The Ratification Premium

hawks, doves, and arms Control

By Sarah E. Kreps, Elizabeth N. Saunders, and Kenneth A. Schultz

This article examines the effect of leaders’ foreign policy preferences on their ability to pursue and ratify arms control agreements. Does it take a “Nixon to go to China,” with hawks more effective than doves, when it comes to the domestic politics of treaty ratification? The authors observe that the theoretical logic correctly identifies an asymmetry between hawkish and dovish presidents, with the latter facing a credibility gap in advocating arms reductions. Although existing accounts assume leaders are captives of their type, the authors argue that dovish executives can overcome their credibility gap by obtaining the endorsement of informed legislators. These executives do so by paying a ratification premium, usually in the form of increased defense effort in areas not covered by the treaty. As a result, doves do not necessarily face a lower rate of success at the ratification stage; their disadvantage manifests itself primarily in the higher premium needed to obtain the same level of support as hawkish executives. The article demonstrates this argument through a formal model and tests the implications with paired comparisons of major arms control treaties in the Cold War and post–Cold War periods. The argument helps to resolve the Nixon-to-China theoretical debate. It shows that dovish leaders are not necessarily captives of their type because they can deploy side payments to achieve their policy goals. It also explains important puzzling features of the arms control record.

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