

Rule Takers or Rule Shapers? Exploring De Facto State Agency across Patron-Client Dyads via a Paired Comparison of Transnistria and Taiwan

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Abstract

How much agency do unrecognized states have vis-à-vis their patron-state? This paper contributes to the literature on de facto states by comparing patron-client relations across two dyads: Russia-Transnistria and US-Taiwan. To analyze the two cases, I formulate an argument drawing on earlier theoretical frameworks (Spanier and Shoemaker 1984; Sylvan and Majeski 2009). Then I identify the conditions under which de facto states may act autonomously and, occasionally, against the interests of the patron state. The paired comparison of the US-Taiwan and Russia-Transnistria dyads indicates that the nature of the domestic political competition, collective identity, the type of patron-state, the influence of the parent-state, and the influence of business groups inside de facto states shape the degree of de facto state agency vis-à-vis the patron-state. Furthermore, de facto state agency may be influenced by informational asymmetries and moral hazard, whereby unrecognized clients often are interested in withholding information from the patron-state to extract more benefits.

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Introduction

Some unrecognized states rely on a patron-state to compensate for the lack of international acceptance. Due to their dependence on the patron-state, often such de facto states are viewed as puppet-states devoid of any agency in international affairs. This perspective may be erroneous and may have significant consequences for the way both researchers and policymakers conceptualize conflict transformation and resolution. Despite the growing interest in the nature of patron-client relations, it is not entirely clear under what conditions de facto states display agency and engage in actions contrary to the interests of their patron-state.

This paper seeks to respond to the following question: under what conditions do de facto states display agency vis-à-vis their patron-states?¹ In answering this question, the article contributes to the literature on de facto states by exploring the determinants of de facto state agency. To that end, I compare patron-client relations across two dyads: Russia-Transnistria and US-Taiwan. To analyze the two cases, I rely on the patron-client frameworks proposed by Spanier and Shoemaker (1984) and Sylvan and Majeski (2009), which I have updated to include insights from the principal-agent approach (Moe, 1984; Williamson, 1985). In doing so, I conceptualize the patron-client relation as a hierarchical, contractual relation in which de facto states display variable degrees of agency contingent on the type of policy areas, the presence of influential business groups, the degree of political pluralism, the type of parent-state, and the degree of cultural proximity to the patron-state.

¹ Scholars have used various designations for unrecognized states – de facto state (Pegg 1998; Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2012; Florea 2014; Pegg and Kolstø 2015), parastate (Rossi and Pinos 2020), and quasi-state (Kolstø 2006). I try to avoid terminological controversies by emphasizing the lack of international recognition as the shared feature of such regions and refer to them as de facto states. Hence in this article I refer to Transnistria and Taiwan as “de facto states.” It should be noted that the term “de facto state” is widely used in the English-speaking academia to refer to Transnistria, but, for obvious reasons, not so much with regards to Taiwan. Next, I also use “parent-state” to signify Moldova and the People’s Republic of China and “patron-state” to mean the United States and the Russian Federation.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I provide an overview of the literature on political clientelism in international affairs. Second, I propose an argument regarding de facto state agency, which I subsequently test via a paired comparison of two patron-client dyads. Third, I discuss the theoretical and policy implications of the major findings for conflict transformation and resolution. The paper ends with an outline of potential directions for future research.

Agency and Political Clientelism in International Relations

Political clientelism refers here to a situation in which the government of one state exerts significant control over the government of another state by offering protection and material incentives in exchange for support. The phenomenon of political clientelism is not confined to a certain geographical region or historical era. The complex system of the Greek city-states can be regarded as an early illustration of clientelist relations. Likewise, the Republican Rome has maintained a vast network of client states in the Mediterranean basin instead of simply incorporating them (Luttwak, 2016). Modern clientelism also differs from the tributary relations of the earlier eras when states were coerced to pay tribute in exchange for protection from security threats and political loyalty as was common for the Roman, Mongol, and Ottoman Empires. For instance, the client-states set up by the Japanese across East Asia during World War II did not pay tribute, but were instead used to extract raw materials and cheap labor to be used by the war machine and major corporations.

During the Cold War, the Communist states of Eastern and Central Europe have functioned as Soviet client-states pursuing foreign and military policies dictated by Moscow. Occasionally, however, some of them would deviate from Kremlin's line and adopt an independent foreign policy course. For instance, Romania built a national-communist regime

centered on Nicolae Ceausescu, who refused to invade Czechoslovakia, preferring instead to cooperate with the Nixon administration and Maoist China. Along similar lines, Albania withdrew from the Warsaw Pact in 1968 and started working together with China. Yugoslavia under Tito did not join the Warsaw Pact, entering instead security alliances with Greece and Turkey against a potential Soviet invasion. In our times, Sylvan and Majeski (2009, 1) observe that “American policy is concentrated on the maintenance of U.S. clients and hostility toward U.S. enemies. In August 2006, there were 80 of the former (i.e. clients) and six of the latter.” Russia is another example of a patron-state overseeing and sponsoring a network of client-states (Hoch and Kopeček, 2020; Marandici and Lesanu, 2020), whereas China appears to be setting up its own league of client-states via the economic mechanisms of the *One Belt, One Road* (一帶一路) project. The phenomenon of political clientelism thus seems ubiquitous.

