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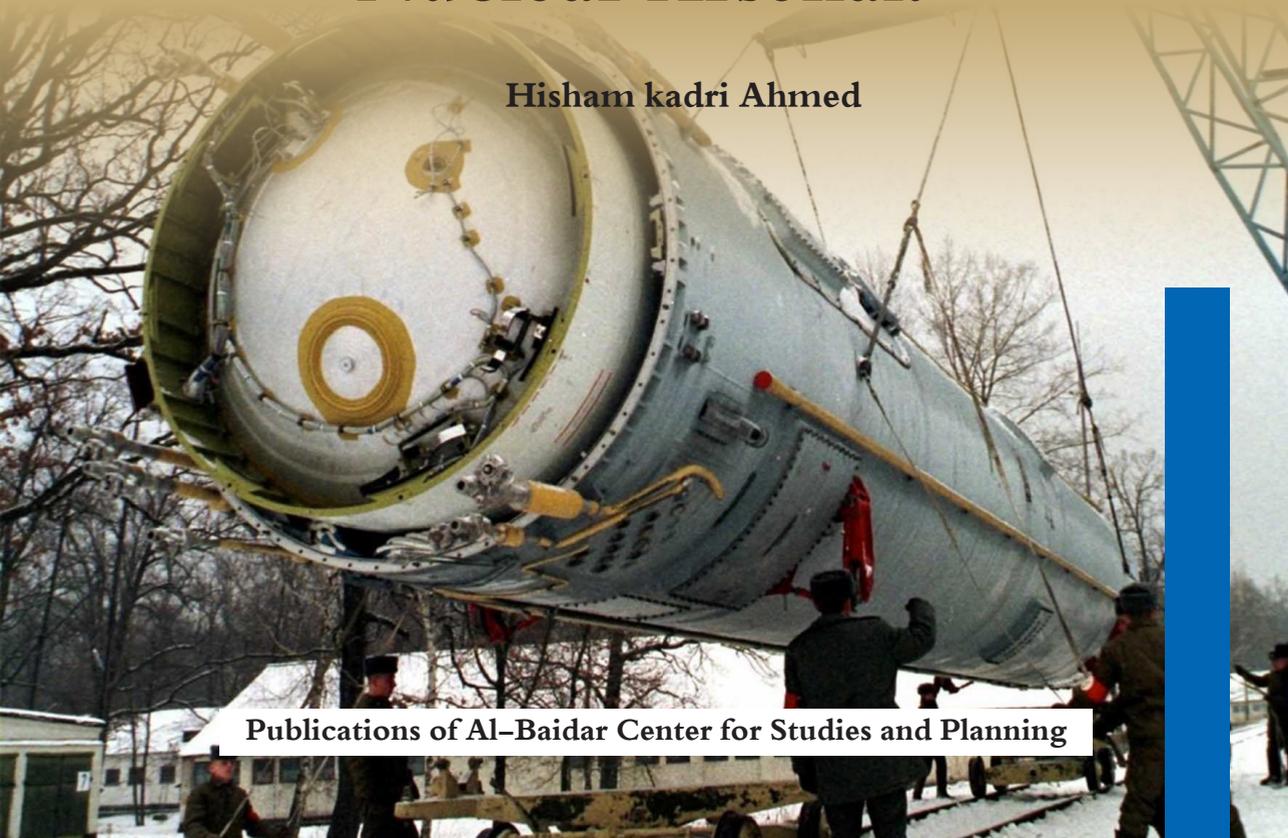
Report Summary

# BUDAPEST SWAPS

## Why Did Ukraine Give Up Its Nuclear Arsenal?

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Publications of Al-Baidar Center for Studies and Planning



### Introduction:

In the wake of Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and its subsequent full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, a compelling argument has gained traction among high-ranking diplomats and analysts in Ukraine and across Europe. They contend that such Russian aggression might never have materialized had Kyiv not agreed to dismantle its nuclear arsenal in 1994. It was in December of that year, under concerted pressure from U.S. President Bill Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin, that Ukraine signed the Budapest Memorandum. Under this agreement, Kyiv committed to surrendering its nuclear stockpile and transferring it to Russia for decommissioning, as part of its international obligation to join the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

Despite the security assurances provided to Ukraine under the Budapest Memorandum, the document lacked any explicit legal or political commitment requiring the signatory states to protect Ukraine or intervene directly on its behalf in the event of foreign aggression. Nevertheless, Ukrainian leadership at the time held a firm conviction that the United States and its European allies would safeguard Kyiv against any future threats. Consequently, it is now widely believed particularly following Russia's 2022 military intervention that maintaining a nuclear arsenal would have served as a potent deterrent against Moscow's expansionist ambitions. Today, Ukraine's decision to relinquish its nuclear stockpile three decades ago is increasingly viewed as a catastrophic strategic blunder, raising profound questions about the feasibility of nuclear disarmament in the absence of concrete security guarantees.

