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### **The Patron States and the Client States in International Politics**

This article analyses the specifics, functional characteristics, and problematic aspects of patron-client relationships between states. It highlights such features as mutual dependence, loyalty, power asymmetry, stability of the relationship, and vague obligations. The main focus is on analysing the characteristics of patron-clientism, such as its contractual nature, the mutual exchange of resources, bonds of loyalty and the asymmetry of power between the parties, which distinguish it from relationships based on coercion and alliance.

It has been determined that the primary determinant in the establishment of patronage relationships between states with differing geopolitical statuses and capabilities is the existence of significant shared security interests, the safeguarding of which requires the pooling of their efforts. In this context, inter-state patron-client relationships serve as an instrumental strategy for realizing the geostrategic and military interests of both parties, where reciprocity and loyalty act as the elements that cement the relationship.

**Keywords:** patronage, asymmetrical relationships, loyalty, client networks, power asymmetry, interdependence, military aid.

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### **Держави-патрони та держави-клієнти в міжнародній політиці**

У статті проаналізовано специфіку, особливості та проблемні аспекти патрон-клієнтських відносин між державами. Виокремлені такі їхні риси як взаємна залежність, лояльність, асиметрія влади, стабільність зв'язку, розмиті зобов'язання. Провідними методами дослідження є системний підхід, порівняльний аналіз, а також загальнонаукові методи. Основну увагу приділено аналізу особливостей патрон-клієнтелізму – договірному характеру, взаємному обміну ресурсами, прихильності та асиметричності влади між сторонами, що відрізняє його від відносин примусу та союзнитва.

Визначено, що головною детермінантою встановлення відносин патронату між державами з різним геополітичним статусом і можливостями є наявність значимих спільних інтересів у сфері безпеки, забезпечення яких потребує об'єднання їхніх зусиль. У цьому контексті міждержавний патрон-клієнтелізм виступає інструментальною стратегією реалізації геостратегічних і військових інтересів обох сторін, де взаємність і відданість відіграють роль цементуючих відносини елементів. Показано, що відмінності у цілях між державами-патронами та державами-клієнтами походять від їхніх геополітичних статусів і амбіцій. Так, патрони прагнуть розширити свій геополітичний вплив і посилити структурну владу щодо міжнародного порядку, тоді як ключова мотивація клієнтів полягає в отриманні захисту в умовах зростання безпекових загроз. Формуючи мережі держав-клієнтів, великі держави переслідують власні стратегічні та ідеологічні цілі, які носять переважно нематеріальний характер. Натомість держави-клієнти в таких

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відносинах фокусуються на отриманні військових і економічних ресурсів, а також посилення міжнародної репутації.

З'ясовано, що найбільш чутливим аспектом у відносинах «патрон-клієнт» у міжнародній політиці є ступінь залежності держав-клієнтів. Діючи в рамках реалістичної парадигми, держави-клієнти прагнуть отримати максимальний обсяг підтримки від патронів, зробивши мінімальну кількість поступок щодо своєї зовнішньополітичної самостійності. Ключовим чинником при цьому стає переговорна сила держави-клієнта, яка полягає у вмінні сформулювати такий набір пропозицій і вигід, який би виглядав виграшним для обох сторін.

**Ключові слова:** патронаж, асиметричні відносини, відданість, клієнтські мережі, асиметрія влади, взаємна залежність, військова допомога.

**Introduction.** Contemporary international relations are characterized by the great diversity and complexity of interstate interactions. Great powers, middle powers, and small states operate within a multilevel system of interconnections and relationships, shaping the world's geopolitical landscape. The capabilities and objectives of different states in international politics vary: while some compete for global leadership and spheres of influence, the ambitions of others are limited to ensuring their own security and independence. The uneven distribution of power in the international system forces weaker states to adapt to existing realities, seeking the protection of great powers to strengthen their international standing. This leads to the establishment of asymmetrical relations between states with different geopolitical statuses, in which the parties are, in practice, unequal not only in terms of resources but also in terms of rights and conditions of cooperation.

At the same time, such unequal relations between states demonstrate resilience, reciprocity, and adaptability to different contexts, as they provide benefits to both sides. Ultimately, the asymmetry in power and resources between states only strengthens their ties. The concept of patron-clientism has become effective analytical tools for explaining interstate cooperation within the framework of asymmetrical bilateral relations.

**Literature review.** The study of international relations and politics through the lens of patronage-clientelism remains an underdeveloped area of international relations theory. This concept emerged in international political studies in the late 1980s, having been borrowed from anthropology and sociology. In contrast, publications on this topic are virtually non-existent in Ukrainian political science.

