The failure of the security assurances contained in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum to prevent Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for eastern Ukrainian separatists has been widely viewed as a serious blow to global nuclear nonproliferation efforts. In particular, observers have maintained that the experience will undermine the future value of security assurances in persuading countries to give up nuclear weapons capabilities or to continue refraining from acquiring them. Observers have also asserted that the experience will reinforce the lesson learned from such previous cases as Iraq and Libya that giving up nuclear weapons or nuclear weapons programs will make a country vulnerable to military attack.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has indeed been a shock to the international order, raising the specter of cross-border violations of sovereignty and territorial integrity that, at least in Europe, was considered a thing of the past. Russia's violation of its Budapest Memorandum commitments has produced acute anxiety and insecurity on the part of its neighbors—the kind of reactions that can give rise to interest in acquiring indigenous nuclear weapons capabilities. However, despite warnings about the adverse implications of the Ukrainian experience for the future of the global nonproliferation regime, a closer look at the case as well as its likely real-world impact suggests that the damage may be much less than some observers have predicted or feared.
The Budapest Assurances

The Budapest Memorandum of Security Assurances was signed by Russia, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States on December 5, 1994. It was the culmination of a nearly three-year effort to address the nonproliferation and other nuclear challenges posed by the demise of the USSR and the inheritance by several newly independent states of former Soviet nuclear weapons and delivery systems that were based on their territory. The main focus of negotiations leading up to the Budapest summit was the disposition of strategic nuclear warheads and systems on Ukrainian soil and the timing of Ukraine’s accession to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Throughout those negotiations, the overriding U.S. goal, according to former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine Steven Pifer, was to “eliminate nuclear weapons on Ukrainian territory as part of a broader effort to ensure that the break-up of the Soviet Union did not increase the number of nuclear weapon states.” While the ultimate outcome of the process—the removal of roughly 1900 strategic warheads to Russia, the elimination of strategic nuclear delivery systems, and Ukraine’s accession to the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state—was essentially understood by the main protagonists at an early stage, the negotiations focused largely on Ukrainian efforts to trade their nuclear forbearance for the greatest possible political, security, and economic benefits, and to mollify Ukrainian politicians who strongly criticized surrendering what they viewed as their country’s rightful and strategically important nuclear inheritance.

Among the benefits Kiev hoped to gain in the negotiations were commitments from key foreign powers that would safeguard Ukraine’s security. Despite Russia’s acceptance of Ukraine’s independence under President Yeltsin, Ukrainians knew that many Russians were unreconciled to Kiev’s breakaway from Moscow, and they feared possible Russian attempts in the future to threaten Ukraine’s interests and even its independence. These fears—and the desire for security guarantees—were reinforced by the acrimonious dispute with Russia over the division of the Black Sea Fleet and a May 1992 resolution by the Russian parliament that declared illegal the 1954 decision by the Soviet Union to cede Crimea to Ukraine.

But the security commitments Ukraine ultimately received—promised in the January 1994 Trilateral Statement by Presidents Clinton, Kravchuk, and Yeltsin, and conveyed later in the Budapest Memorandum—were weak. They mainly reiterated broad international norms of behavior, such as respecting independence and sovereignty as well as refraining from the use of force against

The security commitments Ukraine ultimately received in 1994 were weak.
territorial integrity and political independence—norms that have frequently been ignored in situations around the world. The Budapest Memorandum provided little that Ukraine could count on to ensure its security. It mainly repackaged existing multilateral assurances in a document uniquely applicable to Ukraine. The repackaging had political value for Kiev, but the only new and Ukraine-specific element in the memorandum was the commitment of the parties simply to “consult in the event a situation arises which raises a question concerning these commitments.”4 In March 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry sought to convene those consultations, but the meeting, held in Paris, was attended by only his British and Ukrainian counterparts, not the Russian Foreign Minister.5

The Budapest assurances fell far short of Ukraine’s original demands. Ukrainian officials made clear to the George H.W. Bush administration that simply reaffirming existing multilateral commitments would not provide a sufficient guarantee of Ukraine’s security.6 In July 1993, a senior-level Ukrainian delegation met with Clinton administration officials in Washington and proposed a legally binding treaty on security guarantees.7 But both the Bush and Clinton administrations rebuffed Kiev’s requests for stronger commitments. They were prepared to accept the formulations that eventually appeared in the Trilateral Statement and Budapest Memorandum only because the United States “would be reiterating existing commitments, not undertaking new obligations,” and because they “would be packaged in a document that was not legally-binding.” Moreover, U.S. officials “continually used the term ‘assurance’ instead of ‘guarantee,’ as the latter implied a deeper, even legally-binding commitment of the kind that the United States extended to NATO allies.”8

In the end, Ukraine settled for relatively weak security assurances rather than binding guarantees. Yet it agreed to give up the nuclear weapons on its territory and accede to the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state—largely because it had already concluded that holding on to the nuclear weapons on its territory was not in its national interest. Indeed, even before independence, the Ukrainian parliament, in its Declaration of State Sovereignty on July 16, 1990, committed Ukraine to non-nuclear status. Former ambassador Pifer reports that, soon after independence, senior Ukrainian military officers and foreign and defense ministry officials met to review the practical implications of possessing a nuclear weapons capability and concluded that the technological, financial, and ecological challenges of possessing nuclear arms would be daunting.9

Ukraine had already concluded holding on to nuclear weapons was not in its national interest.
Additionally, Ukrainian leaders recognized that seeking independent control over the strategic nuclear systems on their territory could seriously exacerbate relations with Russia. After independence, Moscow and Kiev worked out an arrangement requiring approval by both countries for ICBMs in Ukraine to be launched. Any attempt by Ukraine to acquire the ability to launch the missiles on its own would have been strongly opposed by Russia and could even have led to a military confrontation.

