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Russia and Ukrainian Denuclearization: Foreign Policy under Boris Yeltsin

The denuclearization of Ukraine in the 1990s was celebrated as a victory of the Russian and American policymakers over Ukrainian nationalists. In reality, though, Russia's desire to see a nuclear-free Ukraine was weak. Moscow postponed taking responsibility for the Soviet weapons, and the initial progress in securing the world's third largest nuclear arsenal was powered solely by Washington. Despite Ukraine's importance and the danger of "loose nukes," Boris Yeltsin's reconciliatory tone toward Kiev was deferent to the American leadership. In 1993, however, Moscow's policy line had changed considerably. Russia began using sticks and carrots to induce Kiev's compliance and sought to limit US engagement. Why did the Kremlin's attitude toward Ukrainian denuclearization change so significantly in the period from 1991 to 1994?

The answer to this question provides important insight into Russian foreign policy, and in order to interpret this shift in attitude we must first understand Moscow's initial passivism. Ukraine's path to denuclearization was a blessing for Yeltsin's West-oriented course. The common interest Russia and the United States found in the denuclearization of Ukraine prevented a close bond from forming between Kiev and the West. Moreover, the USA was willing to solve the problem on its own and urged Kiev to coordinate its policies with Russia – exactly what most Russian political actors wanted. Concerned with self-preservation, the Russian military elite also had little interest in completing the weapons' transfer as their presence on Ukrainian territory prolonged the lifespan of the CIS Joint Forces.

The center-right forces regrouped after the failed August 1991 coup and by 1993 began to obstruct Yeltsin's pro-Western policies. At the same time, Western political observers began to publicly doubt Yeltsin's commitment and capacity to carry out Russia's democratic transformation. US-Russian cooperation was also weakened by disagreements on key foreign policy issues, such as NATO enlargement, and by the summer of 1993 the USA approached Kiev to solve the nuclear problem bilaterally. All this forced Yeltsin to toughen his stance on Ukrainian denuclearization. Thus, Russia's volte-face in 1993 resulted from the president's need to separate himself from the USA, a vulnerable point for him in domestic politics, and not from increasing proliferation concerns.

The paper contributes to our understanding of Russia's foreign policy and nuclear posture by examining Moscow's interaction with Kiev and Washington – the two actors crucial to its self-definition. The lessons of Ukrainian denuclearization suggest that post-imperial sentiments play a great role in how Russia's political elite perceives its neighbors and that the success of American involvement in Russia's backyard is contingent on goodwill in US-Russia relations. Moreover, because Russian and American views on nuclear proliferation diverge, their cooperation is likely to be founded on the basis of quid-pro-quo pragmatism rather than common values.