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Great Power Competition, Clientelism, and De Facto States: Transnistria and Taiwan Compared

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Abstract

To what extent can de facto states act autonomously vis-à-vis their patron states and domestic societies? This article draws on theories of clientelism in international relations to develop a novel argument explaining the agency of de facto states. Examining two strategic triangles—Russia–Transnistria–Moldova and US–Taiwan–China—it demonstrates that interrelated domestic factors such as robust political competition, democratic pluralism, reimagined national identities, and big business shape the autonomy of de facto states in Eastern Europe and East Asia. Furthermore, the structured focused comparison of Transnistria and Taiwan indicates that the agency of de facto states declines when rising parent states and dissatisfied patron states challenge the status quo, engaging in great power competition. Their autonomy varies across areas of low and high politics, as patron states prioritize military-security issues and interfere less in the economic and cultural affairs of the de facto states.

Keywords: Transnistria; Taiwan; Russia; China; conflict resolution

Introduction

De facto states, defined here as entities possessing the characteristics of a state but lacking international recognition (Pegg 1998), are often viewed as organizations that are devoid of any agency. This perspective has significant consequences for the way researchers and policy makers conceptualize conflict transformation. For instance, many observers assumed that the two self-proclaimed statelets in Ukraine—the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR)—were sufficiently autonomous vis-à-vis Moscow to engage in peace talks with Kyiv and negotiate power-sharing agreements leading to durable peace. However, after Russia's annexation of the short-lived DPR and LPR and the takeover of the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) by Azerbaijan, it became clear that such expectations were inaccurate, as some de facto states lacked the required agency to settle the conflict without their patron state's involvement. Similarly, it has often been contended that the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (Transnistria), the Republic of Abkhazia (Abkhazia), and the Republic of South Ossetia-the State of Alania (South Ossetia) could act as independent actors in the peace negotiations with Moldova and Georgia.[1]

Given the ambiguity concerning the degree and type of autonomy possessed by de facto states, it is worth exploring the following question: under what conditions do the de facto states behave autonomously vis-à-vis their patron states and domestic societies?[2] In answering this question, the article contributes to the scholarship on de facto states and clientelism in international relations in two ways. First, it formulates a novel argument about de facto state agency as a form of autonomy.

In doing so, it builds on the patron–client frameworks proposed by Shoemaker and Spanier (1984) and Sylvan and Majeski (2009) to argue that de facto state agency is shaped by a combination of domestic and international factors. Second, the argument is explored by comparing the following strategic triangles: Russia–Transnistria–Moldova and US–Republic of China (Taiwan)–People's Republic of China (PRC).[3] Such a cross-regional comparison, bridging the rigid disciplinary boundaries demarcating East European and East Asian studies, is conducted in line with the structured focused comparison method proposed by George and Bennett (2005).

Transnistria and Taiwan were selected as critical cases to enhance our understanding of clientelism and agency in international relations across strategic triangles involving unrecognized states and great powers. The structured focused comparison allows us to derive useful insights regarding the constraints under which de facto states interact with their patron states and parent states. Of particular interest is the effect of great power competition in Eastern Europe and East Asia on de facto state agency across different policy areas, both low politics and high politics. In doing so, the structured focused comparison sets out to identify causal mechanisms linking de facto state agency to a constellation of domestic and international factors, which is generally neglected by the scholarship.

Elucidating the question of de facto state agency can help devise effective strategies for dispute resolution. The presence of an external patron complicates peacebuilding in postconflict settings, as it is often unclear whether de facto states involved in patron–client relations possess sufficient autonomy to adopt their own conflict resolution strategy. Moreover, the interactions of the international community with disputed areas are always a complex matter in the sense that there is an inherent tension between the policy of engagement pursued by various external players, the parent state's insistence on territorial integrity, and the claim to independence formulated by the unrecognized authorities (Caspersen 2018; Ker-Lindsay and Berg 2018).

The article is structured as follows. First, I provide an overview of the literature on clientelism and de facto states in international relations, identifying some blind spots. Next, I lay out an argument regarding de facto state agency, which I subsequently explore via a structured focused comparison of Taiwan and Transnistria. Third, in a separate section I discuss the main findings and their broader implications for peacebuilding and conflict transformation. The article ends with some reflections on potential directions for future research.

Clientelism and De Facto States in International Relations

As a concept in international affairs, clientelism lacks a widely accepted definition. Here I conceptualize political clientelism as an asymmetric, hierarchical, dependent relationship between two states that engage in *an unequal exchange.* The patron state offers protection, security guarantees, and resources to a client state in return for political loyalty or/and payments. It is the element of unequal power and material resources that distinguishes clientelism from alliances among friendly states and adversarial relations in global affairs. 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 a form of voluntary cooperation akin to a partnership or alliance, as in such cases both parties enjoy a high degree of autonomy acting together as equals. In contrast, in a clientelist relation the patron state defines the terms of the exchange, dominating the client state and modifying unilaterally the terms of the informal association to pursue its own agenda. Norms, coercion, material benefits, and a common identity contribute to the durability of patron–client relationships, preventing clients from switching their allegiance to other potential patrons. Sylvan and Majeski (2009, 1) observe that American foreign policy focuses on supporting a network of US clients, counting 80 client states in 2006. Russia is another example of a patron state sponsoring a network of client states (Hoch and Kopeček 2020), whereas China appears to set up its own league of cooperative states via the Belt and Road Initiative.