Yet, as a concept, clientelism in IR lacks a widely accepted definition. Here I define political clientelism as an asymmetric dyadic relation between two parties which engage in *an unequal exchange* with one side (i.e. the patron-state) offering protection and resources to a client in return for political loyalty and support. It is the element of unequal exchange that distinguishes clientelism from other relations in the international realm. Clientelism is antithetical to adversarial ties in which a state imposes sanctions or uses direct force against another state to elicit compliance. Also, patron-client relations are not exactly a form of voluntary cooperation as cooperation presupposes a high degree of autonomy with both sides interacting as equals, whereas in a patron-client framework, the patron defines the relationship, dominating the client-state and reformulating unilaterally the terms of the association to pursue its own advantages. Certain norms, some coercion, and a common identity may keep the patron-client relationship going, preventing clients from switching their allegiance to other patrons. In

practice, however, client-states are so dependent on the patron-state that the exit from a patron-client arrangement is too costly.

Earlier theories have linked client-state agency to the nature of the regional context and the goals of the patron-state. Shoemaker and Spanier (1984, 14–15) observe that both patrons and clients care primarily about increasing their security. Clients expect transfers of military technology and security guarantees, whereas the patron-state instrumentalizes its relations with client-states in a way that allows it to achieve strategic, ideological, or/and status-related goals. Furthermore, the agency of the client state will manifest itself in a low threat environment as the patron-state will lack interest in the value of the client as an ally against another major power. By contrast, Shoemaker and Spanier (1984, 22) note that the client will be more responsive to demands from a patron-state in a high threat environment. While the theory proposed by Shoemaker and Spanier (1984) explains the dynamics of patron-client relations during the Cold War era, it may be criticized for focusing narrowly on the security dimension of clientelism, leaving out the economic, cultural, and political aspects.

The framework developed by Sylvan and Majeski (2003, 2009) draws on the principal-agent theory and offers an alternative perspective on patron-client relations. It theorizes that a client's agency is limited by the capacity of the patron-state to monitor its policies. In doing so, Sylvan and Majeski analyze the mechanisms of control between patrons and clients. In order to ensure compliance, the patron-state scans and surveils the client-states on a regular basis, a process which in the US case, resulted in the growth of a massive foreign policy bureaucracy, operating directly within the territory of each client-state (Sylvan and Majeski 2003, 7). Unlike Shoemaker and Spanier (1984), Sylvan and Majeski distinguish between processes of client acquisition and client maintenance, juxtaposing clientelism to hostile relations with foreign

enemies, a group of states, which in the US is usually defined by the foreign policy establishment.

In order for the patron-client relation to remain stable, the patron-state uses a mix of incentives to guide the client-state's behavior. A patron-state may alter the behavior of its clients via both positive and negative incentives. Positive incentives include protection and resources, whereas negative incentives involve coercion in order to gain a client's compliance. For instance, the patron-state may threaten to withdraw material aid if the client refuses to comply with the terms of the informal patron-client contract.

In sum, client agency in patron-client relations may vary depending on the type of environment (high versus low threat), the capacity of the patron-state to provide the correct incentives and monitor the client-state, the type of goals pursued by the patron-state (ideological, strategic or status), and policy area. Next, the two theoretical frameworks developed in the context of international affairs will be reconciled and applied to investigate patron-client relations between de facto states and their external backers.

Determinants of De Facto State Agency

By now, there is a significant body of research on the emergence and survival of de facto states in the international system (Pegg, 1998; Caspersen, 2012; Dembinska and Campana, 2017; Hoch and Kopeček, 2020). Pegg's (1998) pioneering study defined de facto states as entities possessing the characteristics of a state but lacking international recognition. Examples of such breakaway regions include the Tamil Eelam, the Republic of Somaliland, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Taiwan, Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh), Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, the two republics in Eastern Ukraine, and others. Florea (2014) identified thirty-four de facto states during the 1945–2011 period.

De facto states should not be confused with quasi-states, which Jackson (1993) conceptualized as states having international legitimacy but unable to control and govern their territory effectively. By contrast, a growing literature on rebel governance highlights the capacity of de facto states to provide public goods much like their internationally recognized peers (Mampilly, 2011). Also, not all de facto states survive with the help of an external patron. Somaliland, for example, existed for decades without an external patron (Prelz Oltramonti, 2020). Having a patron-state and benefitting from external military support during secessionist conflicts does, however, raise the probability of de facto state survival (Florea, 2014).

The question of de facto state agency is at the heart of conflict resolution involving many of the unrecognized states. As Hoch and Kopeček (2020, 3) note de facto states “are not simply puppets in the hands of a power patron.” A multifaceted notion, agency is a relational concept. Entangled in a web of relations comprising a range of actors, de facto states may be autonomous vis-à-vis the parent-state and other states, while simultaneously lacking autonomy in relation to the patron-state. Agency may refer to the independence of the de facto state government, the autonomy of certain administrative agencies, or the freedom to act of a particular leader. Here, I define de facto state agency as referring to the autonomy of a disputed region to formulate initiatives and conduct policies independent of the patron-state. As such agency varies across patron-client dyads as well as across policy areas.

