

Proliferation, Sanctions, and Rollback

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Abstract

The increased number of countries seeking nuclear weapons poses a potential existential threat to humanity, making non-proliferation a vital topic in international relations. The fragile nuclear order created by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)—the signature achievement of the First Nuclear Age (FNA; Cold War)—has been challenged by a variety of new contenders whose fitness as stewards of a nuclear arsenal is questioned. How to deal with these new proliferators and craft strategies of rolling back their programs has become the singular preoccupation of the so-called Second Nuclear Age (post-Cold War) debate. The bulk of the literature deals with the reasons for proliferation; while realists and neorealists contend that proliferation is motivated by security consideration, other scholars argue that the so-called secondary drivers such as national pride or efforts to boost regime legitimacy are behind proliferation decision.

Sanctions are considered the gold standard of rollback strategies. Anchored in rational choice theory, sanctions are expected to increase the economic cost of would-be proliferators, compelling them to decide on a rollback. Traditional sanctions literature is not conclusive, indicating that some would-be proliferators are more willing to roll back than others. More recent and sophisticated analysis demonstrates that the success of sanctions is correlated with the economic character of the target country. Oil-based rentier states are seen as more vulnerable to sanctions than insular and underdeveloped economies.

The efficacy of sanctions is also related to the type of regime. Totalitarian systems are highly impervious to sanctions, but authoritarian, neopatrimonial regime whose rentier income is used by the ruling elite to boost its legitimacy are more vulnerable.

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