It is thus analytically useful to adapt earlier theories of clientelism to explore this phenomenon in the context of de facto states. Shoemaker and Spanier (1984) elaborated a theory of clientelism in international relations to explain the global contest over clients between the US and the USSR during the Cold War. In line with Shoemaker and Spanier (1984), patron states perceive the survival of their clients as instrumental in counterbalancing the influence of rival powers. In doing so, patron states are interested in achieving their own strategic, status-related, economic, or ideological goals. Shoemaker and Spanier (1984, 22) also note that the client will be more responsive to the demands of the patron state in a high-threat environment. Applying the same logic to the de facto states, it is reasonable to assume that the leverage exerted by a patron state over its clients is amplified in a high-threat environment, as de facto states comply with demands, expecting to gain more strategic significance and extract more resources from the patron state. In contrast, in a low-threat environment the patron state will not regard de facto state survival as a high priority and reduce its support.

Yet, the theory proposed by Shoemaker and Spanier (1984) can be supplemented with insights from other frameworks. Clientelism can be viewed through the lens proposed by Sylvan and Majeski (2009), who draw on the principal-agent approach and theorize 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, arguing that to ensure compliance, the patron state monitors the client state on a regular basis, a process that in the US case led to the growth of a massive foreign policy bureaucracy, operating directly from within the territory of each client state (Sylvan and Majeski 2009). Unlike Shoemaker and Spanier (1984), Sylvan and Majeski distinguish between the processes of client acquisition and maintenance, juxtaposing clientelism to hostile relations with foreign enemies, which in the US are usually defined by the foreign policy establishment. For the patron–client relation to remain stable, the patron state uses a mix of positive and negative incentives to guide the client state's behavior. Positive incentives include protection and resources, whereas negative incentives involve coercion to induce a client's compliance. Occasionally, the patron state may threaten to withdraw its aid if the client refuses to comply. Drawing on Sylvan and Majeski (2009), clientelism may be accompanied by informational asymmetries and moral hazard problems whereby de facto states occasionally find it convenient to escalate tensions and invoke humanitarian reasons to win over the international public opinion. The same holds for parent and patron states that are involved in geopolitical rivalries. Under such circumstances, patron states may increase their support for an unrecognized state and antagonize the parent state to extract concessions in other areas.

The approaches proposed by Shoemaker and Spanier (1984) and Sylvan and Majeski (2009) were elaborated to account for interactions between standard states. As Kolstø has noted (2020, 4), the lack of recognition renders de facto states more dependent on the patron state for material assistance, military backing, and diplomatic support. Therefore, the relations between patron states and de facto states are inherently asymmetrical. Usually, but not always, the patron is a great power, wielding significant influence and having enough resources to prop up a de facto state. Besides economic aid, the patron state may steer the decision making of various international organizations, set up regional trade regimes, bestow legitimacy on its clients, and persuade other states to recognize or derecognize a de facto state. As a rule, de facto states are relatively small in terms of territory. All these aspects point to a hierarchical dependent relationship between de facto states and their patron states.

The topic of patron–client ties has been explored extensively in the context of de facto states. By now, there is a significant body of research on the survival of unrecognized states (Pegg 1998; Caspersen 2012; Dembinska and Campana 2017; Hoch and Kopeček 2020). Florea (2014) identified 34 de facto states during the 1945–2011 period. Examples include the Tamil Eelam, the Republic of Somaliland, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Taiwan, Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh), Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and others. De facto states should not be confused with quasi-states, which Jackson (1993) conceptualized as states having international legitimacy but

unable to govern their territory effectively. Unlike quasi-states, 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, most but not all de facto states survive with the help of an external patron. For example, Somaliland endured for decades without an external patron (Prelz Oltramonti 2020), whereas Artsakh, until its recapture in 2023 by Azerbaijan, has relied on Armenia (Miarka 2022). Having a patron state and benefitting from external military support does increase the probability of de facto state survival (Florea 2014).

Argument: Drivers of De Facto State Agency

Even though the question of de facto state agency is at the heart of many conflicts, theories of clientelism in international relations have sidestepped the issue. 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. Here, I define agency as referring to the autonomy of a de facto state to formulate initiatives and conduct policies independently of the patron state, the parent state, and domestic groups. Thus, de facto state agency includes an external dimension and a domestic one. It varies across patron–client dyads, policy areas, and vis-à-vis parent states. Entangled in a web of relations comprising various actors at different levels, de facto states may be autonomous vis-à-vis their parent state and other states while simultaneously lacking autonomy in relation to a powerful patron state and major domestic groups.