The constellations of conditions, under which de facto state agency manifests itself, vary. Patron-client relations in the context of de facto states differ from other relations in international affairs. Compared to standard clientelist relations, the lack of recognition renders de facto states more dependent on the patron-state for material assistance, military backing, and diplomatic support (Kolsto 2020, 4). Often, the patron-state relies on its network of client states (recognized

and unrecognized) to provide international legitimacy for the disputed regions. This arrangement resembles a situation of monopsony, a market in which the patron-state acts as the sole provider of recognition, economic and military assistance. Therefore, relations between patron-states and de facto states are inherently asymmetrical. Usually, but not always, the patron is a great power, wielding significant international influence. The patron-state may steer decision-making within various international organizations, set up regional trade regimes, bestow legitimacy on its clients, and influence other states to recognize or derecognize the independence of a self-ruled region. The relation is also marked by inequality in terms of resources as the patron-state controls more wealth, which it directs toward the client-state. These aspects point to a hierarchical relationship of dependence between de facto state clients and patron-states.

Moreover, de facto state agency fluctuates across policy areas (Table 1). In contrast to the earlier literature focusing on the military-security dimension of political clientelism, I argue that the degree of autonomy enjoyed by de facto states is contingent, among other things, on policy area. Patron-states expect clients to join their military-security alliances, lacking much interest in matters pertaining to domestic politics and economic arrangements. Hence I argue that de facto state agency is greater and restricted to low-politics, mostly domains lacking strategic salience, lying beyond the immediate geopolitical interests of the patron-state, and least affected by the lack of recognition.

Table 1. Agency Variation across Policy Areas.

Policy Area	Domestic Stakeholders	Patron Goals	Monitoring	Domain	Degree of Agency
Security and Military	Military-Industrial Complex, Paramilitary, Government	Strategic	High	High Politics	Low
Economy	Local Companies, Businesspeople, Consumers	Status	Medium	Low Politics	Medium
Internal Security and Political Affairs	Law Enforcement, Customs, Political Opposition	Strategic & Ideological	Low	Low Politics	High
Culture & Education	Ethnocultural Groups, Pro-Independence Groups	Ideological	Low	Low Politics	Medium

Besides policy area, de facto state agency varies with the international context. In line with the argument formulated by Spanier and Shoemaker (1984), I expect patron-states to perceive the survival of their clients as instrumental in counterbalancing the influence of rival powers. In a high threat environment, the leverage exerted by the patron-state over its clients will be amplified as de facto states will be more willing to comply, expecting to gain in strategic significance and thus extract more resources from the patron-state. By contrast in a low threat environment, the patron-state will not regard de facto state survival as a high priority and reduce its material support. Furthermore, the sensitivity of the patron-state to threat perceptions in the region raises some moral hazard problems. Client-states as well as parent-states occasionally find it convenient to engineer artificial tensions in order to manipulate the threat environment and elicit a response from their international allies. The same holds for patron-states as, under some circumstances, the patron-state may increase its support for the client-state and escalate tensions with its rivals and parent-states in order to extract concessions in other areas. The recent Russian military escalation along Ukraine's borders and the multiplication of incursions in Taiwan's air space in April 2021 illustrate this latter point.

Domestic political competition shapes de facto state agency too. Kolsto (2020, 3) observed that often politics in client states is more pluralist than in the patron-state. In cases,

where domestic politics is fragmented with multiple factions competing for power, the relation with the patron-state may become a salient issue on the domestic agenda with interest groups, civil society, and parties engaging in collective action in order to shape the policy toward the patron-state. Domestic actors may be divided over how to construct the relation with the external backer. De facto state politicians, thus, operate under a triple set of constraints. They have to satisfy the demands of their constituents. Then, they also have to defend themselves against attacks from the political opposition, while maneuvering in a space circumscribed by the patron-state's "red lines" and the lack of recognition. The willingness of de facto states to deviate from the patron-state's policy can thus be traced to the nature of domestic politics within the de facto state.

Another determinant of agency pertains to the nature of the cultural connections between the patron-state and the unrecognized state. The patron-client relation appears closer and the dependence higher in cases where the two sides share common cultural ties. In such cases, the link between the two entities may be justified in terms of cultural solidarity rather than simply in an instrumental manner. Hence, potential deviations from the patron-state's official line may be perceived by domestic groups as disloyalty, raising the costs of autonomous action. By contrast, in situations in which the patron and the client-state lack such cultural connections and instead have a history of bilateral relations marked by conflict, there is more room for de facto state agency. For instance, in analyzing the Abkhaz-Russian relations, Kolsto (2020) identified a strong regional identity and historic memories of past wrongs committed by the patron-state as factors contributing to the willingness of the de facto state to act autonomously.

It is thus imperative that scholars explore further the question of agency in patron-client relations in order to understand such dyads and devise effective strategies for conflict resolution.