Most scholarly works on the topic of interstate patronage are authored by American researchers. For instance, K. Carney's dissertation (Carney, 1993) is one of the first attempts to conceptualize the application of the "patron-client" model to the study of international politics. American political scientists D. Sylvan and S. Majeski (Sylvan and Majeski, 2009) examined the role of clientelism in U.S. foreign policy during the second half of the 20th century, identifying as many as 80 client states as of 2006.

Canadian researcher R. Ricardo analysed the characteristics of patronage relations between states within the Westphalian system (Ricardo, 2021). In his view, a weaker state's acceptance of patronage from a great power is entirely consistent with the rationalist logic of survival in a state of international anarchy.

J. Ciorciari from Indiana University examines the specific features of the Chinese model of international patronage, noting that it imposes fewer requirements and obligations on client states compared to the American model (Ciorciari, 2015).

Korean political scientist D. Kim uses the examples of Australia, Japan, and South Korea to analyse the ways client states might respond to – or evade – U.S. strategic demands (Kim, 2025). The author notes that when the demands of the patron state conflict with the political and economic interests of the client states, the latter often resort to a strategy of delaying or sabotaging practical actions.

**Research objective and methodology.** The purpose of this study is to clarify the nature, key features and functional limitations of patron-client relations between states in international politics. Achieving the defined goal involves solving a number of research tasks that allow to comprehensively reveal the specifics of interstate patron-clientelism. Such tasks include:

- to analyze the specifics and features of patron-client relations as a type of asymmetric relations between states;
- define the goals and strategic considerations of patron states and client states within the framework of bilateral interaction;
- to find out the most problematic aspects of interstate patron-client relations.

The methodological basis of the research is a combination of general scientific and special methods. General methods of analysis, synthesis, deduction, induction and generalization are applied. The leading special methods in the study were a systematic approach and comparative analysis, which made it possible to comprehensively analyze the essence and characteristic features of interstate patron-client relations, as well as to distinguish them from other similar phenomena.

**Main results of the research.** Patron-client relationships have long been common in international politics. For instance, ancient China actively pursued a policy of patronage towards its neighbours – the Vietnamese and Korean states, as well as the barbarian tribes of Central Asia. Their political interaction consisted of exchanging tribute and deference to the imperial court for trade privileges and recognition. As a result of numerous military campaigns to the east, the late Roman Republic established a group of client kingdoms along its borders, which supplied Rome with food at preferential prices, paid tribute, and provided auxiliary troops for military campaigns (Maczak, 2017). In return for these ‘friendly’ services, Rome granted these kingdoms economic privileges and military protection. During the Middle Ages, the political landscape of Europe was shaped by hundreds of small feudal domains (duchies, counties, and towns), whose rulers were bound by complex patron-client relationships with more powerful kings and the Holy Roman Emperor.

The principles of sovereign equality of states and non-interference in internal affairs, enshrined in the Peace of Westphalia, helped to establish in international law the idea of the equality of states as functionally similar entities. However, they did not in any way eliminate the asymmetries between states in terms of resources. In practice, structural power within the international system was distributed unevenly among states.

A limited group of states, possessing significant military and economic power, are seeking to expand their geopolitical influence, leading to competition for dominance (hegemony) amongst them. Leading states, seeking to gain strategic advantages, form coalitions of allies and supporters, offering less influential countries geopolitical protection (patronage) and access to essential resources in exchange for their loyalty and support.

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union established and maintained extensive client alliances, spanning more than fifty countries. It seemed that the unchallenged dominance of the US on the world stage following the end of the Cold War would put an end to this trend. Instead, following 1991, the United States, as the sole superpower, actively expanded and strengthened its system of international alliances and partnerships (Sylvan and Majeski, 2009).

By the late 2000s, as American hegemony began to wane, other centres of power – such as China, Russia and Turkey – began to pursue policies based on rivalry between the great powers and the formation of their own networks of client states. Thus, despite possible shifts in the configuration of great and regional powers, their struggle for influence over weaker states will remain a key feature of international politics in the 21st century.

Ukrainian researcher O. Polishchuk describes patron-client relationships as a collaboration between actors of unequal status and power, in which they join forces to achieve common goals, using one another as a means of furthering their own interests (Polishchuk, cited in Pelishenko, 2016). The characteristic features of such relationships include mutual dependence, the presence of feedback, ambiguous obligations, a status hierarchy between the parties, the stability and solidarity.