The argument presented in Figure 1 elucidates the agency of a de facto state through the identification of novel factors and causal mechanisms. These elements point to ways in which domestic processes and rivalries among great powers influence the interactions between a de facto state, its parent state, and its patron state across various policy domains. Each factor will be detailed in the next paragraphs.

Democratic competition affects the extent to which de facto states are willing to behave autonomously with respect to both their parent states and patron states. In discussing Russia's involvement in Abkhazia, Kolstø (2020, 3) observed that often the domestic politics of client states was more pluralist than that of the patron state. Indeed, in cases where domestic politics is fragmented with multiple factions competing for power, foreign policy issues such as relations with the patron and parent states may become salient, with political parties engaging in collective action to shape such policies. It is argued here that democratic competition in de facto states incentivizes their residents to participate in social movements and form new parties, which politicize the relations with both the patron state and the parent state. The relation with the parent state is particularly problematic. Some of the de facto state politicians seek to persuade the voters
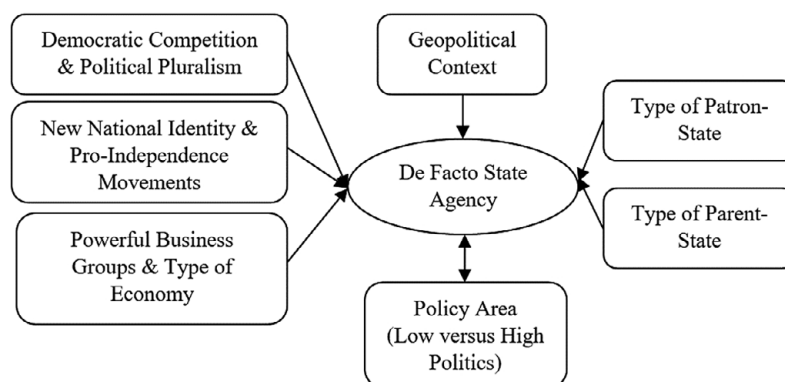

Figure 1. Factors Influencing De Facto State Agency.
Source: Author.

that more cooperation with the parent state would be beneficial to the whole polity, whereas others reject such collaboration as a betrayal of the pro-independence agenda. In debating such cooperation, de facto state politicians transform the relations with the former parent state into a salient issue. They may be divided over how to construct their foreign policy toward the external patron and the parent state the same as certain factions within the patron state may advocate for enhanced relations, whereas others prefer reducing the security commitments to the de facto state.

What explains such divergent preferences vis-à-vis the parent state? Quite often, the unwillingness to cooperate closely with the parent state reflects the consolidation of new national identity groups, which perceive the growing politicoeconomic ties with the parent state as leading to excessive interdependence, a step toward their territorial reintegration and the cultural assimilation of the new identity. Unlike the parties perceiving economic cooperation as a threat, powerful business groups involved in trade with the parent state favor closer economic integration with the parent state and back those domestic parties embracing such an agenda despite resistance from the more hawkish politicians preoccupied with security and political independence. Such policy disagreements over the economic ties with the parent state may fuel new political activism and renewed calls for independence.

New national identities and social movements consolidate the internal agency of unrecognized states as follows. Ulas (2021) has pointed out the role of social movements in driving democratization within de facto states. Such movements and political parties may promote new group identities, changing the national identification within de facto states to distance themselves from the parent state and highlight their cultural proximity to the patron state. Identities unique to the de facto state may serve as a foundation for more external autonomy. The patron–client relation seems more cohesive in cases where the two sides share cultural affinities such as language, religion, heritage, and political culture. In such cases, the link between the patron and the client is frequently justified in terms of cultural solidarity for humanitarian reasons rather than simply in an instrumental manner. Therefore, opposition to the patron state's policies may be perceived by some groups within the de facto state as national disloyalty, raising the costs of autonomous action. In contrast, in situations in which the patron and the client lack such cultural connections and instead have a history of bilateral relations marked by tensions, there is more potential for agency. For instance, in analyzing the Abkhaz-Russian relations, Kolstø (2020) identified a strong regional identity and memories of past wrongs committed by the patron state as factors contributing to the willingness of the de facto state to reject some of Moscow's requests.

An additional dimension that warrants scholarly attention pertains to the influence of great power competition on the agency of de facto states. The nature of the parent state, whether as a formidable great power or a weaker entity, holds significant ramifications. Castan Pinos and Sacramento (2022) propose the notion of counter-paradiplomacy to describe the efforts of the parent states to combat the paradiplomatic activities of the would-be de facto states. A weak parent state may find it challenging to counter the endeavors of a de facto state and its international backers. In such scenarios where the patron state eclipses the influence of the parent state, de facto states could experience increased autonomy in their dealings with the parent state. Conversely, when both the parent state and the patron state are great powers of comparable strength enmeshed in a global rivalry, de facto states may find themselves in a constricting position, pressed from both sides. As the intensity of great power competition escalates, culminating in a high-threat environment characterized by the pursuit of ideological, status-related, and strategic objectives, as outlined by Shoemaker and Spanier (1984), the potential for de facto state autonomy declines. Moreover, the great power rivalry shapes the political debates within a de facto state, as parties opt for distinct foreign policies ranging from unwavering support for the patron state to reintegration with the parent state.