The presence of an external patron complicates peacebuilding efforts as it is often unclear whether de facto states involved in a patron-client relation have any independence in deciding how the conflict should be transformed and ultimately ended. To gain a deeper understanding of the conditions under which de facto states display autonomy vis-à-vis their patron-state I compare clientelist relations across two dyads: US-Taiwan and Russia-Transnistria. The paired comparison generates in-depth case-specific and cross-case insights, allowing us to refine the conceptualization of patron-client relations involving de facto states, which in turn helps us derive significant analytical benefits for the study of peacebuilding in contested areas.

Why is the paired comparison of the US-Taiwan and Russia-Transnistria dyads useful?

Comparing the degree of agency across de facto states is a cumbersome endeavor for several reasons. First, de facto state agency escapes direct observation. Empirically, it is more difficult to establish the presence of de facto state agency than to detect its absence. The case in favor of its absence seems more compelling. Still agency can be inferred from its effects. Two analytical options are available in this situation. The researcher can either focus on agency within the de facto state government or, alternatively, can further disaggregate the de facto state in order to explore the concept of agency at the lower levels of the de facto state bureaucracy. Here I am interested in the instances of autonomy observed at the most general level, leaving out the problem of agency at subnational levels.

Scholars have adopted a variety of methods to study de facto states. Most researchers studying clientelism and de facto states adopt a single case research design (Kosienkowski 2020; Kolsto 2020). Despite some attempts to systematize our knowledge about de facto states by constructing datasets (Florea 2014), cross-case comparisons are relatively rare. Hence I adopt Tarrow's (2010) method of paired comparison, an approach that is both inductive and deductive.

To explore the determinants and scope of de facto state agency I selected two dyads: US-Taiwan and Russia-Transnistria.

Table 2. A Paired Comparison of the US-Taiwan and Russia-Transnistria Dyads.

De facto State	Domestic Opposition	Patron-State Type	Parent-State	Economy	Recognition	Geopolitical Context	National Identity	Agency
Taiwan	Strong	Global Power	Rising Global Power	Diversified, Innovative, and Robust	Derecognition	China-US Strategic Rivalry	Emerging	High
Transnistria	Weak	Regional Power	Weak State	Oligarchic	No Recognition	Russia-EU Rivalry	Weak	Low

The comparison of the US-Taiwan and Russia-Transnistria cases is analytically useful for three reasons. First, it offers us variation in terms of the type of patron-state. Tracing how different patron-states (US and Russia) engage with their clients, provides theoretical insights into how major powers with varying regime types construct their relationships with de facto states. Does it matter for de facto state agency whether the patron-state is a democracy or an authoritarian regime? How does the role of the patron-state as a global power influence agency? The paired comparison helps us discern whether variation along the dimensions listed in Table 2 shapes agency.

The second advantage is related to the duration of the patron-client relation. In the US-Taiwan case, the clientelist relation evolves across seven decades, whereas Russia has acted as Transnistria's patron-state for three decades. Such circumstances offer us enough variation across time to observe how changes in the power of the patron-state and the structure of the international system impact de facto state agency. Furthermore, the two patron-client relations reflect similar de facto state formation paths. Transnistria seceded from Moldova after a brief civil war and received help from the patron-state, whereas Taiwan emerged after the Chinese Civil War, benefitting from Western assistance. Unlike Transnistria, Taiwan enjoyed wide international recognition, even holding a seat at the UN Security Council. Currently, Taiwan is confronted with derecognition, a process driven by the pressure of the parent-state, which Taipei

seeks to slow down by launching various regional initiatives. By contrast, Transnistria spends much less on international recognition efforts and displays less agency.

Third, this cross-regional comparison involving cases from Eastern Europe and East Asia is an innovative approach given the propensity of comparatively minded scholars to focus on cases from one geographic region. Besides cross-regional variation, there are some differences across cases along the dimensions of interest such as the strength of the domestic opposition, the type of economy, national identity, and the regional power distribution (Table 2). In general, Taiwan is more resourceful than Transnistria, a fact which obviously contributes to a greater autonomy vis-à-vis its patron-state. At the same time, Taiwan is under much more pressure from its parent-state (i.e. China) compared to Transnistria, which somewhat reduces its agency rendering it more heavily constrained with regards to its pro-independence aspirations.

Next, I explore the conjectures formulated above using evidence from Transnistria and Taiwan. I have visited Transnistria several times over the years and spent one year in Taiwan to collect data for my adjacent research projects, gathering evidence suitable for this project as well. I supplement local observations and semi-structured expert interviews with information from local media sources, official documents, political statements, and data from the two regions.

Transnistria's limited agency vis-à-vis Russia

All the post-Soviet de facto states function as clients of an external patron-state. Transnistria is no exception. It seceded from Moldova in the late 1980s, declaring its independence in 1990. In 1992, Tiraspol fought with the help of Russian troops, a brief war with Moldova, defending its newly acquired independence. With a diverse population and heavily industrialized, the breakaway region has survived for three decades mostly due to the economic and military support it received from the Russian patron-state (Marandici and Lesanu, 2020). Despite multiple conflict resolution plans proposed over the years, the Transnistrian conflict, labeled often a

frozen conflict, has remained unsettled, but peaceful.² The failure to settle the conflict may be explained by the unwillingness of the Transnistrian and Moldovan political actors to rejoin a common state as well as by the strong ties between Transnistria and its patron-state, preventing the disputed region to act independently during negotiations with Chisinau.