This assessment that possession of nuclear weapons would not serve Ukraine's interests was reflected in Kiev's May 1992 signature of the Lisbon Protocol to the START I Treaty which provided that Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia would assume the USSR's START I obligations, and that Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan would accede to the NPT as non-nuclear weapon states in the shortest possible time. In an accompanying letter, Ukrainian President Kravchuk affirmed that Ukraine would have non-nuclear status, and that it would eliminate all nuclear weapons and strategic arms from its territory during START's seven-year reduction period. Thus, even before receiving the Trilateral and Budapest security assurances, Ukraine had formally committed not to possess nuclear weapons.

The Kiev government's willingness to give up nuclear weapons was opposed by a vocal segment of the Ukrainian public, especially in the Rada, Ukraine's parliament. These opponents did whatever they could to obstruct, qualify, or delay the implementation of the commitments the government had made. In the run-up to the Budapest Memorandum, Ukraine's bargaining with Russia and the United States over the terms of its renunciation of nuclear weapons was aimed in part at overcoming this resistance.

In the end, the Kiev government accepted a deal that renounced nuclear weapons because it believed that the outcome served overall Ukrainian interests, even though it failed to include the strong security guarantees that it wanted. A key goal that Ukraine thought a deal would serve was a better relationship with the United States, Europe, and Western institutions such as the European Union and NATO—and it believed that insisting on retaining its nuclear inheritance would likely jeopardize any prospect of close ties with the West. This calculation seemed to pay off during a visit to Washington by Ukrainian President Kuchma in November 1994, when he and President Clinton signed a “Charter on U.S.–Ukrainian Partnership, Friendship, and Cooperation,” agreed to cooperate on the safe closure of the Chornobyl reactor, and announced $200 million in U.S. economic assistance to Ukraine.

The bargaining that produced the Trilateral Statement and the Budapest Memorandum yielded additional tangible benefits that strengthened the overall deal from Kiev's perspective and helped placate Ukrainian skeptics.
This included Russia providing fuel rods for Ukrainian nuclear power reactors and agreeing to cancel a portion of Ukraine’s energy debt. For its part, the United States agreed to lighten the burden of denuclearization by providing several hundred million dollars to assist in the elimination of START I-accountable strategic systems on Ukrainian territory. And Moscow agreed that Ukrainian experts could monitor the elimination in Russia of the formerly Ukraine-based strategic warheads so that the Ukrainian government and public could receive the politically important reassurance that those warheads were being dismantled and not incorporated into Russia’s nuclear arsenal.13

Loss of a Nonproliferation Tool?

A frequently voiced narrative about the Ukraine experience has been that Kiev gave up its nuclear weapons in exchange for, and in reliance on, the security assurances contained in the Budapest Memorandum—assurances that it now knows are inadequate. Because of this, countries in the future will no longer rely on such assurances in deciding whether to give up, or continue refraining from acquiring, nuclear weapons—and therefore they will be less likely to choose a non-nuclear course. But this narrative is misleading.

Ukrainian officials presumably expected that the Budapest assurances would provide at least a modicum of protection, even if less than the guarantees they had sought. But they must have known that the assurances they received were not as strong as the guarantees they tried, but failed, to obtain. Yet they were willing to consummate the denuclearization deal because they believed it conferred major benefits other than strong security guarantees and, very importantly, they calculated that retaining nuclear weapons would create more problems than it would solve. This is not to say that the security assurances provided in the Trilateral Statement and the Budapest Memorandum were not important to the bargaining process that produced the eventual outcome. Indeed, they probably played an essential role, as no overall deal would have been acceptable in Kiev if it did not address the security issue in some fashion. But their importance was largely political; they helped build domestic support for the overall package.

What about other countries that gave up nuclear weapons or nuclear weapons programs? Were security assurances of the relatively weak variety contained in the Budapest Memorandum a significant factor in their decisions? The record suggests that they were not. South Africa decided to dismantle the nuclear weapons it had built and join the NPT as a non-nuclear weapon state, not because it received security assurances but because the external security threat motivating its nuclear weapons program had dissipated and President de
Klerk was reluctant to put South Africa’s nuclear weapons in the hands of the black-majority government that would soon take power. Similarly, Argentina and Brazil both discontinued nuclear weapons programs and joined the NPT as a result of their transitions from military to civilian rule. Iraq ended its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons after its defeat in the first Gulf war when it faced punishing sanctions, inspections of unprecedented intrusiveness, and a credible, ongoing threat of the use of military force. Libya gave up its nuclear and other WMD programs for several reasons, including fear of being on the U.S. hit list after the invasion of Iraq as well as its desire to lift sanctions, promote investment and trade, and end its international isolation; but it did not ask for security assurances.

So neither Ukraine nor other countries that gave up nuclear weapons or nuclear weapons programs did so relying on Budapest-type security assurances. Assurances that simply reaffirm existing international norms of behavior have never been an important tool in the nonproliferation toolkit, except perhaps in the political role they seem to have played in Ukraine in placating domestic critics. The takeaway here is not that a once-valuable nonproliferation tool has been discredited. Instead, the Ukraine experience provides further confirmation of what was already widely understood: Budapest-type assurances cannot reliably guarantee the security of states that choose to give up nuclear weapons.

**Assurances v. Guarantees**

While the Ukraine experience has further exposed the weakness of Budapest-type assurances—and made it even less likely than before that they will play a role in future nuclear decision making—that experience should not, and hopefully will not, cast doubt on the importance to nonproliferation of the much stronger types of security commitments that have played, and must continue to play, a vital role in reducing incentives for states to acquire nuclear weapons capabilities.

The most reliable form of such commitments is a legally-binding mutual defense treaty of the type the United States maintains with such allies as Japan, South Korea, and members of NATO. The reliability of these mutual defense treaties is greatly bolstered by their ratification in the U.S. Senate, making the pledge to come to the defense of U.S. allies formal and supported explicitly by both branches of government. But the credibility of the pledges depends on more than words on paper. Their credibility—both in the minds of U.S. allies
and potential adversaries—is reinforced by such tangible demonstrations of commitment as the stationing of U.S. military forces, joint military command arrangements, missile defense deployments, and robust defense cooperative ties, as well as by such less tangible factors as strong political relationships, common economic interests, and shared values.

