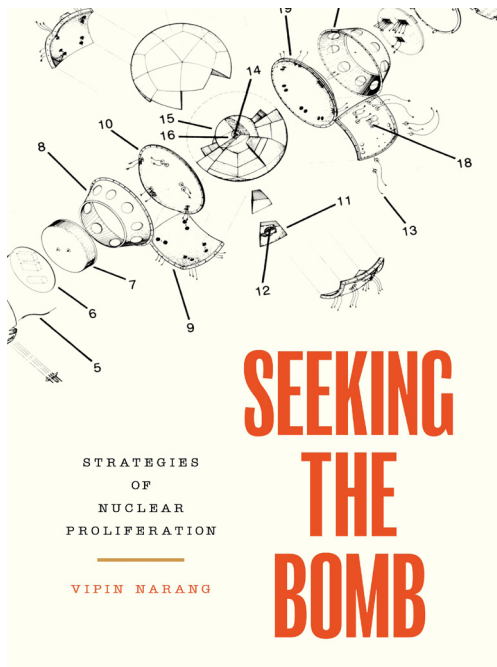




REVIEW ESSAY: NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION, STRATEGIES, AND ROMANIA'S CASES

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• Vipin Narang,
Seeking the Bomb. Strategies of Nuclear Proliferation,
Princeton University Press, Princeton,
2022, 400 pages

- Eliza Gheorghe, “Atomic Maverick: Romania’s negotiations for nuclear technology, 1964-1970”, *Cold War History*, 13(3), 2013, DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2013.776542
- Eliza Gheorghe, “Peace for Atoms. US Non-Proliferation Policy and the Romanian Role in the Sino-American Rapprochement, 1969-1971”, *The International History Review*, 40(5), 2018, DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2018.1425893.

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Nuclear Proliferation, Nuclear Weapons, Realism, Great Powers, Minor Powers

Nuclear proliferation fell into a corner in the last years. There are still disagreements about the significance of this phenomenon, its causes, and sometimes, even about its effects. The texts reviewed here suggests that the issue is still important, and the salience may even grow, since the arms control and disarmament security regime weakened after Russia's aggression against Ukraine. There, we may face an even greater impact in the future than the one expected when the they were written.

Seeking the Bomb is one of the best books written about nuclear proliferation published in the last few years. Vipin Narang is a known expert in this domain, with a previously work on nuclear strategies and posture for minor and medium powers. In the new book, the author tries to explain how states plan and act to acquire this weapon of mass destruction and to help us grasp the factors that stimulate or inhibit this behavior. It is based on an article that contains the main argument, but it may be read by anyone interested in the details and nuances of nuclear proliferation and the international politics around it (Narang 2016/2017).

The author has both theoretical and descriptive goals. What I liked about this book is the author's ability to synthesize different situations and actors in a common theoretical framework and the clarity that his approach brings to the field. He also navigates with ease around methodologies that are contradictory, or at least, in tension, like statistics and case studies. I'm not entirely convinced that the author fully achieved his goals, because some of his variables are not well specified, especially the ones about domestic politics, which seems much like a theoretical dumping ground.

The author advances a neoclassical realist explanation for the strategies that states pursue in search of the bomb. He tries to explain their motivations, taking them for granted because he aims to study strategies, practices and the set of factors that affect the behavior, once the choice of a nuclear capability is made. These are a security threat, alliances, domestic politics, international status (vulnerability), and the protection of a great power (Narang 2016/2017). There is a subtle oscillation here between being empowered by various resources and having agency, and V. Narang argues that even minor actors matter in some contexts, an observation which became more frequent in research after the end of the Cold War (Miroiu 2005).

The author then classifies the states according to these factors, set up in almost an algorithmic order. We have three types of states that get close to nuclear weapons, but they don't cross the threshold, the hedgers, with three types, arranged in a progression: technical, insurance, and hard (Narang 2022, 296-300).



Romania during the Communist regime shows up in the second category, but more on that below (Narang 2022, 42). There are three active types for the pursuit of nuclear weapons: sprinting (usually, a great power), sheltered (under the protection of one), or hiding (if neither) (Narang 2022, 126-291).