Multiple factors shape Transnistria's capacity to act independently of Russia – the type of domestic opposition, the goals of the patron-state, its economic sustainability, the regional threat environment, the reintegration strategy pursued by the parent-state (i.e. Moldova), and the region's cultural ties to Moscow.

Political processes inside de facto states matter with respect to agency in several ways. The relations with the patron-state may turn into a salient domestic issue. In the Transnistrian case, during the initial two decades of independence, the rebel region was ruled in an authoritarian fashion by its first president – Igor Smirnov. In 2011, Smirnov lost to Shevchuk, who served one term, being replaced by the current president – Vadim Krasnoselsky. None of Transnistria's presidents or political parties promotes the idea of a peaceful reintegration with Moldova or a transformation of the patron-client relation. Instead, all presidents and parties mention that Transnistria should be incorporated into Russia, invoking the 2006 referendum organized by the secessionist region (Marandici, 2020). There is thus little room for policy and discursive changes vis-à-vis the patron-state in a context where the status of a client region is deeply embedded in the mainstream public discourse. Politicians inside Transnistria compete to gain the recognition and support of the patron-state in elections, hoping that a nod from the Kremlin will improve their chances of winning the presidency. In the 2015 elections, one candidate claimed to be backed by Moscow when in fact he was not. The patron-state, however,

² The post-Soviet conflicts have been often labeled “frozen conflicts.”

is not particularly interested in openly guiding Transnistria's domestic affairs, preferring instead to work with whoever the incumbent is.

To further elucidate the question of agency, it is essential to understand the goals behind the patron-state's willingness to spend resources on Transnistria. So far, the Russian Federation has pursued primarily strategic rather than ideological or economic goals in the post-Soviet space. The push for a deeper economic integration of the post-Soviet region under the aegis of the Eurasian Economic Union rather than the European Union is part of Moscow's strategy of building ties that bind. Malyarenko and Wolff (2018, 192) also note that Russia's support for secessionism serves primarily to prevent the consolidation of pro-Western regimes in the parent-state. In some contexts, the patron-state in competition with other potential patrons seeks to obtain a strategic advantage by backing the emergence and maintenance of secessionist entities as, for instance, happened in Ukraine after 2014. When pro-Western parties come to power in Moldova, the strategic value of Transnistria becomes apparent. Eventually, the leaders of Transnistria frame external threats as coming from Moldova backed by the European Union and the United States. Led by Russian-speaking elites, identifying with the Russian World, the cultural and ideological closeness of Transnistria to the patron-state enables Moscow to express patriotic solidarity with Transnistria and provide regular support in the name of a shared identity. In line with Shoemaker and Spanier (1984), Moscow's interest in and leverage over these unrecognized states increases, when pro-Western political players rise to power in Moldova and Ukraine.

Second, Transnistria is not self-sufficient. It relies heavily on the economic assistance provided by Russia. Unlike Abkhazia, where the material aid is often used as a carrot of sorts to help politicians vetted by the patron-state win elections (Kolsto, 2020), in Transnistria, Russia

refrained from such actions. In 2015, Moscow rejected a Transnistrian request for more aid, pushing the region to look for alternative means of support. Despite the rhetoric of the Eurasian economic integration, after some resistance, Transnistria changed gears and joined the EU-Moldova free trade regime. The shift can be traced to the dominance of Sheriff over the regional economy and politics, the conglomerate standing to lose the most from its exclusion from the new trade regime. Thus, under pressure from its business community, Transnistria shifted its position on the Moldova-EU Association Agreement agreeing to change its domestic legislation in order to benefit from the new trade regime with the EU.

Despite the lack of international recognition, Transnistria does not embark on significant efforts to attain international recognition. In this sense, the leverage exerted by the patron-state over its clients is amplified, when the elites of both the patron-state and de facto state perceive the external environment as a high-threat environment. The patron-client state framework, thus, helps us understand why the patron, instead of incorporating the unrecognized states, prefers to preserve some strategic ambiguity about their future. In this sense, the organization of a referendum on independence in 2006, despite looking like a local initiative, seems to have served as a reminder to the parent-state that deepening the cooperation with the EU might impede conflict resolution.

Taken together, the consensus among the secessionist elites regarding the benefits of the clientelist relationship with the patron-state, the region's strategic value for the patron-state involved in a rivalry with the European Union, Transnistria's powerful oligarchs, the lack of international recognition, and the deep cultural ties to Moscow render Transnistria's agency circumscribed to areas, which are not heavily dependent on the patron-state and on international recognition.