These alliance security commitments—often referred to as security “guarantees” to distinguish them from security “assurances,” which are generally regarded as much less powerful and committal—have played a major role in the nonproliferation regime. They have been a critical factor in persuading U.S. allies—including several that have had the technical capability to produce nuclear weapons and have faced threats that might otherwise have motivated them to pursue indigenous nuclear deterrents—that their security will not be jeopardized by continuing to refrain from acquiring nuclear weapons. But the future nonproliferation value of these alliance guarantees cannot be taken for granted. Especially in the face of potential threats from Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, the United States and its allies must constantly work to ensure that their mutual defense ties remain strong and credible.

While legally-binding mutual defense arrangements are the strongest type of security guarantee, the United States has developed close security ties with a number of countries that are not formal allies, but that enjoy a significant measure of protection against external threats from their relationship with the United States. Often such countries are referred to as U.S. “security partners” rather than allies. The strength and deterrent value of these relationships are based on a variety of factors including political or historical ties, a sizable U.S. military presence on the partner’s territory or in its region, military assistance ties, and powerful economic interests such as access to oil or other resources. Instead of a formal pledge by the United States to come to the defense of such countries, there is a tacit recognition—by these security partners as well as their potential adversaries—that their security is important to Washington and that, if necessary, the United States can be relied upon to act in support of their interests.

For example, there is no formal commitment by the United States to come to the defense of Saudi Arabia. But when Iraq occupied Kuwait in August 1990 and posed an imminent threat to Saudi Arabia, the United States sent a massive array of military forces to the Kingdom and led an international coalition to forcibly evict the Iraqis from Kuwait. Reinforcing the credibility of the tacit U.S. commitment to Saudi Arabia has been a vital U.S. interest in ensuring access to the Gulf region’s energy resources.

Similarly, while there are no formal security ties between the United States and Israel, the two countries are allies in all but name. Because of political and
historical bonds, strong defense and intelligence ties, shared democratic values, and the close relationship between Israel and its supporters in the U.S. Congress and U.S. public, there is a wide expectation that, if necessary, the United States would come to Israel's defense in a crisis. Of course, given Israel's powerful conventional military capabilities, its own nuclear deterrent, and its determination to be able to “defend itself by itself,” direct U.S. involvement in hostilities involving Israel has not been necessary. Nonetheless, the U.S. commitment to Israeli security has been clearly demonstrated by Washington's long-standing pledge to help Israel maintain a “qualitative edge” in military capabilities over its neighbors, including by providing advanced U.S. weapons systems and supporting such Israeli defense programs as the Arrow missile defense system.

Like in the case of formal mutual defense agreements, the credibility of such less formal security relationships and their value as a deterrent cannot be taken for granted. The reassurance they provide must constantly be reinforced by both tangible and intangible demonstrations of commitment.

In terms of reducing incentives to acquire indigenous nuclear weapons capabilities, these less formal commitments to U.S. partners cannot be expected, in most cases, to be as valuable as the more formal guarantees to U.S. allies. But they can give partners in such less formal security relationships greater incentives to remain non-nuclear than exist in the case of countries like Ukraine, which have few security links to foreign powers and must instead rely largely on Budapest-type norms of international behavior and their own conventional defense capabilities.

**Broader Implications of the Ukraine Case**

So, the Ukraine experience does not appear to warrant a fundamental rethinking of the value to global nonproliferation goals of Budapest-type security assurances or much stronger security guarantees. The former have seldom, if ever, played a critical role in persuading countries to give up or refrain from acquiring nuclear weapons, and the Ukraine case highlights that conclusion. The latter, on the other hand, have played a critical role and will continue to do so, provided their credibility is constantly reinforced.

But leaving aside the question of the utility of various forms of security commitments, what about the broader implications of the Ukrainian experience for the future of nonproliferation? A number of observers have been quick to draw general conclusions from the Ukraine case, usually predicting that it will have far-reaching negative consequences. Walter Russell Mead asserts that, if Ukraine is left “twisting in the wind” and “ends up losing chunks of territory to
Russia, it is pretty much the end of a rational case for nonproliferation in many countries around the world.”

The implication is that, as a result of the Ukraine experience, incentives to forgo nuclear weapons in the future will be significantly reduced, resulting in an increase in the number of countries armed with nuclear weapons. But such a prediction ignores the country-specific circumstances that tend to drive national nuclear choices. To get a more realistic picture of whether and how the Ukraine case will affect the future of nonproliferation, it is necessary to focus on particular countries.

Ukraine

In the wake of Russian aggression, Ukrainians will give serious consideration to how best to safeguard their security. Among their options is to attempt to join NATO or to acquire nuclear weapons. In December 2014, in a step intended to move Ukraine closer to NATO, the Rada adopted and President Petro Poroshenko signed a law revoking a constitutional provision codifying Ukraine’s non-aligned status. Recognizing Moscow’s extreme aversion to Ukraine joining NATO, Poroshenko made clear he was not pushing for early membership, indicating that a referendum would be held sometime around 2020, after the reforms and investments needed to meet NATO requirements had been carried out.

But Ukraine’s possible path to NATO membership is not only long; it is also very uncertain at best. Although strong U.S. pressure produced language in NATO’s 2008 Bucharest Summit Declaration that Ukraine and Georgia “will become members of NATO,” Germany and France blocked a decision to give those countries a MAP (Membership Action Plan), a critical step toward membership. In the wake of the Ukraine crisis, Kiev’s membership has become even more problematic. Concerned that membership or even steps toward membership would trigger a harsh Russian reaction and dramatically increase tensions, Germany, France, and several other NATO members have made clear that they do not support Ukraine’s entry into NATO. German Chancellor Angela Merkel reportedly said that membership “is not on the table,” and German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier added that he sees “a cooperative relationship between Ukraine and NATO, but no membership.” French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius further asserted that when Ukrainians say their “goal is Ukraine’s accession to NATO, this evidently creates great problems.” And at a February 5 press conference in Paris, French President Francois Hollande said that Ukraine’s NATO membership would be
“undesirable” for France. For the foreseeable future, therefore, Ukraine’s entry into NATO appears to be ruled out.

