

Opinion | Ukraine gave up nuclear weapons at our behest. Here's what we owe them.



The mushroom cloud from a nuclear test above the Pacific Ocean over the Enewetak Atoll in the Marshall Islands. (Los Alamos National Laboratory/AP) (uncredited/AP)

By Jon B. Wolfsthal

February 10, 2023

Jon B. Wolfsthal is senior adviser to the nuclear disarmament group Global Zero, a board member at the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists and an adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security.

The world is on the cusp of a dangerous new nuclear era, and the war in Ukraine might be a glimpse of what is to come.

Reflecting this, the hands of the iconic [Doomsday Clock](#), an indicator reflecting the opinion of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists as to how close humanity finds itself to self-destruction, were recently moved up 10 seconds — to 90 seconds to midnight. This is the closest they have ever been to Armageddon.

But even if the Ukraine war never goes nuclear, any ultimate Russian victory would add to the sense that nuclear weapons are increasingly useful elements of state policy, for both offense and defense.

That said, because Russia retains the ability to escalate to the nuclear level, ensuring Russian defeat is not a simple problem that can be solved by arming Ukraine with every weapons system it requests. To properly appreciate the difficulties, it's important to understand the nuclear history involved.

Moscow has nuclear weapons and Kyiv does not in large part because the United States and its European allies and partners made sure that all Soviet nuclear weapons left in Ukraine in 1991 were relocated to the Russian Federation. When the Soviet Union collapsed, [there were more than 1,900 strategic Soviet nuclear weapons](#) on Ukrainian territory, as well as more than 2,000 strategic weapons in Kazakhstan and Belarus.

While these weapons remained under the control of Russian troops, as did the thousands of tactical nuclear weapons deployed there when the Soviet Union ceased to be, there was a real possibility that they might be seized by their newly independent hosts. Had that come to pass, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus could have emerged as the third-, fourth- and sixth-largest nuclear states in the world. Ukraine's decision to [resist nuclear temptation](#), real and palpable at the time, remains a major security victory.

Any outcome to today's war that fundamentally undermines Ukraine's long-term sovereignty would add to the argument that Kyiv made a fatal error in giving up on nukes. Such a lesson would inform decision-making in other states. Countries interested in territorial aggression will see nuclear weapons as an asset, and will seek to acquire them to advance their goals. At the same time, threatened states will have a stronger incentive to acquire their own nuclear deterrent and avoid relying on U.S. assurances — a worry already [gnawing at U.S. allies](#) uncertain of America's staying power in East Asia or the Middle East.

This is a strong pragmatic case for supporting Ukraine that is distinct from the obvious moral one — that we simply must help a young democracy to defend itself against a neighboring aggressor state. Failing to stand up for a country that chose to disarm itself at our behest sets all the wrong precedents.

That said, these strong logical and moral imperatives to support Ukraine must be tempered with reality. Russia has repeatedly drawn attention to its ability to escalate the conflict, including up to the nuclear level. While we might want to dismiss these as bluffs, President Biden and his key officials clearly understood these risks from the start and have appropriately calibrated U.S. and NATO support for Ukraine to avoid, as they have said, World War III.

It is also why the administration is clearly thinking ahead to the thorny issue of the [end state of Crimea](#) — a likely [tripwire for possible Russian escalation](#). This is frustrating and aggravating, but it is nothing new. It is the same tension that dominated the Cold War division of Europe.

There is no risk-free solution to the war. Giving Ukraine less than it needs to repel Russian invaders and liberate its territory ignores both self-interest and historical obligations. But providing Ukraine with everything it might want could lead to a disastrous broader war that could go nuclear. The middle ground, a long and incremental war, is a horrible prospect for the people of Ukraine, but it might be the only option that provides a plausible pathway for success: one where Russia meaningfully loses but does not escalate.

If we successfully thread this needle — help Ukraine defeat Russia without Moscow resorting to nuclear weapons — there is a chance to reverse some dangerous nuclear trends. Over the past several decades, the United States has overemphasized the benefits of nuclear weapons while underappreciating the financial and strategic costs of those capabilities. The downsides to relying on such weapons for our security include the fact that it makes it harder to condemn and confront states that do the same. And when weaker states can threaten to escalate to the nuclear level, it is harder for the United States to bring its considerable conventional advantages to bear.

Nuclear weapons can work against U.S. security interests just as they can work for them. For that reason alone, the United States cannot give up on the effort to find ways to negotiate agreements with adversaries such as Russia and China to reduce the danger of nuclear conflict, even when the near-term prospects seem dim. The more nuclear weapons spread, and the more usable they are thought to be by anyone (including ourselves), the harder it will be to preserve U.S. security and influence.

Trying times lie ahead. As we weigh how much support the United States should provide to Ukraine, and for how long, we have to keep our obligations, moral and self-interested, in mind. Sadly, not being able to indulge every one of those instincts is just one of the many costs of living in a world backed by nuclear deterrence. If we do get to celebrate Ukraine's victory, we would do well to then re-energize U.S. efforts to reduce the role and utility of nuclear weapons everywhere.