The American political scientist J. Scott defines patron-client relationships as instrumental friendships, in which wealthier and more influential individuals (patrons) use their influence and resources to provide protection and benefits to those of lower status (clients) (Hilgers, 2011). The latter, in turn, demonstrate reciprocity by providing general support and assistance. Such relationships are characterised by power imbalances, loyalty, reciprocity, and stable bonds.

The nature of patron-client relationships is defined by shared interests and mutual exchanges. Their stability stems from the fact that each participant in this interaction derives a benefit: patrons use these special relationships to consolidate their influence, whilst clients use them to secure protection.

Relations between states based on the ‘patron-client’ model are contractual in nature and arise from an imbalance of power. The stronger state acts as a protector, whilst the weaker state voluntarily aligns its foreign policy on certain issues and provides assistance to the patron. This interdependence is evident in the fact that the weaker state feels the need for protection from the more powerful state, whilst for the latter, providing patronage to client states is an important means of strengthening its geopolitical influence.

Patronage relationships between states involve mutual obligations and informal exchanges that may evolve depending on the circumstances. Under such conditions, the weaker state repays the assistance and protection it receives by aligning its foreign policy and promoting the economic interests and military ambitions of the patron state. Therefore, patron states regard client states as outposts of their influence in neighbouring regions.

In such a flexible model, states offer one another unique resources – those which the other party lacks but desires, or those which cannot be obtained by any other means (Ricardo, 2020). In this context, the relationship between the patron state and the client state can be viewed as an exchange between actors possessing unequal yet mutually valuable resources. The benefits, that both parties derive from such an exchange, are often long-term in nature and partly intangible, which makes it difficult to quantify them using traditional cost-benefit analysis.

On the international stage, patron states and their clients actively interact simultaneously at various levels (from bilateral to global) and across different spheres, including political coordination, security, energy and trade. Given the multifaceted nature of international relations, patron-client relationships can be viewed as a kind of package deal, in which the parties exchange various resources and services on favourable terms. Whilst in domestic politics the inclusion of unrelated issues in a joint package indicates a lack of trust between the parties, in relations between patron states and client states such exchanges form the basis for the emergence of moral obligations and mutual solidarity.

However, this client status does not in any way imply that the state must agree with the powerful state on all foreign policy issues. Nor does it mean that their relations are exclusively friendly and free of conflict.

The patronage of a powerful state does not require its clients to make an immediate and substantial commitment. Through ongoing dialogue, the weaker state will itself come to understand when and how best to respond.

Since patron-client relationships between states are designed to be long-term, they involve a ‘credit of trust’: debts may accumulate and then be repaid through foreign policy measures, international support or economic agreements. This relationship is based on the principle of ‘give and take’, which allows both parties the flexibility to respond to each other’s needs.

When establishing relations with a client state, the patron state does not focus on the amount of resources that will need to be expended, but rather on the potential strategic advantages and opportunities that will arise. An important prerequisite for establishing such relations is the client state’s political stability, since investing in a problematic partner carries significant risks.

A powerful state may be drawn into a conflict or lose its investments in the event of a regime change. For their part, weaker states, by assuming the role of clients, seek to neutralise external risks and threats, whilst assessing the potential costs, associated with patronage (Marandici, 2025). Thus, these asymmetrical partnerships are mutually beneficial and goal-oriented.

Patron-client relationships between states persist as long as both parties derive the expected benefits from them. Significant concessions in favour of the patron, the patron’s prolonged dominance in bilateral cooperation, and growing inequality between the parties can lead to the client state’s complete dependence on the patron, which effectively amounts to the establishment of a protectorate (Wouter, 2017). In contrast, strengthening the military and economic capabilities of the weaker state and sustained cooperation reduce the asymmetry in capabilities, gradually transforming the client state into an equal partner of the powerful state. The termination of patron-client relations between countries is the third possible scenario. The most common causes of such a breakdown between states include a waning of mutual interest in cooperation, a change in the ruling regime in the client state, as well as the client’s disappointment and a shift toward another patron.

The main forms of patronage support provided by powerful states are military and economic aid, as well as diplomatic support. Today, this is supplemented by ideological and expert advisory support. Powerful states can also mobilise additional resources to support a client state by enlisting the help of their other clients and great powers. Sometimes a patron state simply props up a weak but loyal regime, or enriches its leaders financially. In return, client states offer their own resources and opportunities for cooperation, such as access to military infrastructure, mineral resources, transport routes, and voting in international organisations.