Assuming that joining NATO is unlikely, some Ukrainians have recently talked about acquiring nuclear weapons. In September 2014, Ukrainian Defense Minister Valery Geletey stated at a news conference in Kiev that, “if today we cannot defend [Ukraine], if the world will not help us, we will be forced to return to creating this weapon, which will defend us against Russia.” He later clarified that changing Ukraine’s nuclear status is not on the agenda right now. Some members of the Ukrainian parliament have also been outspoken in their support for reconsidering the nuclear option. “We gave up nuclear weapons because of this [Budapest Memorandum] agreement,” stated Rada member Pavlo Rizanenko, and “now there’s a strong sentiment in Ukraine that we made a big mistake.”

While some Ukrainians may well want to revisit their renunciation of nuclear weapons, it is likely that any internal reconsideration of the nuclear option would come to the same conclusion that was reached before. Unlike the situation in the early 1990s, when becoming a nuclear power was a matter of acquiring operational control over nuclear weapons already on its territory, Ukraine now would have to construct new nuclear facilities to produce the necessary fissile material, design and fabricate the warheads (Soviet-era warheads were produced in Russia), and—assuming it would want confidence in the performance of indigenously produced nuclear weapons—pay the high political price of carrying out nuclear tests.

Although Ukraine’s expertise is more in the area of missile delivery systems than in nuclear weapons, it clearly has the technical capability to succeed in becoming a nuclear power. But the effort would be expensive at a time when Kiev has other pressing priorities, and it would take a substantial period of time. Moreover, the move could be expected to elicit a strong negative reaction from the international community and undermine prospects for greater ties with the West. It would also become a source of great friction with Russia, reducing the likelihood of bilateral reconciliation and perhaps even creating the risk of armed intervention by Moscow to prevent Ukraine’s acquisition of a nuclear deterrent.

A fundamental question Ukrainians would have to ask themselves is whether their possession of nuclear weapons would have deterred Russia’s annexation of Crimea or its active involvement in support of eastern Ukrainian separatists. Of course, no one can be certain of the answer, but a strong case can be made that Ukrainian nuclear weapons would not have prevented Russian aggression. Nuclear
weapons can be effective in deterring the use of nuclear weapons as well as large-scale conventional military attacks. But their utility in deterring much lower-level acts of aggression is highly questionable, especially when the aggression is disguised and calibrated to fall well below the threshold that might be expected to trigger a nuclear response.

Could Ukrainian nuclear weapons have deterred Russia’s “little green men” from occupying Crimea, prevented the stage-managed vote in Crimea to join Russia, or stopped eastern Ukrainian rebels and their Russian supporters from pursuing their insurgency? For each of these provocations, the answer is almost surely no. While a Ukrainian nuclear capability might have given Putin some pause, he is likely to have gone forward in any case, both because of the high importance he placed on pursuing his goals vis-à-vis Ukraine and because he would have calculated that his low-level, stealthy tactics would not have led to a decision in Kiev to use nuclear weapons.

In considering whether to opt for nuclear weapons, it would also be useful for Ukrainian officials to recall past cases in which aggressors attacked states that possessed nuclear weapons—among them, Argentina’s attempt to seize Britain’s Falkland Islands, Arab states’ attack against Israel to start the Yom Kippur War, and Pakistan’s takeover of India’s outpost of Kargil in Kashmir. Nuclear weapons did not deter any of these attacks, just as Ukrainian nuclear weapons would not have prevented Russia’s aggression.

In fact, Ukraine’s vulnerability to Russian aggression resulted from factors other than the absence of an indigenous nuclear weapons capability. One of those factors was the weakness of Ukrainian conventional military capabilities. A report by the Center for Army, Conversion, and Disarmament Studies, a military think tank in Kiev, maintained that the Ukrainian army had been “destroyed” by the low priority given to military spending and endemic corruption.24 The poor showing of Ukraine’s conventional forces, especially when regular Russia army units directly intervened in August and easily drove back Kiev’s troops from their positions, revealed the extent to which the Ukrainian military had been hollowed out by years of underfunding and neglect.

Perhaps a more fundamental source of Ukraine’s vulnerability was its failure of governance—the inability of the Kiev government to overcome corruption, cronyism, and factionalism, and build national institutions capable of improving economic conditions as well as commanding the loyalty and support of all Ukrainians, east or west. It was this dysfunction that contributed to the...
dissatisfaction and internal divisions that Putin was able to exploit, first in Crimea and then in eastern Ukraine.25

So in deciding how best to safeguard their security, Ukrainians are unlikely to go for nuclear weapons. Valery Chaly, deputy chief of the Ukrainian presidential administration, seemed to preview this conclusion in October 2014 when he declared that “Ukraine has neither plans, nor intentions, nor real opportunities for acquiring a nuclear status in the long run.”26 Instead, Kiev is likely to seek the protection it hopes will come from stronger ties to the West, including economic links to the European Union. If it is unable to achieve NATO membership, it will at least push for significant defense cooperation with Western countries that would help strengthen its conventional military capabilities. At the September 2014 Wales summit meeting, NATO members pledged their support for various measures designed to enhance Ukraine’s ability to provide for its own security, including greater interoperability between Ukrainian and NATO forces.27 But perhaps the best way to protect Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity against Russian encroachments would be to pursue the domestic reforms needed to boost its economy, reduce internal divisions, and increase the authority and appeal of national institutions.

Georgia and Moldova

In considering the potential proliferation fallout from the Ukraine case, it is important to look at countries that may regard themselves at greater risk as a result of Russian actions against Ukraine. Two such countries are Georgia and Moldova, both of which have breakaway regions supported by Moscow. Since the 2008 Russia–Georgia war, Tbilisi has feared that Russia, having recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, would move to annex the two separatist regions, a fear heightened by the annexation of Crimea. To address their concerns about Russia, the Georgians have long been interested in NATO membership. But despite the 2008 NATO summit statement that Georgia “will become” a NATO member, Georgia, like Ukraine, has found its path to entry impeded by concerns, primarily among Europeans, that membership would greatly heighten tensions with Moscow. With NATO members taking the view that border issues (i.e., disputes over South Ossetia and Abkhazia) should be resolved before membership, there are no expectations for near-term Georgian entry.

