Opinion: Ukraine’s Nuclear Threat Today Is Nonexistent

Steven Pifer  March 04, 2022

Russian President Vladimir Putin.
Credit: President of Russia

Trying to justify Russia's unjustifiable invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that Kyiv sought to develop nuclear weapons. That is a glaring untruth, as he well knows.

Thirty years ago, Ukraine had on its territory the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal. Kyiv gave those weapons up—in large part because Russia said it would respect Ukraine's territorial integrity and not use force against it. The country has never sought to reacquire nuclear arms.

A months-long crisis became a war on Feb. 24, when the Russian military launched attacks into Ukraine from multiple directions. Russian officials have strained to come up with reasons.

Speaking to a Russian security council meeting on Feb. 21, Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu suggested that Ukraine could develop tactical nuclear weapons. Putin picked up this theme, saying: “We also know that statements have already been made that Ukraine intends to develop its own nuclear weapons. We cannot leave this real danger without reaction.”

In his Feb. 24 announcement of a "special military operation"—the Kremlin's euphemism for its brutal new assault on Ukraine—Putin stated that those in Kyiv “also claim to possess nuclear weapons.” On March 1, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told the United Nations Conference on Disarmament that Ukraine sought nuclear arms.

None of that is true.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Ukraine had some 4,500 nuclear weapons within its territory. With minimal consultation, the Russian military spirited out the tactical nuclear weapons in early 1992.

That left 1,900 strategic nuclear warheads, more than the combined arsenals of Britain, France and China. As for delivery systems, Ukraine inherited 176 SS-19 and SS-24 ICBMs and 45 strategic Blackjack and Bear bombers. Beginning in the spring of 1992, Ukrainian military personnel maintained the nuclear storage facilities and had sole custody of the spare ballistic missile warheads and nuclear weapons for the air-launched cruise missiles to arm the Blackjack and Bear bombers.

Ukraine lacked the infrastructure to sustain an independent nuclear force, but it very likely had the scientific talent to figure out how to make some weapons operational. The Ukrainian government chose not to do so. It instead agreed to transfer the nuclear warheads to Russia for elimination and to destroy the ICBM silos, ICBMs and bombers.

A major factor prompting Ukraine's agreement to get rid of the nuclear arms and accede to the Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear-weapons state was the Budapest Memorandum of Security Assurances. The memorandum, signed in December 1994 by then-U.S. President Bill Clinton, then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin, then-Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma and then-British Prime Minister John Major, committed the U.S., Russia and Britain to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty and not to use force or threaten to use force against Ukraine.
Ukraine completed shipping the 1,900 strategic nuclear warheads to Russia by June 1, 1996. It finished eliminating the missile silos, ICBMs and heavy bombers several years later.

Unfortunately, Russia shredded the commitments it had made in the memorandum. In March 2014, the Russian military seized Crimea, and Moscow illegally annexed the peninsula. Several weeks later, Russian security and military officers launched a supposed “separatist” conflict in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas. Over eight years, that conflict has claimed some 14,000 lives.

On Feb. 21, 2022, Russia recognized the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk “people's republics” as independent states. Three days later, the Russian invasion began.

Understandably, many Ukrainians now regret the decision to get rid of nuclear arms. On Feb. 22, Ukraine's minister of foreign affairs, Dmytro Kuleba, side-stepped a question about whether Ukraine had made a mistake in 1994. He then noted that “a smarter decision could have been found.” However, on Feb. 23, he stated: “In 1994, we gave up nuclear weapons, from the third-largest nuclear arsenal in the world. We are not going to get nuclear weapons again. Today we expect the world to keep us safe.”

Russia attacked his country the next day, beginning the largest war in Europe since 1945.

Had Ukraine attempted to keep nuclear weapons in the 1990s, it would not have been able to establish close ties with the U.S. and Europe, including with key institutions such as NATO and the European Union.

However, Kyiv did not try to keep nuclear arms, and today it lacks the infrastructure necessary to build and maintain nuclear weapons. It has no facilities for enriching uranium or reprocessing used nuclear fuel to extract plutonium. No evidence suggests the country ever tried to build that infrastructure. Had it done so, the Russians would have almost certainly found out and could cite specifics. Putin, however, has zero evidence, just as he has no proof for his false assertions of genocide in eastern Ukraine or of drug addicts and neo-Nazis running the government in Kyiv.

His decision to invade Ukraine will leave a stain on Russia's reputation for decades to come. Unfortunately, the example of what the Kremlin has done to Ukraine also will discourage states considering getting nuclear arms from giving up those nuclear aspirations.

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