Drawing on Sylvan and Majeski (2009), it is posited here that de facto states are not totally helpless in their relationship with the patron state. When interacting with the patron state, de facto states routinely withhold information regarding their resources, capabilities, and intentions, whereas the patron states may try to compensate such informational gaps by closely monitoring

de facto states. Other mechanisms may be at work too. Bakke et al. (2018) demonstrate the existence of a conditional mechanism whereby trust in the patron state is directly correlated with the residents' trust in their own authorities. In combination with other individual-level attitudes, distrust toward the patron state results in lower trust toward de facto state authorities. In this sense, a high level of popular trust toward the external patron would translate into greater support for the authorities of the de facto state and, therefore, result in greater agency internally and lower external autonomy. Still, such an approach assumes the existence of a cohesive public opinion inside a de facto state, with no opposition toward the patron state and broad resistance to improved ties with the parent state. Such an assumption is not always tenable, as the public in a de facto state may be divided over the most effective way to interact with the parent state.

The degree of autonomy enjoyed by de facto states is contingent, among other things, on the type of policy area. The agency of such entities manifests itself differently across low-politics and high-politics domains. Patron states pay more attention to high politics, expecting clients to side with their military, foreign, and security policies, lacking much interest in matters pertaining to low politics such as domestic affairs, cultural matters, and economic arrangements. Thus, de facto state agency should be greater in the low-politics domains, situated beyond the immediate geopolitical interests of the patron state. Indeed, Berg and Vits (2022, 5) note that de facto states may strengthen their self-proclaimed statehood by behaving in a pragmatic manner, adopting a dual logic—cooperating economically with the patron state's rivals while toeing the line of the patron state with respect to strategic and political decisions.

Business groups and access to resources feature as additional elements of the agency puzzle. Both incumbent and opposition politicians in de facto states are not much different from their peers in recognized states. Unless the de facto state is ruled by a dictator, politicians in such areas must provide public goods and be responsive to their constituents' demands. They also need to defend themselves against criticism from the opposition. The composition of the domestic opposition, the main electoral cleavages, and the role of the civil society and the business community matter when one seeks to explain the willingness of some de facto states to deviate from the constrains imposed by the patron state. Politicians who disagree with the goals pursued by the patron state may win elections and challenge the status quo. Furthermore, in certain situations the patron state may intervene in the domestic politics of the de facto states to tilt the balance in favor of its preferred candidate. Such attempts do not necessarily succeed. Kolstø (2021) noted that after a failed intervention in Abkhazia's politics in the 2010s, Russia adopted a more relaxed approach, accepting any winner as long as they did not challenge Moscow's role as a patron state.

To gain more knowledge about the conditions under which de facto states display autonomy vis-à-vis their patron states and parent states I compare clientelist relations across Eastern Europe and East Asia by examining the US–Taiwan–PRC and Russia–Transnistria–Moldova strategic triangles.

The Advantages of a Cross-Regional Comparison

Studying the question of agency across de facto states is a thought-provoking endeavor primarily because the phenomenon escapes direct observation. Empirically, it is more difficult to establish the presence of autonomy than to detect its absence. Even though the case in favor of its absence seems more compelling, agency can be inferred from situations in which a de facto state acts either against domestic societal interests or deviates from the constraints imposed by external actors. In the first case, one may speak of domestic autonomy, whereas in the second case of external agency.

Scholars have adopted a variety of methods to study de facto states. Some researchers prefer a single-case research design (Kosienkowski 2020; Kolstø 2020), whereas others engage in a quantitative inquiry by constructing data sets (Florea 2014). Cross-case comparisons across regions are still rare. This article follows a middle path and adopts the structured focused comparison as a methodological lens, an approach proposed by George and Bennet (2005), which is both inductive

Table 1. A Structured Focused Comparison of Taiwan and Transnistria

Cases	Taiwan	Transnistria
Determinants of Agency Democratic Competition	Strong	Weak
New Identity & Social Movements	Strong	Weak
Business Groups & Type of Economy	Strong Diversified & Innovative	Strong Oligarchic–Monopolistic
Geopolitical Context	China–US Rivalry High Threat	Russia–Ukraine War High Threat
Policy Area	Low vs. High Politics	Low vs. High Politics
Type of Patron State	Global Power	Regional Power
Type of Parent State	Rising Global Power	Weak State
Degree of Agency & International Status	Declining Agency & Ongoing Derecognition	Low Agency & Unrecognized0

Source: Author.

and deductive. The structured focused comparison generates in-depth case-specific, cross-case, and cross-regional insights, allowing us to refine the conceptualization of agency in international relations, which in turn has the potential to contribute to the design of effective peacebuilding strategies in conflicts involving de facto states backed by external patrons. To explore the ramifications of the proposed argument I selected two cases—Taiwan and Transnistria—both of which are disputed jurisdictions claimed by parent states and receiving support from their respective patron states for several decades.