Nonetheless, NATO has strengthened its defense ties with Georgia in recent years. At its Wales summit meeting, NATO endorsed a package of measures, including defense capacity building, training, exercises, strengthened liaison, and enhanced interoperability, designed to help Georgia provide for its own security and move closer to NATO membership.28

Like Georgia, Moldova is deeply concerned about Russian designs on its separatist region, Transdniester, where 1500 Russian troops are stationed. In the
aftermath of Russia’s actions against Ukraine, Moldovans have expressed fears about Moscow’s stated interest in recreating “Novorossiya,” which could include Transdniestra as well as parts of Ukraine. But Moldova’s approach to protecting its security is different from Georgia’s. While Moldova has signed an association agreement with the European Union, it has made clear that it has no intention of joining NATO. In September 2014, Moldovan Prime Minister Lurie Leanca stated that “our neutrality is a reliable pillar for solving the Transnistrian conflict and eliminates all possible Russian fears on security issues.” He added that “Moldova’s proximity to the European Union is not a threat to Russia’s security interests.”

While Georgia and Moldova have taken different approaches to safeguarding their interests against further Russian infringements of their sovereignty and territorial integrity, neither one has demonstrated any interest in acquiring nuclear weapons. Both countries lack the technical infrastructure and economic resources needed to pursue a nuclear capability for the foreseeable future, and both presumably recognize that any indication that they were moving in that direction could trigger a dangerous confrontation with Russia.

The Baltics and Poland

Among the countries most unnerved by Russian aggression in Ukraine are the three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, all former republics of the Soviet Union—and Poland, a former member of the Warsaw Pact. Especially unsettling to Estonia and Latvia, with their large minorities of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, was President Putin’s July 2014 statement about Moscow’s responsibility to protect Russians wherever they are located. Repeated Russian violations of Baltic airspace and maritime incursions as well as Russian military exercises in Kaliningrad have added to their concerns. The response of the Baltic states and Poland to the heightened level of threat has been a combination of strengthening their own defense capabilities—including Lithuania’s creation of its own rapid reaction force and Poland’s redeployment of troops from bases in western Poland to positions in the east—and appealing to their NATO allies to increase their military presence on Baltic and Polish territories.

The United States and other NATO members responded with several stopgap measures, including the U.S. deployment of 150 troops to each of the Baltic states and Poland on a rotating but persistent basis as well as a substantial expansion of NATO’s shared mission of patrolling Baltic airspace. At the Wales summit, NATO outlined broader, longer-term plans for assisting its eastern allies, including enhanced exercises, transferring and prepositioning weapons systems and other military equipment, stationing military personnel on a rotational basis, and establishing a rapid response force that would be able to
deploy to beleaguered allies in a few days. In a reference to Russian tactics in Ukraine, the NATO leaders said, “We will ensure that NATO is able to effectively address the specific challenges posed by hybrid warfare threats, where a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measure are employed in a highly integrated design.”

On route to the Wales summit, President Obama stopped in Tallinn and gave a speech intended to reassure NATO’s new allies regarding the U.S. commitment to their security: “The defense of Tallinn and Riga and Vilnius is just as important as the defense of Berlin and Paris and London,” the President declared. “Article 5 is crystal clear. An attack on one is an attack on all. So if, in such a moment, you ever ask again, who'll come to help, you'll know the answer: the NATO alliance, including the armed forces of the United States of America, right here, present, now.”

While the Baltic states and Poland welcomed the statements and concrete steps taken by their allies, they would have preferred more. Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski noted that “so far, the only permanent military institution that we have is a conference center. We would welcome a prominent, major presence.” His Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, said that “we are gaining something step by step, but the pace of NATO increasing its military presence could be faster.” Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves called for permanent NATO bases in Estonia. “We should not have NATO with two-tier countries: with NATO permanent bases and without. This is the wrong signal to send to the potential aggressor.” But whatever frustration these frontline states may feel, it is clear that they all regard their membership in NATO as the key to their security. There are no indications that any of them would entertain the notion of pursuing a nuclear weapons capability.

At the same time, they and other new NATO countries strongly support maintaining the deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in several European countries. Although a number of western European allies had in recent years argued that forward-deployed U.S. nuclear weapons were no longer necessary and could be withdrawn, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine —and the conviction of the NATO members most exposed to the Russian threat that those weapons remain critical to deterrence—has essentially taken off the table the option of removing U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe, at least for quite some time. Indeed, in addition to the increased conventional military support that new NATO countries hope to receive from their allies, the preservation of NATO’s nuclear deterrent, including forward-deployed U.S.
forces, is a significant factor further reducing any incentives those countries may have for acquiring their own nuclear capabilities.

**Japan and South Korea**

Among the states often considered potential candidates to join the nuclear club are Japan and the Republic of Korea. Both clearly have the technical skills, infrastructure, and economic resources to produce nuclear weapons. Both face growing military threats from neighboring countries that possess nuclear weapons. And both have entertained the idea of acquiring nuclear weapons in the past.\(^{38}\)

But the Ukraine case will not materially affect prospects for either country to reconsider its non-nuclear status in the future. Instead, they will be affected primarily by factors much more directly relevant to the two countries’ own security situations—the evolution of regional military threats, the state of their bilateral relations with potential regional adversaries, the development of their own conventional military capabilities, and the perceived reliability of the U.S. alliance commitment to their security.

Japan is concerned by China’s military modernization efforts and its greater regional assertiveness, especially Beijing’s claim to what Tokyo regards as the Japanese Senkaku Islands. It is also concerned by North Korea’s growing nuclear and missile capabilities as well as by the continuing bilateral tensions with both North Korea and China over historical grievances. But at the present time, there is little reason to believe that these concerns will lead to a Japanese interest in pursuing nuclear weapons.