## **I. Ukraine: A Nuclear Power Under Soviet Rule**

Ukraine officially joined the Soviet Union in 1922 as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, emerging as the most significant republic after Russia due to its strategic position on the Black Sea and its vital role as the breadbasket of the empire. Beyond its economic importance, Ukraine played a pivotal role in the development of the Soviet nuclear program. Notably, scientists at the Ukrainian Institute of Physics and Technology in Kharkiv were the first to replicate nuclear fission experiments in 1932, a contribution that paved the way for the detonation of the first Soviet nuclear bomb in 1949<sup>1</sup>. As the Cold War intensified, Ukraine became home to approximately one-third of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. By the time of its independence in 1991, its stockpile was estimated to include between 1,514 and 2,156 strategic nuclear warheads, 2,800 to 4,200 tactical warheads, and 176 Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, in addition to dozens of strategic bombers and missile launchers.<sup>2</sup>

## **2. Ukraine's Independence and the Fate of its Inherited Nuclear Arsenal**

Ukraine declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and in December of the same year, a national referendum on the Act of Independence was held, receiving the support of over 90 percent of the Ukrainian people. Concurrently with this referendum, Leonid Kravchuk was elected as the country's first president. Less than four weeks after Kravchuk's election, Mikhail Gorbachev announced his resignation as the last Soviet leader. The following day, the Supreme Soviet formally announced the dissolution of the Soviet Union and recognized the independence of its constituent republics, thereby ending the political and legal

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1.1.Oleksandr Cheban, Ukraine and Soviet Nuclear History, Wilson Center, Published in 12 August 2015, available at: <https://n9.cl/ydnhq>

2.Kateryna Hodunova, 30 years ago today, Ukraine traded nuclear arms for security assurances, a decision that still haunts Kyiv today, Kyiv Independent, 5 December 2024, available at: <https://n9.cl/q7hjt>

existence of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which had lasted for nearly seventy years.

In an effort to secure international recognition for the new government, Ukraine announced its intention to join the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons as a non-nuclear-weapon state. To reinforce this commitment, Kyiv, alongside the governments of the Commonwealth of Independent States, signed the Minsk Agreement in December 1991. Under this agreement, the signatory nations recognized the Russian Federation as the sole successor state among the former Soviet republics to hold the status of a nuclear-weapon party. In this context, the end of 1994 was set as the final deadline for dismantling these nuclear weapons and transferring them to Russia<sup>3</sup>. The following year, in 1992, Ukraine signed the Lisbon Protocol, which served as a supplementary agreement to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty concluded between the Soviet Union and the United States in 1984. This signature signified Ukraine's formal pledge to renounce its nuclear status and join the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

### **3. The Road to Budapest: Nuclear Disarmament in Exchange for Security Assurances**

Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow reached understandings with Belarus and Kazakhstan to remove their nuclear arsenals, while Ukraine expressed a similar desire to join the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons as a non-nuclear-weapon state. Following the deadlock in bilateral negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow in September 1993, the United States intervened as a mediator. This led to a Trilateral Statement in January 1994, in

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3. Ukraine, Nuclear Weapons, and Security Assurances at a Glance, Arms Control Association, Published in March 2022, available at: <https://n9.cl/gxbyj>

which Ukraine agreed to transfer its strategic nuclear warheads to Russia for dismantling in exchange for security assurances. These efforts culminated on December 5, 1994, with the signing of the Budapest Memorandum by Bill Clinton, Boris Yeltsin, Leonid Kuchma, and John Major. This document, known as the Memorandum on Security Assurances, marked Ukraine's formal agreement to relinquish its nuclear arsenal.

Following the signing of the Trilateral Statement and the Budapest Memorandum, the implementation process proceeded relatively smoothly. By June 1, 1996, Ukraine had transferred the last of the nuclear warheads on its territory to Russia for dismantling. Five years later, the final strategic nuclear missile launcher under the START-1 treaty, an SS-24<sup>4</sup> missile silo, was removed.



Articles 1 and 2 of the Budapest Memorandum stipulate the commitment of the guarantor states to respect Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and existing

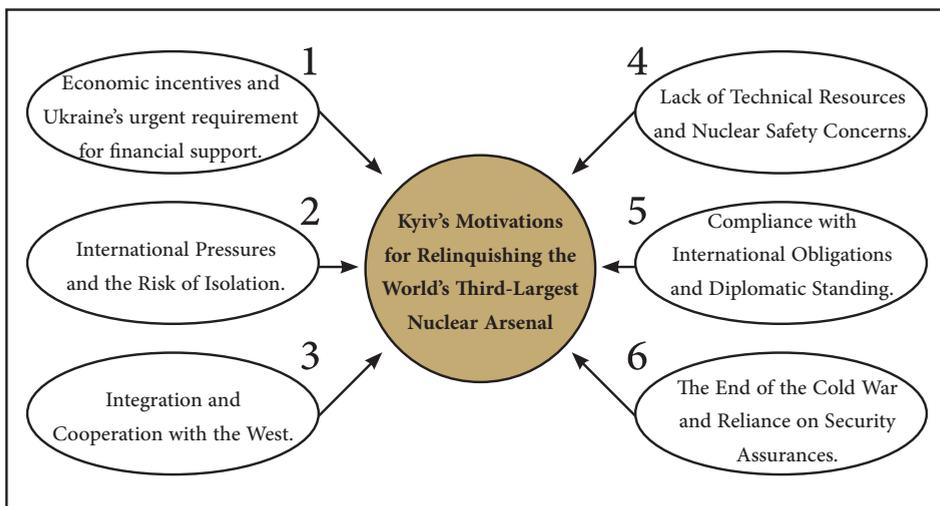
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4. Steven Pifer, *The Trilateral Process: The United States, Ukraine, Russia and Nuclear Weapons*, The Brookings Institution, Published in 9 May 2011, available at: <https://n9.cl/zh6ym>