The proposed case selection is analytically useful for three reasons. First, it helps researchers develop a common framework to analyze de facto state agency and clientelism in global affairs, offering variation in terms of the types of patron states and parent states interacting with the unrecognized regions. The structured focused comparison helps highlight the challenges posed by entities lacking recognition and clientelism in international relations.

The second advantage is related to the extended duration of the patron–client relations under scrutiny allowing us to observe long-term processes. The rich history of clientelist ties in both cases presents us with the opportunity to engage in a comparative historical analysis tracing how democratic competition, the emergence of new identities, powerful domestic business groups, various types of patron states and parent states, and the changing geopolitical context influence the capacity of de facto states to survive (Table 1).

Furthermore, these two cases offer insights into two somewhat parallel paths of de facto state formation. Aided by Russia, Transnistria's secession from Moldova followed a brief civil conflict, whereas Taiwan's emergence was facilitated by American support after the Communists defeated the Nationalists in the Chinese Civil War. Both regions are categorized as secessionist by their respective parent states. However, a significant distinction sets Transnistria and Taiwan apart. Unlike Transnistria, Taiwan has not proclaimed its formal independence and has not legally separated from the PRC, claiming instead the mainland as its jurisdiction. Taiwan stands as a rather atypical de facto state, having initially garnered widespread international recognition, even holding a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Yet, due to the UN Resolution 2758 in 1971, the American abandonment in the late 1970s, and the escalating pressures from China, Taiwan now grapples with the complex process of derecognition. This derecognition dynamic is governed by a different set of factors than is the trajectory observed, for instance, in Kosova's case, a de facto state progressing toward global recognition.

Third, given the propensity of de facto state scholars to focus on one geographic region, this cross-regional comparison involving cases from Eastern Europe and East Asia stands as an innovative approach to the puzzle of contested statehood in international affairs. Even though scholars have previously compared Kosova's status in the 2000s to Taiwan's predicament,[4] the present article employs a standardized comparative procedure to analyze the same dimensions (Table 1) across both instances.

The conjectures formulated above are explored using evidence from Transnistria and Taiwan, both of which the author has visited for research purposes. On-site observations were supplemented by local media accounts, documents, official statements in Russian, Romanian, and Mandarin, and statistical data from Transnistria and Taiwan.

Transnistria's Limited Autonomy vis-à-vis Russia and Sheriff

Transnistria emerged in 1990 after local activists voted to split from the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, forming a separate republic within the USSR. As the act of creating the new entity was annulled by the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, Transnistria waited until August 1991 to proclaim its independence. Receiving significant Russian military assistance, Tiraspol successfully fought a brief war with Moldova in 1992, defending its status. Since then, Transnistria survived for three decades, mostly due to its pragmatic approach regarding economic cooperation with Moldova and the support received from Russia as its patron state (Marandici and Leșanu 2021). Despite several settlement plans proposed over the years, the conflict between Moldova and Transnistria remained unresolved, but largely peaceful. The failure to build lasting peace can be explained by the unwillingness of the two parties to join a common state as well as by Russia's significant leverage over Transnistria, preventing the region's elites from pursuing their own interests and negotiating freely with Chişinău. Several interrelated dimensions are discussed in more detail below with reference to their effect on the external and domestic agency of the de facto state.

Why cannot Transnistria abandon the Russian vector? Several factors explain Transnistria's failure to act autonomously vis-à-vis Russia. The region's public sphere is dominated by the Sheriff corporation, a powerful business conglomerate towering over its internal politics, economy, and media. The region's lack of pluralism and weak civil society prevent the formation of authentic social movements that would advance local political and social objectives. The limited political pluralism and the controlled media space impede the formation of a strong Transnistrian nationalism. Besides the overdependence of the de facto state on Sheriff's oligarchic interests, the weakness of the parent state facilitates Tiraspol's reliance on Russia. Moldova is a neutral state, one of the most impoverished countries in Europe, without the resources necessary to offset the Russian influence over Transnistria. Despite its official reintegration policy, post-conflict cooperation between Transnistria and Moldova remains limited to areas considered low-politics domains such as economic and cultural affairs, which are viewed by the patron state as less important than the high-politics domains touching on military, foreign, and security policies.

Moreover, Transnistria's identity, often described as civic, is heavily Russified and connected to the cultural space of the patron state, a bond further cementing the political alignment with Moscow. Although the Transnistrian authorities claim to have designed a political system purported to preserve the cultural diversity of the region, Tiraspol has imposed a policy of creeping Russification so that Russian became the preferred language in the public sphere, media, administration, and education (Marandici 2020). The frail Transnistrian identity coupled with the lack of political pluralism and Moldova's relative weakness did not lead to much resistance against increased trade with the EU. Given the weak Transnistrian nationalism, the region is unwilling to oppose the patron state on cultural grounds, emphasizing instead its distinctiveness vis-à-vis Moldova via cultural policies seeking to protect from the alleged risk of Romanianiziation, what its officials deem as the authentic Moldovan traditions, language, and ethnicity.