Prime Minister Abe’s determination to strengthen Japan’s self-defense capabilities as well as his government’s reinterpretation of Japan’s constitution to permit collective defense efforts have increased confidence within Japan regarding its ability to address regional security threats. Moreover, the perception in some parts of the world that the United States may be pulling back from its global responsibilities does not seem to have shaken Japanese confidence in the U.S. security guarantee. In addition to continuing to station sizable military forces in Japan, the United States has taken a variety of steps to reinforce the credibility of the mutual defense relationship including support for Abe’s defense policies, close cooperation on missile defenses, a challenge to China’s unilateral declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone, and President Obama’s April 2014 public assertion that U.S. obligations under the U.S.–Japan mutual defense treaty cover all territories under the administration of Japan, including the disputed Senkaku Islands.\(^{39}\)

Moreover, while members of Japan’s national security establishment have from time to time privately debated...
whether Japan should acquire nuclear weapons, the Japanese public remains firmly opposed to Japan becoming a nuclear weapon state.\textsuperscript{40} The South Korean public is much more comfortable with the idea of Seoul possessing nuclear weapons,\textsuperscript{41} and some ROK politicians have openly advocated the return of U.S. tactical weapons to South Korean territory and even consideration of the possibility of the ROK producing its own nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{42} But ROK officials continue to reject the nuclear option. While some South Korean observers have voiced concerns about U.S. willingness to continue meeting its overseas commitments, senior officials and military officers seem well satisfied with current bilateral defense cooperation, including stepped-up preparations for countering possible North Korean provocations, continued robust joint military exercises despite protests from Pyongyang, and the U.S. decision—in light of the continuing North Korean threat—to honor the ROK request to once again defer the transfer of operational control over South Korean forces in wartime from U.S. to South Korean commanders.

Japan and South Korea will both follow the crisis in Ukraine closely and will be attentive to any U.S. actions that might provide clues about Washington's readiness to meet its security commitments to them. But both governments understand the difference between U.S. responsibilities toward Ukraine and U.S. security guarantees to its allies. They will find U.S. responsiveness to the concerns of its NATO allies more relevant to their security than U.S. actions vis-à-vis Ukraine. However, far and away the most relevant indications of U.S. reliability will not be U.S. actions on the other side of the world, but U.S. actions directly in support of bilateral security commitments to them. And at least at the present time, Japanese and South Korean perceptions of the reliability of U.S. security guarantees do not seem to have given them grounds for altering their non-nuclear status.

The Middle East
Speculation about future nuclear proliferation invariably involves the countries of the Middle East. Among the factors currently assumed to motivate countries in the region to reconsider their nuclear options are Iran's nuclear program, the uncertainties and anxieties arising from the turmoil now engulfing the region, and questions about U.S. willingness to remain engaged and committed to protecting the security of its friends.

Saudi Arabia has made no secret of its acute concern about regional developments, especially about the expansion of Iranian influence in the region. The Saudis fear that Washington is inclined to accommodate Tehran at their expense, and to scale back U.S. military presence and commitment to Gulf security. Senior Saudi officials have stated both publicly and privately that they
would feel compelled to pursue nuclear weapons if Iranian nuclear weapons ambitions are not reliably curbed.43

The Obama administration has tried to persuade the Saudis that the agreement the P5+1 countries are negotiating with Iran will prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons. It has also sought to reassure them that the United States is not withdrawing from the region, that it will counter destabilizing Iranian behavior, and that it will stand by its security commitments to the Kingdom and to other Gulf Arab states. By maintaining a strong military presence in the Gulf region and strengthening partner defense capabilities through military sales, training, joint exercises, and collaborative defense planning, the United States has tried to demonstrate that it has, in the words of former Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, a “deep and enduring interest in the Middle East.”44

Depending on the outcome of the Iran nuclear negotiations, Tehran’s regional behavior, and Saudi perceptions of U.S. policies toward the region, Saudi Arabia may at some stage try to pursue a nuclear weapons capability.45 But its options for realizing such a capability are limited. While it certainly has the necessary financial wherewithal, it has neither the technical skills nor the industrial base needed to produce nuclear weapons at Saudi facilities. To produce weapons-grade nuclear material indigenously, the Kingdom would require large-scale foreign assistance, including in sensitive fuel-cycle technologies which most, if not all, foreign suppliers would be unwilling to provide. There has been much public speculation that Pakistan would pay back long-standing debts to the Kingdom by supplying key technologies, nuclear materials, or even nuclear weapons themselves.46 But given the international opprobrium Pakistan faced over A.Q. Khan’s black market activities as well as the more rigorous surveillance of illicit nuclear trade that exists today, it is unlikely that Pakistan would be an accomplice to Saudi nuclear weapons plans.

Egypt is often mentioned as another Middle East state that could decide to pursue nuclear weapons. It has traditionally seen itself as the leader of the Arab world and a potential rival with Iran for regional influence. It was one of the earliest developing countries to pursue a civil nuclear program and even flirted with the development of nuclear weapons in the 1950s and 1960s. After a long hiatus, it is interested in resurrecting its civil nuclear plans and building its first power reactor. It is once again led by a military-dominated government. If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, Egypt could be motivated to try to follow suit, for political as much as security reasons.

But the likelihood of Egypt acquiring nuclear weapons is small. Facing monumental economic problems, Cairo is likely to regard a possible nuclear weapons program as prohibitively expensive and place it low on any scale of national priorities. Pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability could jeopardize the
foreign assistance Egypt desperately needs. The principal security threat to Egypt is internal, which has been highlighted by the recent wave of Islamic extremist attacks against Egyptian armed forces in the Sinai Peninsula. In addition, Egyptian nuclear expertise gained during the Atoms for Peace days has atrophied as a result of the abandonment decades ago of Cairo’s ambitious nuclear power plans. Like Saudi Arabia, it could not produce nuclear weapons indigenously for a very long time. But unlike Saudi Arabia, it has neither the economic resources nor a compelling security motivation to undertake a nuclear weapons program.