The main message: if not a great power, protected by one or part of an alliance, and you face a security threat, it's a tough world. V. Narang expects that nuclear proliferation will continue and that hiding will remain the main path followed by states interested in nuclear weapons, mostly because there aren't many candidates for the other two strategies, especially for sprinting. The rationalist nature of his framework is notable, the only exception being the way the factor of domestic consensus is specified, which may be seen as a departure from the main perspective. It's also significant that the author is responsible for the proliferation policy, among others at Pentagon (Defense 2024).

Seeking the Bomb is interesting also from a methodological point of view. V. Narang pushes further a research tradition initiated by Scott Sagan, in which internal and external factors are combined to understand nuclear themes like deterrence and proliferation (Sagan 1994). The author uses a mixed methods approach, combining statistics with detailed, process tracing-style case studies. This combination represents the main difference between the book and the article on which it is based.

I would recommend *Seeking the Bomb* to any reader interested in nuclear topics or regional politics. The extended case studies include lesser-known stories, such as the Swedish or Taiwanese interests and projects, and offer consistent information on Israel's policies in this domain. V. Narang developed two IR explanations to grasp nuclear proliferation and combined statistical methods and historical research. The main drawback is similar to other variants of neoclassical realism, that the domestic factors are not well developed in this theory, while alternative perspectives are underestimated.

Communist Romania'S Nuclear Policies

Now, let's see what happened with Romania. Eliza Gheorghe is a researcher who gained her PhD at Oxford on this subject and represents the main voice on this subject (Gheorghe 2014). There is a consensus among international experts that the former regime tried to keep its nuclear options open, that it had some interest in the military applications of this technology, and that it took some steps, breached the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), then the system fell and everything stopped (Gheorghe 2014, 1). She argues in her thesis that the details are not very well known, and she relies on declassified documents and interviews to tell an interesting story which inspired a couple of articles, two being reviewed here (Gheorghe 2014, 2).

The first one tells the origin of this policy. In "Atomic Maverick", E. Gheorghe explains how Communist Romania gained from the West a research reactor,



technologies to manufacture plutonium, a heavy water plant, and later, a CANDU reactor, and sensitive nuclear materials (Gheorghe 2013, 374). Alongside natural uranium, these could have allowed the former regime to pursue a nuclear weapons program, the main reason why this strategy is called hedging (Gheorghe 2014). This way, an actor develops elements which, combined may offer a good chance to build nuclear weapons, but it refrains from the last steps, from internal or external factors (Narang 2022, 53-56).

The external or transnational context is the stage for these events. Romania's Communist regime started to distance itself from its political patrons from the Soviet Union and gradually started to act more autonomously once the Red Army withdrew, in 1958. There were several disputed issues, a significant one being the Valev Plan, Moscow's ideas about a supranational economic specialization, in which Bucharest's role would have been that of an underdeveloped hinterland for other, more industrialized socialist countries (Miroiu 2005, 164-177). Then, Nicolae Ceaușescu came to power and used his popular opposition against the Warsaw Pact's intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 to boost the nationalistic discourse and his credentials in the West (Miroiu 2005, 164-177).

E. Gheorghe underlines diplomacy and the ability to maneuver, contrasting with V. Narang's approach, which emphasized power or internal consensus. Romania's nuclear interests were first pursued under the Soviet Union's guidance, but the Soviets were careful not to slip too much to its clients, especially once they started to be cautious about the reliability of its satellites (Gheorghe 2013, 375-376, Gheorghe 2014). Once the political distance started to grow, the former Communist regime cultivated the image of a maverick, a disturber inside the Socialist camp, an image whose limits were known and accepted by all the parties (Gheorghe 2013). The Romanian authorities started multisided negotiations with Western countries, like the UK, France, and the US, but also with China and the Soviet Union (Gheorghe 2013, Gheorghe 2014).

This approach failed the first time. The reason was that the Soviets had a veto and that Nicolae Ceaușescu was not an entirely autonomous actor, or a dissident but a leader whose opposition could be tolerated by the Soviets because it didn't threaten them and it provided them with Western knowledge and technology. For example, Bucharest tried to mediate between Washington and Hanoi for an end to the Vietnam War, while providing the second one with supplies, a diplomatic activity encouraged by the Soviet Union (Gheorghe 2013, 382-389). This baffling situation ended when Moscow reinforced the deal it made earlier with the Romanian authorities, promising them the delivery of a nuclear reactor for a plant situated in the Olt country, a reactor never provided (Gheorghe 2013, 390).