Democratic competition shapes de facto state agency in two ways. In a competitive political environment, diverse ideas and policies are discussed. Yet, Transnistria's experience with democracy was brief. During the initial two decades of Transnistria's independence, the region, a presidential republic, was ruled in an authoritarian manner by its first president—Igor Smirnov. Not only did Smirnov set the tone of the political discourse, but he also relied on the Ministry of State Security to closely monitor and suppress internal dissent. Despite such undemocratic practices, a surprising power transition occurred in 2011, when Smirnov lost the presidential race to Evgeny Shevchuk, a candidate backed by the Renewal (*Obnovlenie*) Movement, who promised to improve Transnistria's economic prospects. Shevchuk's victory demonstrated that elections in Transnistria could not be stolen by the incumbent despite excessive reliance on the administrative resources and unfettered access to the official media. A second alternation in power unfolded in 2016, when Shevchuk was defeated by Vadim Krasnoselsky, an ally of Smirnov. As a result, Shevchuk was condemned in absentia on grand corruption charges, escaping to Russia via Chişinău to avoid imprisonment.[5] The outcomes of the 2011 and 2016 presidential elections indicate that the Transnistrian leaders need to maintain the trust of their electorate which cannot be easily manipulated. Still, the observed leadership changes could be viewed as mere reshuffles reflecting the intraelite competition in Transnistria rather than veritable grassroots activism. Since the mass pro-independence mobilization of the early 1990s, the region did not witness significant protest movements. Instead, one observes the creation from above of various semiofficial movements such as Recognition (*Priznanie*) in 2011 and the All-Transnistrian Popular Forum (*Obshepridnestrovskii Narodnyj Forum*) in 2016, meant to consolidate the local society behind the goal of achieving international recognition.[6]

The absence of pressures from below led to the emergence of a broad elite consensus in favor of the status quo. Questioning the presence of the Russian peacekeepers and the Russian military stationed in Transnistria is a taboo, an informal political norm followed by all the politicians inside the de facto state. That is why Transnistria's presidents have never promoted the idea of a peaceful reintegration with Moldova. Instead, all of them supported Transnistria's "reunification" with Russia invoking the 2006 referendum (Marandici, 2020). Moreover, the elections in Transnistria are marked by the competition among local politicians to gain Moscow's backing, anticipating that a supporting statement from the Kremlin would improve their chances of winning, a phenomenon partially confirmed by survey data (Bakke et al. 2018). One of the candidates in the 2016 elections even lied about being supported by Moscow but still lost the vote. Thus, there is little room for rhetorical and policy innovation vis-à-vis the patron state in a context where the ruling elites adamantly oppose any political rapprochement with Moldova, labeling such initiatives as "betrayals." Faced with a like-minded political class, Russia is not particularly interested in guiding Transnistria's internal politics, preferring instead to cooperate with whoever wins the electoral contest. Whereas in Abkhazia, Russia used economic assistance to elicit compliance and to help vetted politicians win elections (Kolstø 2020), in Transnistria the patron state refrained from such actions. Moscow's rejection of a Transnistrian request for additional aid in 2015 was caused by economic hardship rather than the desire to support a particular politician within Transnistria.

The wide-ranging consensus regarding Transnistria's relations with Russia and Moldova was never challenged by the political opposition within the de facto state. After Krasnoselsky's election victory in 2016, Transnistria experienced a period of democratic backsliding as its leader turned toward authoritarianism. One of Krasnoselsky's opponents, Oleg Khorzhan, the leader of the Communist Party of Transnistria and a harsh critic of Sheriff's oligarchic influence, was imprisoned in 2018 on fabricated charges. Despite calls from the United States, the EU, Moldova, and Russia's Communist Party to end his prosecution, Khorzhan served the full sentence. After his release, Khorzhan continued his political activities confronting the oligarchic regime but was assassinated. In this sense, Khorzhan was the only politician from Transnistria willing to improve ties with Chişinău. He established connections with political parties in Moldova and sought to form a united opposition to defy the oligarchic system set up by Sheriff (German 2021). Indeed, the Transnistrian

Communists with ties to both the Moldovan and Russian Communist parties have been actively mobilizing the region's pensioners and protesting social spending cuts since the mid-2000s. Other cases of political persecutions include the investigations of the activist Ghenadie Chorba for "insulting the president," the charges against pensioners Mikhail Ermurachi and Sergey Mirovich, and the case against Natalia Bondarenko, another major figure of the Transnistrian Communists (Freedom House 2021). Their only offense lies in their critique of what they characterize as the prevailing oligarchic socioeconomic and political order.