Turkey is often assumed to be a potential candidate to seek nuclear weapons. As prospects for near-term membership in the European Union have faded and as the Erdogan government has strengthened Turkey’s Muslim identity, Turkey has increasingly aspired to be a major player in the Middle East. Like Egypt, Ankara sees Iran less as a direct military threat and more as a political rival and supporter of Shia governments and extremist groups that are at odds with Turkey. While its economy has recently experienced a slowdown, its prospects for future growth are good. It is now seeking to build its first nuclear power reactors, and has so far been reluctant to forswear a uranium enrichment capability. Its industrial base is much stronger than either Egypt’s or Saudi Arabia’s, but it would still take a long time to build and operate the specialized facilities needed for a nuclear weapons program.

Turkey’s membership in NATO might be expected to reduce its incentives to acquire nuclear weapons. But disagreements over how to address the Syrian civil war—with Ankara focused on removing the Assad government and alleviating the burden of Syrian refugees while Washington prioritizes the defeat of the Islamic State—may raise the question of whether the NATO guarantee, designed to counter Cold War threats, is sufficient to address Turkey’s current regional concerns. Still, while the NATO guarantee may be seen by Turkey as less relevant today, it is unlikely that Turkish leaders would regard indigenous nuclear weapons as a more relevant response to the sectarian rivalries, internal struggles, refugee migrations, and extremist violence that currently pose the greatest challenges to regional stability and Turkey’s own security.

Syria should figure on any list of Middle East proliferation suspects. North Korea helped it build a nuclear reactor at al-Kibar that was apparently intended to provide plutonium for a Syrian nuclear weapons program. Although the Israelis destroyed the facility in 2007, Syria has subsequently stonewalled IAEA efforts to investigate other Syrian facilities and locations believed to be related to the al-Kibar project. Conceivably, President Bashar al-Assad intends to resuscitate his nuclear plans at a future date. He may well feel that, with the United States, several European states, Turkey, and other countries all trying to
topple him and with Israel repeatedly launching air strikes against Syrian
territory, a nuclear deterrent would be a critical asset.

At the same time, there are formidable, even insurmountable, obstacles to a
Syrian nuclear weapons capability. As long as the civil war and the resulting
devastation of Syria’s economy continue, it is hard to imagine Assad devoting the
necessary resources to such a project. Moreover, with anti-government forces
occupying significant portions of the country, it is exceedingly unlikely that the
government would be able to mount a sustained covert operation without being
detected and becoming vulnerable again to military preemption. Even if Assad
manages to end the civil war and regain control over Syria, he would not have
the technological base to proceed without major foreign assistance, which would
be much more difficult to obtain after Israel’s bombing of the North Korean-built
reactor. In addition, Russia and Iran, while Assad’s main sources of support in
fighting the civil war, could be expected to strongly oppose Syria’s acquisition of
nuclear weapons. So, while a reunified Syria under Assad would have a
motivation to acquire a nuclear deterrent, it would have a very difficult time
doing so. Still, Syria deserves to be put on any proliferation watch-list.

Iraq and Libya cannot be ruled out altogether. After all, each sought nuclear
weapons under Saddam and Qaddafi. But Iraq’s nuclear program has been
moribund since soon after the first Gulf War, and Iraqi scientists who
participated in Saddam’s bomb-building efforts have passed away or moved on
to other endeavors. More fundamentally, the country remains consumed by
sectarian violence, lacks Saddam’s prestige and other foreign policy motivations
for pursuing the bomb, and the two countries with the greatest influence in
Baghdad—the United States and Iran—would both strongly oppose an Iraqi
nuclear capability.

With chaos prevailing today in Libya, the idea of a coherent central
government pursuing a sustained, well-organized effort to acquire nuclear
weapons seems far-fetched. But even if a future government in Tripoli restored
effective control over the entire country, it would face daunting obstacles to
nuclear weapons acquisition. While Qaddafi had a nuclear weapons program
and managed, with the help of the A.Q. Khan network, to procure sensitive
equipment and materials for that program, it lacked the technical expertise
needed to make real progress, and Libya still lacks that expertise. Without
Qaddafi’s megalomania and eccentricity to motivate the acquisition of nuclear
weapons, a future Libyan government may well see little reason to pursue a
nuclear deterrent; its primary security threats are likely to remain internal rather
than external.

The Middle East remains a region of proliferation concern. At least one
country has talked about possessing nuclear weapons and several had nuclear
weapons programs in the past. While most countries in the region still lack the
technological wherewithal to produce nuclear weapons indigenously in the near future, there are potential developments in the region that could increase their incentives to make a run at it, including if Iran becomes a nuclear-armed state and a lack of confidence in U.S. willingness to maintain a strong military presence and support the security of its friends in the region. But whether or not any Middle East country eventually does elect to make a run at nuclear weapons, the incentives and disincentives for acquiring a nuclear capability will be almost exclusively region-specific and country-specific. Whatever “lessons” countries of the Middle East might draw from the Ukraine experience are likely to have little impact on nuclear decision-making in the region.

**North Korea and Iran**

Finally, a conclusion that a number of observers have drawn from the Ukraine case is that countries with nuclear weapons or nuclear weapons programs will be reluctant to give them up in the future for fear of leaving themselves vulnerable to attack. This lesson presumably applies to countries that are being urged to give up their nuclear weapons or nuclear weapons programs, but there are very few such countries. No one expects the five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council to give up nuclear weapons, except perhaps in the distant future if the world gets rid of nuclear weapons. The same is true for India, Israel, and Pakistan. South Africa produced nuclear weapons but dismantled them and joined in the NPT. Argentina and Brazil had programs and gave them up. Belarus and Kazakhstan, like Ukraine, sent their nuclear weapons to Russia. The countries to which this lesson could apply boils down to North Korea, which already has nuclear weapons, and Iran, which had a nuclear weapons development program until at least 2003 and has kept its nuclear options open for the future. Will Ukraine’s experience make either country more likely to hold onto its nuclear weapons (in North Korea’s case) or its future nuclear option (in the case of Iran)?

