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The timing could not be more fortuitous for the publication of Mariana Budjeryn’s important article on the decisions by Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine to relinquish the nuclear weapons they inherited when the Soviet Union collapsed. Although these nuclear renunciation decisions took place approximately three decades ago, the factors responsible for them remain very relevant today.

A fundamental premise of Budjeryn’s article—and one that extends well beyond the three cases she examines—is that nuclear decisions are multicausal and are influenced by a variety of domestic and external factors. The more important drivers and inhibitors in her lucid, comparative analysis include: historical experiences, leadership beliefs, domestic economic, political, and security considerations, the behavior of other powerful states, and international normative structures associated with the 1970 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). This method of focused comparative analysis, which is informed by the author’s familiarity with essential primary sources and relevant prior scholarship, enhances the value of her findings and their contribution to the larger body of research on nuclear nonproliferation decision making.

Budjeryn is especially effective in mining non-English language archival and memoir literature of relevant post-Soviet policy makers, including, among others, former Belarusian President Stanislav Shushkevich, former Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbaev, and key Ukrainian politicians such as Yuri Kostenko, Volodymyr Tolubko, and Leonid Kravchuk. She also has made good use of personal interviews with some of these figures and others.

While Budjeryn’s effort to ground her research in the existing corpus of work on the nuclear renunciation decisions by the three post-Soviet states is commendable, it would have been useful to have explored the relevance of the wider body of scholarship on nuclear renunciation decisions by the surprisingly large number of states that at one time or another actively pursued military uses of nuclear energy. For example, the work by Harald Mueller and Andreas Schmidt is particularly relevant to Budjeryn’s findings about the role of nuclear norms and the NPT in nonproliferation decision making and has the virtue of examining a much larger universe of cases.¹

¹ See Harald Mueller and Andreas Schmidt, “The Little-Known Story of Deproliferation: Why States Give up Nuclear Weapons Activities” in William C. Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, eds., *Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century: The Role of Theory*, Vol. 1 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010): 124-158. They identify approximately three dozen states that previously pursued military applications of nuclear energy.

Budjeryn's analysis of the competing incentives and disincentives affecting the decisions by Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine to forego retention of the nuclear weapons they inherited is impressive for its fair and dispassionate approach. In general, her conclusions are sound and appear to be based on the careful weighing of evidence as it existed at the time the decisions were made first half of the 1990s rather than as it appears today. Most compelling are her findings about the relative importance of the different mix of domestic and external determinants in each of the three cases.

In Belarus, there were no overriding international security incentives, while important constraints included the absence of technical conditions to acquire control over and maintenance of the inherited Soviet nuclear weapons and the lack of a clear external adversary to deter. Perhaps most importantly, as former President Stanislav Shushkevich related to me in an interview in October 1994, nuclear weapons served no useful protection or purpose for Belarus but constituted a target for other states' nuclear weapons.² Shushkevich's low regard for the utility of nuclear weapons almost certainly was based in part on his own background as a physicist who understood better than most policy makers the technical and economic challenges associated with nuclear weapons possession.

As Budjeryn persuasively argues, the situation was less clear cut in Kazakhstan, whose history was inextricably linked to the Soviet nuclear weapons program since the first Soviet test of a nuclear explosive at Semipalatinsk. Over 450 nuclear tests in Kazakhstan followed, along with severe ecological, health, and economic costs to the nation. Budjeryn does a very good job in depicting the convoluted evolution of US-Kazakhstani nuclear negotiations and correctly points to the very pragmatic and astute manner in which President Nazarbaev played his diplomatic cards. While she touches on most of the relevant factors, her analysis would have benefited from a discussion of the quest by Kazakhstan for leadership among the Central Asian states—and especially rivalry with the most populous state in the region, Uzbekistan—and the possible attractiveness of nuclear weapons as an element of prestige in this regard.³ More significantly, she does not examine the degree to which some influential policy advocates in Kazakhstan regarded China rather than Russia as the primary potential target for nuclear deterrence.⁴

Not surprisingly given her familiarity with key Ukrainian politics and policy makers, Budjeryn's analysis of Kyiv's nuclear renunciation decision making is especially cogent. It reveals how the Chernobyl nuclear accident predisposed Ukraine to adopt an anti-nuclear stance in the early phase of its statehood but how this factor subsequently was overshadowed by distrust of Russia and domestic political infighting. Budjeryn also astutely observes how policy makers in Ukraine (as well as in Belarus and Kazakhstan) were amazed by the fixation of visiting Western delegations on the nuclear issue to the relative neglect of the "daunting economic, social, and political crises that besieged their countries" (92). What she does not explicitly discuss, however, is that advocates for retention of nuclear weapons on Ukrainian soil typically failed to appreciate the degree to which they were irrelevant to the most perilous security threat facing the country—domestic economic turmoil.

