ukrainian ‘meat-grinder’ to die.

In another world, would Russian leadership be willing to tolerate a tactical Ukrainian nuclear strike with a similar number of casualties to today’s figures?

I’m not entirely sure that it wouldn’t, if it meant achieving its objectives and winning the war.

In another world, would a nuclear-armed Ukraine really be willing to sacrifice the lives of millions of citizens by launching a pre-emptive nuclear strike to stop a conventional invasion in the

first place?

I'm not entirely sure that it would.

Such is the problem of modern nuclear deterrence – when red-lines are unknown, there is no telling how far a nuclear conflict will or will not escalate. A nuclear-armed Ukraine would be no safer from these circumstances than the Ukraine of today, and it would have certainly received far less grace from the international community had the country chosen not to give up its nuclear weapons in the 90s.

Then, there is the issue of compellence.

Russia believes it can compel Ukraine into concessions through nuclear blackmail. This compellence has manifested not only through traditional means, but also through state-sponsored nuclear terrorism, as exemplified by the Russian mining of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant – the largest NPP in Europe.

Frustratingly, a sizeable number of scholars, journalists, and politicians have taken the bait – insisting that Ukraine must be brought to the negotiating table by virtue of Russia's nuclear hedging. Perhaps worst yet is the indication that some countries may be limiting, or spreading out, their weapons deliveries to Ukraine over fear of escalation with Russia. These actions have emboldened Russia to continue using nuclear coercion as state policy and have caused damage to the global nuclear non-proliferation regime.

We should not have to live in a world where the threat of nuclear destruction calls into question our morals, nor our dedication to the principles of liberty and justice. The only way to end this cycle of violence is to abolish nuclear weapons, once and for all.

Undoubtedly, there are many challenges to worldwide nuclear disarmament. The fact that so many Ukrainians – including myself – have questioned the merit of giving up the country's nuclear weapons is a testament to the difficulty of the choice that lies ahead of the international community. However, just because something is difficult does not mean we should not try to achieve it.

Despite the potential costs to its national security, Ukraine made the right choice all those years ago. When the war finally ends, whenever that may be, it is up to the rest of the world to follow in its footsteps.