Nevertheless, the former Communist regime persevered. This is the story told in „Peace for Atoms”, another article by Eliza Gheorghe, also based on her thesis



(Gheorghe 2018). The Republican administration of Richard Nixon in which an important role was played by Henry Kissinger came to power in 1969 and tried to use the Sino-Soviet split to improve the US standing in the world, which was challenged in the context of the Vietnam War and the economic conditions (Kissinger 1998). As with the previous attempts, Bucharest tried to mediate between Washington and Beijing, but this time, acting without with Soviet approval (Gheorghe 2018, 2018).

E. Gheorghe argues that proliferation was less important than great power diplomacy for the Nixon administration. This outlook allowed a minor power to play a bigger role than its capacities would have allowed, but it wasn't the only factor. Romanian diplomacy and the international setting were also important to understand how Bucharest gained access to sensitive Western technology during the Cold War, even if it was known that the country would not switch camps (Miroiu 2005, Gheorghe 2014, Gheorghe 2018). Also, the goals were obvious since Nicolae Ceaușescu was skeptical towards the NPT in the past and he even explained his policy a couple of times (Gheorghe 2018).

There were several important moments, according to the author, in this process. One occasion was Nixon's visit to Romania, in 1969, where the two leaders talked about the mediation with China and nuclear cooperation with the US, at a time when the diplomatic relationships between Washington and Beijing were frozen (Gheorghe 2014, 5-7). In another, the invitation addressed to the US president for the soon-to-be historical visit to China came a bit later through Romanian contacts, by comparison with the parallel Pakistani channel (Gheorghe 2018, 13-14). Some messages were even carried by Ceausescu himself (Gheorghe 2018, 15-16).

Romania wasn't the main channel between the US and China, but sometimes, it was important. According to E. Gheorghe, it offered the US leaders an internal view of the workings of the Communist world, especially of *nomenklatura*'s perspective (Gheorghe 2018, 15-16). It also provided redundancy, which prevented the secret communication from being interrupted (Gheorghe 2018, 11-12). The Romanian Communist regime achieved its short-term goals and gained access to the capacity it needed for the intended hedging strategy (Gheorghe 2018, 16-17).

An example quoted by the author illustrates this point. The secret, mediated, negotiations between US and China were often influenced by events like the extension of the Vietnam War in Laos by the American authorities (Gheorghe 2018, 14-15). The Romanian middlemen plead for a de-linkage of these issues from the general subject of US-China relationship. A similar argument was used for the more protracted Taiwan question (Gheorghe 2018).

Up to a point, is a tale of how close Romania came to resembling North Korea. Disgruntled by the relationships with the dominant power, the Soviet Union, the former regime pursued a nuanced strategy of obtaining access and nuclear facilities from any international actor willing to provide, while remaining in the socialist camp.



The regime became more ideologized, nationalistic, and dynastic, and everyone can notice its fixations simply by looking at *Casa Poporului* or *Casa Radio* (Burakowski 2011). Nevertheless, Eliza Gheorghe tends to see Communist Romania's policy under a realist lens, as a search for external power, influence, and autonomy, being closer to the perspectives based on state or national interests, than to the approaches reliant on domestic policies.

E. Gheorghe's research brought new light on a controversial idea: Nicolae Ceaușescu's nuclear projects. One of the main strong points of her approach is the reliance on an impressive collection of documents, from various sources like official Romanian texts, US archives, or from international organizations. The other is the theoretical framework, which is mostly realist, and allows the reader to connect the conclusions with wider debates on nuclear proliferation and the role of capabilities in world politics. There is an unanswered question, why did the projects remain in the hedging stage and why weren't they intensified towards the end of the regime, when the external situation worsened?

Nuclear proliferation is close to many other important issues in International Relations. One is the role played by power in world politics since the dissemination of this technology depends on the relationship between great and minor powers. Both authors argue that small powers matter, even if the setting is dependent on the major players, as shown by Romania's mediation between US and China. The other is the relationship between technology and society, and we see that political actors and structures play an important part in modeling it.

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