From the Libya case, North Korea claimed to have learned the lesson about not giving up its nuclear deterrent: “It has been shown to the corners of the earth that Libya’s giving up its nuclear arms...was used as an invasion tactic to disarm the country,” a North Korean spokesperson argued. “Having one’s own strength was the only way to keep the peace.”\(^{47}\) The North Koreans repeatedly cite the threat from an allegedly hostile United States to justify retaining their nuclear weapons. While DPRK leaders have had motives other than fear of the United States for keeping nuclear weapons (e.g., preserving support of the military, promoting regime survival), it is probably true that many North Koreans genuinely believe that abandoning their nuclear deterrent would leave them vulnerable to U.S. pressure or even military attack.

But the Ukrainian and Libyan experiences did not put that idea in their heads. They had decided long before Qaddafi’s fall or Russia’s aggression against
Ukraine to produce a nuclear deterrent and to hold onto it. Ukraine's experience may well reinforce Pyongyang's determination to keep its nuclear weapons. It also gives North Korea an argument to justify its rejection of international demands that it fulfill its denuclearization commitments. But the Ukraine case is hardly the reason North Korea is intent on not relinquishing its nuclear weapons.

According to the U.S. intelligence community, Iran pursued nuclear weapons development prior to 2003, decided to suspend the key weaponization component of the program at that time, and deferred the decision on whether to produce nuclear weapons. We can assume that, within Iran, there are strong advocates of becoming a nuclear-armed state, as well as those who believe that Iranian interests are better served by retaining the capability to pursue nuclear weapons but refraining from exercising that capability. In any future debate between these two positions, we might anticipate that supporters of possessing nuclear weapons will invoke the “lesson” of Ukraine—that acquiring and keeping a nuclear deterrent is essential to ensuring the security of the Islamic Republic. Supreme Leader Khamenei previewed such an argument in discussing the Libyan case: “This gentleman [Qaddafi] wrapped up all his nuclear facilities, packed them on a ship and delivered them to the West and said, 'Take them!'...Look where we are, and in what position they are now.”

Future decision making in Tehran on the nuclear weapons issue will be based on a variety of factors related to Iran's special circumstances including whether Iran believes it can achieve its regional and international objectives without possessing nuclear weapons, its perception of external threats from the United States and elsewhere, the effectiveness of any agreement with the P5+1 in increasing the time and detectability of any nuclear “breakout,” the anticipated international reaction to an Iranian weapons program, and the balance of domestic forces between pragmatists and ideologues. The Ukraine case may be used as an argument in the internal debate on the nuclear issue, but it is unlikely to be a major factor.

Ukraine and the Future of Nonproliferation

In assessing the impact of the Ukraine experience on prospects for proliferation in general, some observers have predicted a significant weakening of the global nonproliferation regime. But proliferation doesn't occur “in general.” It occurs in specific countries with their own perceptions of threat, their own
conventional military capabilities, their own security ties to other countries, their own economic resources, their own technical capabilities, and their own balance of domestic and bureaucratic interests. When one focuses on specific countries and the particular factors likely to drive their nuclear decision making, the outlook is not as pessimistic.

For most countries, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine is not terribly relevant to whether they should revisit their nuclear weapons options. That is the case for most Middle East countries, some of which may develop an interest in pursuing nuclear weapons but not because of any lessons learned from the Ukrainian experience. It is also the case for the United States’ East Asian allies, whose future nuclear choices will be influenced largely by the perceived reliability of U.S. security guarantees, not by any lessons from Ukraine.

This is not to say that the Ukraine case is irrelevant to incentives for reconsidering nuclear options. Moscow’s actions against Ukraine have alarmed countries in Russia’s neighborhood and forced them to consider anew how best to safeguard their security. But several of those states—particularly the Baltic states and Poland—will look to NATO rather than an indigenous nuclear capability to address their fears (although they will insist on the continued deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe). Some of the exposed states, especially Georgia and Moldova, do not have the option of joining NATO, at least not in the near term. But their economic and technical limitations as well as their concern about provoking Russia mean that they do not have a realistic nuclear option. Even Ukraine, the country most directly affected by Russia’s behavior, is likely to decide, even in the absence of NATO security guarantees, that its national interests are best served by remaining non-nuclear while seeking military assistance from the West and integrating with western institutions as much as the traffic will bear.

The failure of the security assurances contained in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum to prevent Russia’s aggression will further decrease the utility of such assurances in persuading countries in the future to give up or refrain from acquiring nuclear weapons. But this is not a significant loss for nonproliferation. While such relatively weak assurances may have played a political role in the past, they have rarely if ever been seen as a dependable guarantor of security.

The Ukraine experience does not, however, discredit the stronger forms of security
commitments that have reduced incentives for U.S. allies and security partners around the world to acquire their own nuclear weapons. Such security guarantees will remain a mainstay of the global nonproliferation regime. Russia’s violation of international norms of behavior will be a reminder of the need to constantly reinforce those guarantees with both tangible and intangible forms of reassurance.

Proponents of nuclear weapons in North Korea and Iran can be expected to invoke the Ukrainian experience to make the case for keeping or acquiring a nuclear deterrent. But such arguments are designed to reinforce and justify pre-existing views; they are not newly learned lessons from Ukraine.

The eventual outcome of the current Ukraine crisis could have some effect on future nuclear decision making. If Russia pays a very high price for its efforts to destabilize Ukraine, both in economic and political terms, it may discourage Russia and other potential aggressors from similar behavior in the future, and this could reduce international concerns that may give rise to interest in acquiring national nuclear capabilities. And if Ukraine receives substantial assistance from the West and survives the current crisis with its sovereignty and territorial integrity intact, this would also reinforce the view that states can protect their security without nuclear weapons.

But the outcome of the Ukraine crisis, good or bad, is likely to have only a marginal effect on the nonproliferation regime. What will drive future decisions on nuclear weapons will be the particular circumstances of the countries involved. In few, if any, cases will the argument “look what happened to Ukraine” be a crucial factor.

Notes

6. Budjeryn, p. 3.
28. Ibid.


34. NATO, “Wales Summit Declaration.”