The voluntary nature of the exchange is the key distinction between patronage and coercive relationships. Mutual benefit and exchange between states create a certain degree of balance, even within their asymmetrical interactions. In relationships between unequal partners, there may be areas of co-

operation where their capabilities are comparable or complementary. On the other hand, the power dynamic inherent in their relationship cannot be ignored. Inequality of resources and status inevitably leads to an imbalance of power between states in bilateral relations.

The «patron-client» model a priori assumes that a stronger state sets the agenda for bilateral relations, sets priorities, and provides support to the client state. The role of the patron is the key instrument for managing these relationships (Carney, 1993). In exchange for the patron's support, the client state follows the patron's foreign policy and provides less significant resources.

At the same time, a powerful state can always resort to threats or the imposition of sanctions, the withdrawal of aid or other forms of pressure to force the client state to comply with its demands. Interstate relations based on the 'patron-client' model, combining elements of coercion, exploitation and voluntary cooperation, occupy an intermediate position between soft subordination and asymmetric partnership.

According to western researcher J. Chorchari, patron-client relationships should not be viewed as mere subordination or domination. Rather, they are more akin to following a great power, with clients wielding significant influence and leverage (Ciorciari, 2015). From this perspective, client networks between states can be viewed as flexible international hierarchies formed on a contractual basis. Weaker states follow a powerful state and recognise its role as a patron only as long as they derive significant security, economic and status benefits for themselves. The view of patron-client partnerships between states as distinct international hierarchies presupposes the existence of certain rules and norms governing the behaviour of the participants.

Several factors influence the emergence of 'patron-client' relationships between states. These can be divided into hard and soft factors. Hard factors include common security interests, the strategic geographical location of the client state, resource asymmetry, and a mutual willingness to cooperate. Soft factors include shared political values, the presence of a diaspora, and close historical and cultural ties.

The establishment of 'patron-client' relationships between states is based on strategic calculations and a carefully considered choice of partner. At the same time, value-based considerations and the subjective assessments that political leaders make of other countries play a significant role in this process. Great powers, forming their patronage networks, are guided by the pragmatic logic of seeking 'subordinate friends' at a reasonable price. At the same time, the primary motivation for powerful states to establish and maintain patronage relationships with weaker states lies in their desire to advance their own geostrategic and national interests through them.

Patron-client relationships between states can also be examined through the prism of the legitimacy of the status of great powers and the structure of the international order. In such relationships, weaker states, by assuming the role of clients, thereby demonstrate their recognition of the patron state's leadership and their willingness to support its foreign policy initiatives (Kowalski and Rekšć, 2023). As a powerful state's patronage network expands, so too does its ability to influence the international order (structural power).

When dealing with client states, patron states are primarily guided by non-material interests, which fall into two categories: strategic and ideological. The former includes securing significant advantages over rivals, access to the client state's territory and infrastructure, and diversifying supply sources for critical and raw materials. Ideological objectives include enhancing the prestige of the patron state, building international support for its position, and fostering a symbolic attachment among client states, which manifests itself in the dissemination of the patron state's cultural values and educational models, and the study of its language. Economic motives, such as access to natural resources or the expansion of markets, are also present in the calculations of powerful states, but they are of secondary importance.

The motivations of client states are shaped primarily by the prevailing security environment. An increase in the level of threats automatically raises the cost to a state of ensuring its own security. These costs include not only expenditure on weapons and military personnel, but also the need to modernise industry, strengthen the state's institutional capacity, and secure international support.

When the scale of external threats becomes commensurate with or exceeds a state's resources and capabilities, it naturally begins to seek external assistance to ensure its security. A powerful state can act as such a protector (security provider), offering security guarantees or helping to strengthen the military capabilities of a weaker state. The client state expects, first and foremost, to receive specific material resources – military equipment, state-of-the-art weaponry and technology, investment, economic aid, and access to markets. At the same time, client states also pursue intangible objectives,

which include strengthening their international influence and creating a deterrent effect against their enemies.

The consequences of patron-client partnership of states go beyond the scope of their bilateral relations. For both sides, this cooperation is becoming an instrument for implementing its objectives in the wider context of foreign and domestic policy.

Great powers can create a network of client states to strengthen their influence at the global level, form a favorable balance of power in the region, or restrain geopolitical rivals. Instead, client states use cooperation with a great power to strengthen their positions in the region, implement important projects in strategic sectors, and establish partnership relations with other client states of this patron. Often, ruling elites and leaders of client states use close relations with a great power to strengthen their domestic political positions.