Taiwan's extended autonomy vis-à-vis the United States

Taiwan emerged as a result of the Chinese Civil War pitting the Communists against the Kuomintang (i.e. Nationalists). As the Communists took over mainland China, the Nationalists, backed by the United States and led by Chiang Kai-shek found refuge on the island, hoping to use it as a launchpad for a new campaign to regain control of the mainland. In doing so, the KMT instituted an authoritarian regime, a military dictatorship known as the White Terror. The authoritarian regime was quite successful economically. In the 1970s–1980s, Taiwan's economy was booming, the island being classified as one of the East Asian developmental states (Gold, 1986). In the late 1980s, liberalization resulted in democratization, the condemnation of the White Terror regime, and the transition of power to Lee Teng-hui, the first president born on the island, who subsequently was excluded from the KMT for his pro-independence stance (Fell, 2018).

Since its founding, U.S. acted as Taiwan's external patron, a relationship that passed through several stages, evolving from the signing of a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan in 1954 to the interruption of diplomatic ties between the patron and the client in the late 1970s. The American derecognition of Taiwan served strategic reasons and was inscribed in the logic of the Cold War. As U.S. – China relations improved, derecognition proceeded in a gradual manner. In 1971, Taiwan lost its seat at the UN Security Council. Then, after the Deng-Carter summit, it was confronted with what was perceived at that time as the American betrayal, specifically the decision of the Carter administration to switch recognition from Taipei to Beijing. As a result, the patron-state began conducting its bilateral affairs with Taipei via the American Institute. The move generated massive protests on the island, leading to the incremental decline of Taiwan's international status over the last three decades. The derecognition process began in the 1950s as major Western powers – UK (1950), France (1964), Germany (1972) – cut off their diplomatic

ties with Taiwan. Currently only fifteen countries recognize the island as an independent state. In the meantime, the process of derecognition is continuing, an illustration of the fact that the recognition-derecognition dynamics are driven by economic and geopolitical reasons rather than ideology.

After derecognition, Taiwan's value as a client-state laying claims on mainland China weakened. By contrast, as the Sino-American rivalry intensifies, the existing institutional framework with its roots in the period of US-China cooperation faces adjustment pressures. Due to Beijing's efforts, Taiwan was excluded from various international organizations. When officials from Czechia visited Taipei, China's foreign minister threatened that the Czechs will "pay a heavy price" (Huang, 2020). Taiwan responded by engaging in vaccine diplomacy. In 2020, Taiwan donated to the European Union circa six million masks to help fight the coronavirus, generating a lot of sympathy in the EU.

From the patron-state's point of view, Taiwan's status is undetermined. U.S. is adhering to the One China policy, which does not recognize Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan, while, at the same time, refrains from encouraging Taiwan's aspiration for independence. A number of legislative acts and statements demonstrate the U.S. commitment to Taiwan and underpin the One China policy. The Washington-Taipei-Beijing relations have been defined by six key texts: the Taiwan Relations Act (1979), the US-China Joint Communiqués (the Shanghai Communiqué of 1972, the Normalization Communiqué of 1978, the Arms Sales Communiqué of 1982) and the Six Assurances (1982, 2016). Of those, the *Six Assurances* adopted by the Reagan administration laid out the principles of the US policy toward Taiwan.

In effect, the *Six Assurances* specify the limits and scope of the US-Taiwan relations in the areas of military and political cooperation. The *Six Assurances* stipulate that there would be

no end date for arms sales to Taiwan, no mediation role for US in the cross-strait relations, no US pressure on Taiwan to negotiate with the PRC, no formal recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan, no revisions of the Taiwan Relations Act, and no consultations with Beijing on arms sales to Taiwan. At the same time, US via its support for the One China policy recognizes that Taiwan is part of China. The patron-state reserves the right to arm Taiwan without, however, committing to its defense against a potential incursion from the mainland. Likewise, US does not support changes to the status quo, including any unilateral attempts to change the status quo such as a spontaneous Taiwanese declaration of independence.

The Cold War legacy still weighs heavily on the US policy toward Taiwan. Formulated at a time when Washington sought to engage a relatively weak China as part of its containment strategy vis-à-vis the Soviets, the *Six Assurances* sought to compromise the symbolic abandonment of Taiwan with the engagement policy toward post-Mao China. As such the *Six Assurances* remain a historical legacy of the Cold War, reaffirmed in 2016, but, at the same time, under strain due to the growing US-China strategic rivalry as well as due to the mounting pressure from Beijing. So far, this policy of strategic ambiguity deterred Beijing from invading Taiwan, while allowing U.S. to continue arms sales to Taiwan in spite of China's protests.

Yet, the issue of Taiwan's agency should be placed in the broader context of the budding US-China strategic rivalry. According to Allison (2017), U.S. and China are heading toward the Thucydides trap, a pessimistic scenario culminating with a major conflict between the two. Taiwan, as an element of the first island chain, occupies a central place in the new pivot to Asia, initiated by the Obama administration. This rebalancing strategy shifts military forces to the Asia-Pacific region from Europe and the Middle East, increasing the US military posture in East Asia. The likelihood of a conflict over Taiwan's status is higher now as a result of China's rise in

a world still governed by the US international rules. Hence, the value of Taiwan as a U.S. client is increasing as the US-China rivalry escalates. So far, Beijing refrained from intervening militarily in Taiwan, Taiwanese pro-independence presidents backed away from unilateral declarations of independence, and US did not venture to station again its troops on the island.

