8 Proliferation and Non-Proliferation in Ukraine: Implications for European and US Security
Stephen Blank

[Ukraine inherited nuclear weapons when the USSR collapsed. It did not develop them. By 1993 Ukraine’s public and élite were increasingly strongly inclined to keep control and ownership over these weapons, although Ukraine formally agreed to accept the START-I treaty, dismantle, and then transfer control over the weapons to Russia. Yet in January 1994 Ukrainian President Kravchuk signed a treaty with the United States and Russia to dismantle these weapons and return them to Russia in return for substantial economic and security guarantees. Therefore, we must explain why Kravchuk initially manoeuvred to keep the weapons and then ultimately gave them up. Ukrainian ‘nuclearization’ was as much political as military. Today nuclear weapons are as much tools of political bargaining as they are of military threat and deterrence. This insight helps clarify Ukraine’s actions. William Overholt’s ‘checklist’ of motives for states to go nuclear also comports well with Ukraine’s motives. The decision to forgo nuclear weapons can also be explained. Undoubtedly this issue also has profound implications and repercussions for European security and the future of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Since the NPT came up for renewal and review in 1995, Ukraine’s ultimate decision also had critical importance abroad.

1 UKRAINE’S OBJECTIVES

Ukraine’s military doctrine stated its intention to be a non-nuclear state, renounced territorial claims against anyone, and claimed that Ukraine had]
no enemies. Indeed the doctrine urged nuclear free zones and regional security in Eastern Europe. But any state ‘whose consistent policy constitutes a military danger for Ukraine, leads to the interference in internal matters, and encroaches on its territorial integrity or national interests’ is viewed as an enemy.³ Obviously that means Russia. Despite its disclaimers, Ukraine also was visibly moving to gain the weapons and positive control of them.⁴

While Ukraine’s sense of threat is well founded, it exploited its potential nuclear status to extort political and economic guarantees and deter Russia, confirming that proliferators use their weapons for bargaining as much as for deterrence or warfighting. As compensation for removing the weapons Kiev demanded from Russia and NATO (and especially the United States) binding military, political, and economic guarantees.⁵ To defray denuclearization’s immense costs during an acute economic crisis Ukrainian officials spoke of billions of US dollars as compensation. While precise figures are unavailable, they apparently sought 2–5 billion dollars. Kiev also sought financial compensation for the highly enriched uranium (HEU) that Ukraine would forgo by dismantling, and which could bring desperately needed billions on the world market. The government sought guarantees that Ukraine would not suffer any outside economic pressure. This mainly refers to Russia’s easy ability to strangle Ukraine’s oil supply by charging world prices for energy sent to Ukraine. Hitherto that energy was shipped below cost, as a subsidy to Kiev. Both states know that Russia can ruin Ukraine’s economy by its control over Ukrainian energy supplies.⁶ Thus Russian energy subsidies was the second condition for denuclearization. Lastly, Ukraine sought from the West, again mainly the United States, a guarantee of political integrity and sovereignty against any Russian attack, conventional or nuclear.⁷ Kiev wanted a guarantee going beyond those offered in the NPT, where any attack by a nuclear state upon a non-nuclear one would be taken to the UN.⁸ Kiev demanded that the United States, and presumably the West, guarantee military action against any state attacking it, i.e. Russia, and that Russia guarantee its borders too. Nowhere was the form of this guarantee stated. Should the US act alone or should it act with and through NATO? Should the guarantee remain strictly limited to conventional counterattacks or escalate to the nuclear level?

Obviously these questions raise the most profound issues of allied and European security. But Ukraine has been unable to fashion a coherent security policy that could answer these questions. Indeed, Ukraine arguably sought the nuclear option because it cannot either afford economically or decide politically how to confront its various military-political-economic challenges by purely conventional military and