Patron-client relationships between states differ from alliances. Alliances are characterized by formally established obligations, equality between the parties, the provision of mutual security guarantees, and a focus on protection against external threats (Kim *et al.*, 2017). The ‘patron-client’ model offers a more flexible yet cautious approach to engagement, one that avoids making firm commitments. It involves providing military assistance without direct security guarantees, diplomatic support, and technical assistance to strengthen the client state’s resilience and address its internal challenges. Such relationships involve flexible mechanisms of diffuse obligations. Their predominantly informal nature distinguishes them from contractual relationships and formal obligations. These bilateral partnerships are governed by informal agreements (pacts). These agreements are often quasi-personal in nature, as they are established through mutual understanding between the leaders of the countries involved. The terms of a pacts depend on the capabilities of the great power, on how much each side values what the other has to offer, on the alternatives available to the parties, and on the international political situation. They outline the political course that the client state must follow; the resources, the conditions for their provision, and the level of support the weaker partner can expect; potential sanctions for noncompliance; as well as the “red lines” beyond which the patron may intervene in the client state’s internal affairs.

The most challenging aspect of the relationship between patron states and client states is finding the optimal balance between the client’s autonomy and its dependence on the patron. This balance is delicate and dynamic. Although neorealism argues that great powers by their military and economic might dominate the international arena and are capable of directing the behaviour of weaker states, in practice client states often act independently and against the will of their patron.

A client state’s dependence on a patron’s resources creates vulnerabilities and potential risks that most client states seek to avoid. Weaker states want to receive as much support as possible while making as few concessions as possible regarding their autonomy (Kim, 2025). Serious external threats compel states to seek protection and make them more willing to accept the terms of that protection. In such situations, the strategic benefits of a great power’s patronage outweigh and justify certain concessions in terms of foreign policy autonomy.

The degree of a client state’s dependence is not static: it changes over time and depending on the context of the partnership. This dependence can be balanced by the patron’s dependence on the client’s unique resources, including critical materials, technologies, natural resources, and strategic location. This creates an asymmetrical interdependence between the parties.

Structural and normative restrictions within the international system also influence patron-client relationships between states. These include international legal norms, the principle of sovereignty, the reactions of other states, the balance of power in the region and others. The contradiction between the patron’s objectives and these restrictions often works in favour of the client state (Ricardo, 2021).

A reduction in external threats gives the client greater freedom of action and strengthens its influence in bilateral relations. Furthermore, the client’s buildup of military and economic capabilities naturally leads to a reduction in asymmetry between partners. Thus, even under conditions of significant state patronage, client states can sometimes maintain considerable foreign policy autonomy.

The degree of autonomy that a client state enjoys relative to its patron is largely determined by its bargaining power. The effectiveness of this power depends on the negotiation strategy, with the most successful approaches being those that avoid situations where negotiations turn into a zero-sum game. The weaker state wins when it develops a “win-win scenario” that includes benefits for both itself and the patron. In certain situations, the client state may also adopt a stance that differs somewhat from that of a patron, yet remains active and assertive, citing shared interests.

A patron state can exert significant influence over political and economic processes in a client state. This influence, along with the desire to strengthen its position on the global stage, is an important objective of the patron state (Resnick, 2022). This will enable the powerful state to draw on more of the client state's resources, gain a better understanding of its domestic political situation, and prevent undesirable developments. Foreign advisors who oversee military and technical assistance programs serve not only as sources of expert knowledge and best practices, but also as agents of political influence. By working with government officials and various target groups, they indirectly promote the interests of their countries and also act as observers of the situation. For their part, thanks to close ties with the patron state, client states also gain the opportunity to influence political processes within the patron state. The main channels for such influence are the activities of diaspora communities and business groups.

**Conclusions.** Patron-client relationships between states are a specific type of asymmetrical relationship in which the parties are not equal but derive valuable benefits by exchanging their respective resources. Patrons primarily provide military and economic resources, while clients offer international support and specific resources, such as access to their territory and infrastructure.

The key features of interstate patron-client relationships include mutual dependence, power asymmetry, loyalty, vague obligations, the durability of ties, and their contractual nature. The main factor driving their formation is common strategic interests in the sphere of security, which can only be realized through cooperation. At the same time, this unequal partnership serves a practical purpose for both sides: through it, the patron strengthens its geopolitical influence, while the client enhances its own security and counterbalances threats.

The importance of patron-client relations for foreign policy activities lies in the fact that, despite the resource asymmetry of states, they allow ensuring the strategic and security interests of both sides and making their bilateral relations stronger. Furthermore, elements of subordination in these relations indirectly contribute to the structuring of the international environment.

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