Occasionally, U.S. deviates from the One China policy. The early ambivalence of the Trump administration regarding Taiwan caused some ruckus in Beijing. Trump accepted a congratulatory call from Tsai Ing-wen, describing her as Taiwan's president, and even questioning the One China policy in an interview (Bohan and Brunnstrom, 2016), only to change his tune during the first meeting with Xi. On the other hand, the Trump administration backed the adoption of the *Taiwan Travel Act* (2018) followed by numerous visits of high-ranking American officials to Taipei. Another example of ambiguity is John Bolton's op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "Revisit the 'One China Policy'" in which the future National Security Adviser supported increased sales of defensive weaponry to Taiwan in combination with increased military deployments to the Western Pacific to deter China. In Bolton's (2017) view, US should station troops on Taiwan and conclude a mutual defense treaty, transforming the island into an "unsinkable aircraft carrier." Although the Biden administration took a more comprehensive approach by leading the Quad alliance, it largely follows the same line of increased engagement with Taiwan. For instance, in March 2021, the US government insisted that Hong Kong and Taiwan should be on the bilateral agenda, leading to a loud diplomatic dispute with the Chinese side (BBC 2021).

Unlike Transnistria, the political elites in Taiwan are divided over the issue of patron-client relations. Taiwan is an open and democratic society with a vibrant civil society held as a counterexample to the political regime in China. However, the two major parties in Taiwan – the

Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and Kuomintang (KMT) – hold diverging views on how to build Taipei’s relations with Beijing, which then influences the way they view Taiwan’s relations with the US. Beijing’s pressure on Taiwan fluctuates depending on whether the presidency is held by a pro-independence or China-friendly party. After DPP’s rule from 2000 to 2008, Taiwan was governed again by the KMT under President Ma Ying-jeou (2008-2016), acquiescing to the status quo, and thus calming its neighbor. However, once Tsai Ing-wen from the DPP expressed the hope to further separate from Beijing, cross-strait relations got tenser, resulting in more inconveniences for Taiwan. China stepped up its efforts during the 2020 elections, hoping to boost the Beijing-friendly parties on Taiwan. Still, Beijing’s interference may have backfired, generating more support for Tsai, who ultimately won the presidency.

Regarded as one of the Asian tigers, a typical developmental state, Taiwan remains a great economic success (Wu, 2007). The island is an important element in the global supply chain and an important trading partner of the United States. It innovates by investing in 5G, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing. Over time, the strategy of developing industrial clusters and technological transfers from the patron-state led to the emergence of a strong semiconductor industry, so that nowadays most smartphones include semiconductors manufactured in Taiwan. For instance, Taiwan’s Semiconductor Manufacturing Company features as the world’s largest contract chipmaker, a key link in the US supply chain, giving Taipei some leverage in the relation with the patron-state and its tech corporations. At the same time, the patron-state is interested in reshoring jobs and major Taiwanese companies such as Foxconn and Pegatron comply by opening new factories in the US (Li and Cheng, 2020).

Economic interdependence constrains Taiwan’s autonomy. As China was rising, in the mid-2000s, the two sides began negotiating a series of economic agreements. In 2004, a

referendum on Taiwan's cross-strait relations was organized, whereas in 2010, despite significant domestic opposition, KMT concluded the Economic Cooperation Agreement Framework. However, economic relations with China ultimately turned out to be a highly controversial issue pitting the China-friendly KMT led by President Ma Ying-jiou against the Sunflower Movement (太陽花學運), a loose network of civil society groups, politicians, and activists, which in 2014 staged massive protests against the passing of the Cross-Strait Trade Agreement (CSSTA). The Sunflower Movement activists perceived closer economic relations with China as a step toward rendering Taiwan more dependent on the mainland and detrimental to the island's economy. But the Sunflower Movement was more than just a simple protest against a trade agreement. It evolved into a political party – the New Power Party (NPP), advocating for political independence, and the rejection of the One China policy. As such the NPP is one of the several pro-independence parties, part of the Pan-Green coalition in Taiwan. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, riding this wave of popular dissatisfaction, Tsai Ing-wen from the DPP won the 2016 elections on a China-critical platform.

The lack of a common cultural identity with the US enhances Taiwan's agency as the patron-state lacks the cultural tools to influence its domestic politics. By contrast, the parent-state (i.e. China) regards officially the population of the island as Han Chinese, sharing a common national identity. Chinese officials are adamant that the Taiwanese identity is a myth. However, a recent survey on Taiwan identity recorded a historical high in terms of respondents identifying as Taiwanese (Devlin and Huang, 2020). Taiwanese nationalism (臺灣民族主義) seems on the rise and various groups demand a desinicization (去中国化) of the educational curriculum, urban spaces, and promoting various name rectification campaigns (see Figure 1 and 2). This development reflects a generational difference as the older generation still regards Taiwan as an

extension of mainland China much like many mainlanders (Figure 3). According to the same survey, 68% of the population of Taiwan views US more favorably than mainland China (35%), supporting closer political and economic ties with the patron-state (Devlin and Huang, 2020). The identity split matters (Schubert, 2004). One of the reasons KMT turned friendlier toward Beijing once democratization began relates to the fact that its constituents identify as Han Chinese (Devlin and Huang, 2020). By contrast, the DPP, more distant in its relations with Beijing, displays more reliance on the patron-state, being backed by many residents self-identifying as Taiwanese.