Indeed, Transnistria resembles a captured de facto state serving oligarchic interests. In addition to Sheriff's control over much of the economy and private media, since the mid-2010s the conglomerate has captured the legislature through its Renewal (*Obnovleniye*) Party. In 2020, the Renewal Party gained 29 out of 33 parliamentary seats. The president and the courts similarly are influenced by Sheriff's owners, whereas journalistic investigations into Sheriff's corrupt dealings are censored. To improve its public image, Sheriff has engaged for more than a decade in philanthropy, offering pension supplements, social assistance, and student fellowships. Thus, Transnistria's agency is limited by the Sheriff oligarchs, who essentially captured the de facto state. Consequently, in the low-politics domain one observes that Sheriff's economic interests are sometimes at odds with Russia's long-term strategic goals. For instance, Tiraspol's decision to join the Moldova-EU Association Agreement stands as a glaring example of how oligarchic groups within de facto states may influence policy making despite Russia's reluctance to accept the client's rapprochement with the EU. Because Sheriff stood to lose significant revenue due to Transnistria's exclusion from the new trade regime with the EU, it successfully lobbied the region's accession to the Moldova-EU Association Agreement and harmonized its internal manufacturing and trade legislation to meet the EU standards.[7]

To further elucidate the question of agency, it is essential to understand the drivers behind Russia's willingness to spend significant resources on Transnistria. Malyarenko and Wolff (2018, 192) note that Moscow's support for secessionism serves to prevent the consolidation of pro-Western regimes in the parent state. So far, Moscow has pursued primarily strategic rather than economic goals. Its push for deeper regional economic integration under the aegis of the Eurasian Economic Union as part of a strategy to build ties that bind was not particularly successful in Moldova and Ukraine. Despite the rhetoric of the Eurasian integration, after some resistance, Transnistria changed its long-standing policy and joined the EU–Moldova free trade regime. Whenever pro-Western parties acceded to power in Moldova, Transnistria's leaders sought to attract more aid by portraying Moldova backed by Western allies as a major threat. However, Moldova is partially dependent on Russia and Transnistria when it comes to energy supplies and its actual policies have generally been directed at improving economic ties with Tiraspol in the hope that increased trade will lead to more interdependence and durable peace. Still, the large protests in 2024 demonstrate that its economic reintegration policies were never popular in Transnistria.

As a mediator in the 5+2 negotiation format, Russia has never proposed a settlement, insisting on indefinitely deploying its peacekeepers in Transnistria. Moscow did, however, conduct diplomatic talks with Moldova and Transnistria outside the 5+2 format and tabled the 2003 Kozak Memorandum nearly succeeding in pressuring the two sides to agree to a power-sharing formula and the construction of a common asymmetric federal state. Whereas until 2022 Russia backed secessionism in Moldova and Ukraine to obtain a strategic advantage in its rivalry with the West, amidst the Russian war on Ukraine it became apparent that Moscow intended to expand its military conquest to form a land corridor from annexed Crimea to Transnistria. The 5+2 format, dysfunctional due to the Russo-Ukrainian War, has been replaced by the bilateral "1+1" Moldo–Transnistrian negotiations.

The question of identity is particularly relevant to clarifying Transnistria's clientelist ties with Moscow. The region's cultural and ideological closeness enables the patron state to express patriotic solidarity with Tiraspol and provide regular support in the name of a shared civilizational identity. The political elites in Transnistria adhere to the Russian World ideas (Marandici 2020), Moscow's semiofficial foreign policy toward the millions of Russian-speakers across the post-Soviet region.

The patron–client ties with Russia are framed in the Transnistrian internal discourse as links to the homeland. The issue of identity is further complicated by Russia's practice of offering easy access to citizenship to PMR's residents, which allows it to claim that over 200 000 of them require protection from "the nationalists" in Chişinău. Indeed, Russia's war on Ukraine was supposed to reach Transnistria, with one high-ranking Russian general declaring that Moscow planned to take over the Southern Ukraine and link up with the de facto state (Uspenskaya 2022). Transnistria did not protest an eventual Russian annexation, a fact that further points to the prevailing societal consensus regarding the "unification" scenario. Still, despite rumors of Wagner mercenaries being deployed to the region in April 2022, Transnistria's armed forces did not join Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, Tiraspol accepted refugees from Ukraine, and its president even emphasized Transnistria's non-involvement in the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Despite the lack of recognition, Transnistria does not embark on significant efforts to attain acceptance as a member of the international community. Its declared independence does not translate into unofficial diplomatic relations with full-fledged states. In line with Shoemaker and Spanier (1984), Moscow's leverage over Transnistria increases when pro-Western political players rise to power in Moldova. In this sense, the organization of a referendum on independence in 2006, despite looking like a local initiative, served as a reminder to Moldova that deepening the cooperation with the EU might lead to the loss of Transnistria.

Transnistria's limited autonomy vis-à-vis the patron state as well as vis-à-vis its oligarchs throughout its three-decade existence as a de facto state can therefore be explained by a complex interplay of factors. Although it favors pragmatic economic ties with Moldova, Tiraspol receives steadfast support from Russia. However, the real beneficiary of this modus vivendi is the Sheriff corporation, which has set up what can be characterized as an oligarchic, monopolistic system in which the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the de facto state are captured by a private enterprise.[8] The region's Russified identity, weak civil society, limited political pluralism, lack of meaningful democratic competition, and a broad consensus favoring the status quo reinforce the patron–client relation with Moscow. These dynamics point to the relevance of business groups when examining the lives of de facto states and the chances of durable peace across postconflict settings.

