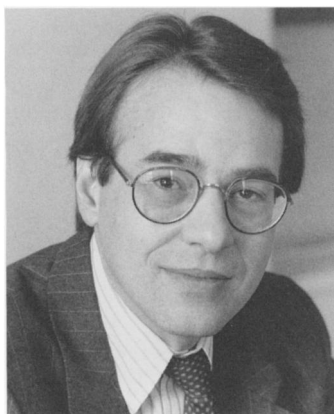


Ukraine's Nuclear Backlash

BY BRUCE G. BLAIR



Since declaring its intention to become a non-nuclear weapons state back in July of 1991, Ukraine has been building up a large conventional army and hedging its nuclear idealism. Ukraine's temporizing on its nuclear future began only a month after its initial bold declaration, when conspirators in Moscow staged their coup and promptly dispatched the commander of the Soviet ground forces to Kiev with an ultimatum to Ukrainian leaders: comply with the diktat of the new regime or the army would move in. To make the threat credible, helicopters reconnoitered the city while Soviet forces specializing in the seizure of government buildings took up positions on the outskirts. For Ukrainians, the incident drove home the precariousness of their sovereignty.

After the ascent of Boris Yeltsin and the Soviet break-up, Ukraine, along with Belarus and Kazakhstan, the three non-Russian states with nuclear weapons on their soil, agreed in May 1992 to implement the START I treaty, adhere to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and eliminate nuclear weapons on their territory within seven years after ratifying the START treaty. But Ukraine's insecurity was taking its toll. Today, legislators appear on the brink of declaring Ukraine an interim nuclear weapons state and of postponing accession to the NPT. The government also demands firm security guarantees, Russian recognition of existing borders, and several billion dollars for dismantling its arsenal.

Increasing the pressure on Ukraine only seems to strengthen pro-nuclear sentiment there. Ukraine might react to extreme coercion by trying to gain independent launch control over the forces on its territory. Today, Russia has firm operational control over the missile forces in

Ukraine. The status of about 670 bomber warheads is less clear. Ukraine may have *de facto* custody of these weapons though it is believed that locking devices using Russian codes remain intact and that Russia earlier removed guidance components from air-launched cruise missiles.

This brewing crisis could grow volatile if Ukraine does move to take full control of the missiles and Russia resists with military force. Although there is no political consensus in Ukraine to take this step, if it manages to seize intact missile forces, it may be able to rapidly circumvent the Russian locking devices. The only major hurdle to establishing a credible missile deterrent aimed at Moscow would then be to program new target sets for the missile computers. All this might be feasible to accomplish within several months, given the freedom to operate with impunity—that is, assuming Russia acquiesces.

To avert a possibly incendiary confrontation over nuclear control and custody, Ukraine should be invited to join Russia and the United States in removing all warheads from missiles slated for elimination under START I and II, and placing them in storage depots in our respective territories under joint monitoring. This agreement would also cover heavy bomber weapons, which were decoupled from the bombers by presidents Bush and Gorbachev. Ukraine would accept that all nuclear weapons on its soil would be expeditiously placed in central depots on Ukrainian territory. American, Russian, and Ukrainian inspectors would continuously monitor the site. Other teams of similar composition would monitor offloaded weapons placed in storage in Russia and the United States under the same agreement.

Ukraine would remain

obliged to honor its previous commitment to eliminate these stockpiles within seven years. This deadline allows ample time to address the questions of Ukrainian security and economic assistance. In the meantime, all the parties could lay to rest many of their current fears. Russia and the United States would be reassured that Ukraine remains a non-nuclear state that could not easily reverse course, and that the operational chain of command would not be splintered. Ukraine would derive considerable security assurance from the presence of American personnel at a critical military facility on its territory. The offloading of weapons and the American presence would also uphold Ukraine's right to prevent Russia from using nuclear weapons deployed on Ukrainian territory. And Ukraine's participation in an equitable multilateral nuclear agreement would enhance its regional and international prestige. Last, storing the warheads in Ukrainian depots monitored by American inspectors would increase Ukrainian confidence that its ownership claims on the weapons components would be honored, that the weapons would not make their way into the Russian inventory, and that the value of the uranium recovered from the weapons would wind up in Ukraine's bank account.

This proposal meshes with related efforts to hasten denuclearization in the former Soviet Union (FSU), notably the American contract with Russia to purchase 500 metric tons of highly enriched uranium from the FSU arsenal. This contract, worth \$8 billion to \$13 billion, offers the primary economic incentive for Ukraine to dismantle its warheads (at Russian facilities) and cash in. ■

Bruce G. Blair is a senior fellow in the Brookings Foreign Policy Studies program. He is the author of *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War* (Brookings, 1993).