Figure 1. Pro-independence supporters watching the vote count in 2016 (Ximinding, Taipei).



Source: Author

Figure 2. Signs promoting a new Constitution, a new independent state, and desinicization, 2016 (Ximinding, Taipei).



Source: Author

Figure 3. Workers from Weihai (Shandong province) hold a banner during their visit to the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall in Taipei (January, 2016).



Source: Author.

Taiwan’s agency vis-à-vis the patron-state depends partly on whether China’s rise continues and the US-China rivalry endures. From China’s perspective, even though Taiwan is beyond Beijing’s control, it is *de jure* part of China. PRC officials expect that sooner or later Beijing will take over Taiwan and introduce the ‘one country, two systems’ (一国两制) arrangement. Beijing demonstrates its intentions by conducting regular incursions in the Taiwanese airspace, military exercises in which the PLA practices the takeover of Taiwan, the adoption of the 2005 anti-

secession law (反分裂国家法), efforts to isolate Taipei internationally, and offers of economic incentives to third countries in exchange for a diplomatic switch from Taiwan to Beijing. Thus, despite some local protests, Kiribati ceased the diplomatic recognition of Taiwan, whereas in the Solomon Islands, the president allegedly was offered, but rejected a substantial bribe from the PRC.

Taiwan's declining international influence due to derecognition and the improvement of the US-China relations is likely to slow down as the US-China rivalry intensifies. Even though the patron-client relations are still unfolding on the basis of the *Six Assurances*, some interest groups within the patron-state call for closer ties to Taiwan, including the basing of US troops on the island. Such calls in the US are backed by the pan-Green parties inside Taiwan, requesting more protection from a rising China. Unlike the Russia-Transnistria dyad, the American patron-state and the client-state lack a common cultural identity, which makes the patron's commitment to defend the island more costly domestically as it cannot invoke cultural or ethnic grounds. Still, Taiwan, unlike Transnistria, controls more resources, which allow it to pursue a more robust foreign and security policy.

Conclusion

The comparison of the two patron-client dyads has yielded three important theoretical implications for the study of clientelism and conflict in international affairs. First, the likelihood of a future conflict might depend on the degree of agency enjoyed by de facto states vis-à-vis their patron-states. Whereas Transnistria enjoys a limited degree of agency vis-à-vis Russia, Taiwan has more resources to act independently. Such autonomous action is, usually, limited to areas of low-politics. In both cases, the patron-states lack interest in the cultural, political, or economic life of the de facto state unless such dimensions are perceived as impacting their

security interests. Instead, patron-states in both cases are primarily seeking to keep the client-states as loyal political and military allies. The dyadic relation between patron-states and de facto states is, however, shaped by the capacity of the parent-state to interfere in the policymaking of the patron-state. In this sense, Moldova's ability to influence Russian politics is close to nil. By contrast, China's rise as a major power parent-state can significantly affect the level of international recognition and legitimacy of Taiwan. However, PRC's pressure meets the resistance of Taiwanese domestic and civil society actors, which under stress may radicalize and intensify their pro-independence calls openly challenging Beijing.

Second, patron-states may display different levels of commitment with regards to their clients. Whereas Russia keeps military troops and peacekeepers in Transnistria, showing readiness to defend Transnistria against a potential military takeover, Taiwan lacks similar defense guarantees from the United States. In this sense, Taiwan is in a much more vulnerable situation as the patron-state, a major democratic power, is unwilling to risk expanding its commitments, preferring a policy of strategic ambiguity, thereby reducing the likelihood of a major conflict with the parent-state over the status of the island. In contrast to Beijing's pressure on both US and Taiwan, the parent-state in the case of Transnistria lacks the will, the resources, and the military capacity to recapture the disputed area. This suggests that major power parent-states can alter the patron-client calculus. Moreover, this situation produces a stable equilibrium in the case of Transnistria and a rather volatile environment in the US-Taiwan case.

Finally, going back to the question in the title of this paper, de facto states vary in their capacity to contribute to conflict resolution. Transnistria is generally a rule taker, whereas Taiwan has more resources to act as a rule shaper. Still, none of the two clients has a major role with regards to conflict resolution. Besides economic initiatives and the Berlin+ piecemeal

cooperation, I could not find any instance where Transnistria's preferences diverged from the patron-state's political and military interests. Furthermore, the autonomy displayed by Transnistria in the economic area is tied to the emergence of the European Union as a major actor in the region, rendering Tiraspol more dependent on the new trade regime. Similarly, the economic rise of China has prompted Taiwan to deepen the economic cooperation with the PRC, a highly contentious issue domestically, which generated a social movement and even contributed to the victory of the pro-independence forces in 2016. In both Transnistria and Taiwan, authorities had to overcome resistance from domestic groups, opposing the deepening of economic integration with the parent-state, perceived as a concession. This last point alludes to the earlier remarks concerning the relevance of domestic politics in explaining the degree of agency across de facto states.

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