borders, while refraining from the threat or use of force against its territorial integrity. However, Russia violated these obligations by invading Ukraine. Furthermore, Article 3 mandated refraining from economic coercion; a provision breached not only by Russia but also through efforts by the United States during the Donald Trump administration to leverage military support for exclusive access to Ukraine's rare earth minerals, effectively turning security assurances into a trade-off. Finally, under Article 4, the signatories pledged to seek immediate United Nations Security Council action to assist Ukraine in the event of aggression. Nevertheless, the Council remained powerless following the Russian invasion because Russia, as a permanent member, utilized its veto power to block any international action against it.

#### 4. Kyiv's Motivations for Relinquishing the World's Third-Largest Nuclear Arsenal

Ukraine's acceptance to sign the Budapest Memorandum and its relinquishment of the third largest nuclear arsenal in the world was a result of complex motives, in which political pressures mixed with security and economic calculations, and the most important of these motives are represented in the following:



### 1. Economic Incentives and the Need for Financial Support:

Ukraine's post-independence economic struggles made international financial aid a necessity for its internal stability. Consequently, Kyiv accepted US and Russian pledges of support in exchange for nuclear disarmament. These incentives included Moscow's readiness to waive Ukraine's energy debts and Washington's commitment to provide fair compensation for the economic value of the highly enriched uranium contained in the decommissioned warheads.

### 2. International Pressures and the Risk of Isolation:

The United States and Russia exerted significant pressure on Ukraine to dismantle its nuclear arsenal and join the Non-Proliferation Treaty. They argued that such weapons were unnecessary for Ukraine and that disarmament would ease tensions with Russia and prevent international isolation or sanctions. This was further reinforced by the international community's recognition of Russia as the sole legal successor to the Soviet Union's nuclear status and permanent seat on the Security Council.

### 3. Integration and Cooperation with the West:

The Clinton administration persuaded the Ukrainian government that nuclear disarmament was a strategic move to strengthen political and economic ties with the West. This step was presented as a gateway for Ukraine's global integration, offering promising opportunities to benefit from Western expertise in various fields, including security, economy, technology, innovation, and energy.

### 4. Lack of Technical Resources and Nuclear Safety Concerns:

Ukraine faced complex technical challenges in maintaining and modernizing its nuclear arsenal due to a shortage of expertise and resources. This was intensified

by the fear of a nuclear catastrophe, especially as many warheads approached the end of their operational lifespan. Haunted by the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, the Ukrainian leadership viewed disarmament as a national safety measure to prevent potential radioactive accidents and ensure public security.

#### 5. Compliance with International Obligations and Diplomatic Standing:

The signing of the Budapest Memorandum reflected Ukraine's commitment to the legal pledges it made following its independence, starting with its ratification of the Minsk Agreement in 1991 and the Lisbon Protocol in 1992. By committing to join the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a non-nuclear state, Kyiv aimed to bolster its diplomatic status as a peace-supporting nation, seeking to secure the backing of international organizations like the UN and the EU, following the precedent set by South Africa.

#### 6. The End of the Cold War and Reliance on Security Assurances:

The conclusion of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union reduced the perceived threat of a direct nuclear conflict, encouraging Ukraine to dismantle its weapons. Kyiv viewed the security assurances provided in the Budapest Memorandum as a suitable compensation for losing its nuclear deterrent. However, subsequent years revealed the inadequacy of these assurances in the face of the geopolitical ambitions of major global powers.

**Conclusion:**

Ukraine's decision to dismantle its nuclear arsenal at the end of the 20th century was a result of intersecting domestic economic crises, international pressure, and post-Cold War geopolitical shifts. Although Kyiv traded its deterrent for promises of financial support and security assurances under the "Budapest Memorandum," these guarantees remained purely political and lacked actual protection mechanisms or binding military commitments. Subsequent events, particularly the Russian interventions in 2014 and 2022, have proven that these assurances were merely symbolic "reassurances" that failed to safeguard Ukraine's security and territorial integrity against the ambitions of major powers.

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**Title of Research:** The Budapest Swaps: Why Did Ukraine Abandon Its Nuclear Arsenal?

**Date of Publication:** December 2025

**Note:** The opinions expressed in this research do not necessarily reflect the views of the center, but only the opinions of its author.

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The center aims to utilize the vast amount of potential in Iraq's human resources by organizing programs to prepare and develop promising young people, including leaders capable of proposing, adopting and implementing visions and future plans that advance society and preserve its value-system based on the commitment to a high moral standard and rejection of all types of corruption.

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