Perhaps the most important conclusion Budjeryn derives from her impressive comparative analysis is the critical role played by the NPT and its associated nonproliferation norm in framing and guiding nuclear deliberations in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. This normative framework—reinforced by the looming 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference at which the future of the Treaty would be determined—

² Interview with author, cited in William C. Potter, *The Politics of Nuclear Renunciation: The Cases of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine*, Henry L. Stimson Occasional Paper No. 22, April 1995, 32.

³ Although peripheral to her basic argument, Budjeryn (76) overstates the role played by Kazakhstan in the negotiation of the Central Asian Nuclear [Weapon]-Free (sic) Zone to the neglect of the contributions of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

⁴ For a discussion of the 'China factor' see Potter, *The Politics of Nuclear Renunciation*, 37-38. See also the important new book by Togzhan Kassenova, *Atomic Steppe: How Kazakhstan Gave up the Bomb* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), 133-136. Kassenova's book, which sheds new details about decision making within Kazakhstan, was published at about the same time as Budjeryn's article.

influenced the positions of both the key external players (the United States and Russia) and the three newly independent states that had inherited weapons from the Soviet nuclear arsenal.

The influence of the NPT was manifest not only in the Treaty's prohibition of further nuclear weapons spread, but also in its promotion of the peaceful use of nuclear technology. Although only indirectly addressed in Budjeryn's analysis, the issue of peaceful use was a key element that impacted significantly on the decision by Kazakhstan, in particular, to renounce nuclear weapons. President Nazarbaev and his advisors recognized that were the country to flout the NPT, it would no longer be entitled to the benefits of unobstructed nuclear trade, an important consideration for a country that was intent upon pursuing a civilian nuclear power industry. It is a concrete example of Budjeryn's more general and very important premise that the three post-Soviet states "all desired to join the 'civilized' world ...as good international citizens, and not as 'pariah' states defying international rules and public opinion" (94).

The unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has again focused international attention on the decisions by the three Soviet successor states to forego nuclear weapons and join the NPT as non-nuclear weapons states. It also has led many pundits to argue that Russian aggression demonstrates the deterrent value of nuclear weapons, a recognition that will set in motion new proliferation dynamics and nuclear weapons spread.

It remains to be seen how much of this speculation is well founded, and there are good reasons to be skeptical that the war will significantly alter the nuclear calculus in most countries.⁵ However, it is also the case that the important nuclear nonproliferation norm that influenced the decisions taken by Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine three decades ago can no longer be taken for granted. Norms are quickly eroded but are not readily restored and parties to the NPT would be well advised to recall that the nuclear renunciation decisions very ably chronicled by Budjeryn were neither easy to take nor inevitable.

Dr. **William Potter** is Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar Professor of Nonproliferation Studies and Founding Director of the Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey. He is the author, editor, or co-editor of over 20 books, including most recently, *Preventing Black-Market Trade in Nuclear Technology* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), *Once and Future Partners: The United States, Russia, and Nuclear Non-Proliferation* (IISS/Routledge, 2018), and *End of An Era: The United States, Russia, and Nuclear Nonproliferation* (CNS, 2021). He has authored more than 125 journal articles and book chapters, including in *International Security*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Arms Control Today*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Slavic Review*, *Survival*, and *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Dr. Potter has served on numerous committees of the US National Academy of Sciences and for five years was a member of the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters. He has participated as a delegate at every NPT Review Conference and Preparatory Committee meeting since 1995. He was elected as a Foreign Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 2019. Dr. Potter was the recipient of the 2021 Therese Delpech Memorial Award.

⁵ See Jeffrey W. Knopf, "Why the Ukraine War does not Mean More Countries Should Seek Nuclear Weapons," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (July 12, 2022) available at: <https://thebulletin.org/2022/04/why-the-ukraine-war-does-not-mean-more-countries-should-seek-nuclear-weapons/>.