Taiwan's Declining Agency amidst the US-China Rivalry

The Republic of China (ROC) or Taiwan emerged as a disputed jurisdiction after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) forced the Nationalists (i.e. Kuomintang [KMT]) led by Chiang Kai-shek to find refuge on the island in 1949. In doing so, the KMT instituted the White Terror, a military dictatorship run by mainlanders (*waishengren* 外省人), who oppressed the local Taiwanese and instituted a pervasive policy of sinicization, whereby Mandarin replaced Japanese and functioned as the official language in education and administration at the expense of the local languages such as Hakka, the indigenous dialects, and Taiwanese Hokkien.[9] The KMT never declared formal independence, as it regarded Taiwan as a provisional anti-Communist base, hoping to launch a new military campaign to "liberate" the CCP-controlled areas. During its first decade of existence, Taiwan was recognized by most of the Western powers. In the 1970s, due to its booming economy, Taiwan was regarded as one of the East Asian developmental states (Wu 2007). In the late 1980s, grassroots activism led to democratization and condemnations of the White Terror, culminating with the accession of Lee Teng-hui to power. This was a turning point in Taiwan's history because Lee was the first president born on the island. He would be excluded from the KMT for his pro-independence stance (Fell 2018) and subsequently participate in the creation of the Formosa Alliance, a party that planned to organize a referendum on Taiwan's independence.[10]

Since its founding, the US acted as Taiwan's main ally. In the 1950s, the US deployed troops and entered a defense treaty with Taipei, pledging to protect it from a potential PRC takeover. However, two decades later, the US-China rapprochement led to the deterioration of the US-Taiwan relations. In the early 1970s, the PRC took Taiwan's seat at the UN Security Council, an event that was followed

by Carter's decision to switch diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing. After Washington derecognized Taiwan, the cross-strait dispute largely disappeared from the American political discourse (Marandici, 2023). Inscribed in the Cold War logic, the American abandonment of Taiwan in 1979 served strategic reasons because the US was courting Beijing as an ally against the USSR. Perceived as a betrayal, the derecognition generated massive protests across Taiwan. Eventually US-Taiwan cooperation continued uninterrupted via unofficial channels such as the American Institute of Taiwan and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO). In 2023, Taiwan maintained such de facto embassies in 60 countries and, conversely, those states staffed similar bureaus in Taiwan. Still, without UN's and Washington's diplomatic backing, Taiwan's international status declined swiftly so that in 2023 only 13 countries—the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Tuvalu, Eswatini (Swaziland), Vatican City, Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, Paraguay, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines—maintained diplomatic ties with the ROC. In 2019, notwithstanding some local protests, Kiribati switched recognition from Taiwan to the PRC. Honduras, pressured by Beijing, broke off relations with Taiwan in 2023. Similarly, politicians from the Solomon Islands claimed that they were subjected to checkbook diplomacy, whereby both the PRC and Taiwan offered them payments to influence their recognition policy. Viewing Taiwan as China's 23rd province, Beijing pursues such derecognitions and seeks to limit ROC's participation in international organizations.[11]

Inside Taiwan, political elites are divided over how to construct relations with both China and the US. Held as the opposite of China, Taiwan is an open democracy with a vibrant civil society where various policy options are publicly debated. Such democratic competition reveals the existence of an underlying cleavage on the matter of cross-strait relations. Known as the *Tongdu* (unification vs. independence) dimension, the relations with the PRC feature as one of the main issues in Taiwanese politics. Figure 2 illustrates the public support for the status quo as well as the rise in pro-independence attitudes since 1992. At the elite level, the two major parties—the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and KMT—hold diverging views on how to interact with Beijing. Whereas the DPP is critical of overtures vis-à-vis the PRC, the KMT favors improving cross-strait relations. When the island is ruled by the KMT, such as under President Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2016), relations with the parent state get better. In contrast, when Tsai Ing-wen (DPP), Taiwan's president (2016 to 2024) expressed her intention in 2016 to maintain the island separate from the mainland, Beijing responded by increasing its military incursions in Taiwan's vicinity. The PRC, aware of the conflicting preferences among the Taiwanese, seeks to pressure Taiwan whenever the presidency is held by the DPP-led pan-Green Alliance. China steps up its media campaigns especially at election time, hoping to boost KMT's popularity by portraying the DPP in the mainland press as the party of war and juxtaposing it to the KMT as the party of peace. Still in 2020, such interference backfired, generating more support for Tsai and helping her win a second term.

Unlike Transnistria, Taiwan, one of the East Asian tigers, continues to be a great economic success. As a member of the World Trade Organization, it occupies a key position in the global supply chain of semiconductors and electronics. Trading with both the US and China, Taiwan innovates a lot by investing in advanced technologies such as 5G, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing. Over time, the state-led strategy of developing industrial clusters via technological transfers from the US led to the emergence of a competitive semiconductor industry such that in 2023 more than 90% of the world's advanced microchip production was concentrated in Taiwan. As an example, the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company stands out as the world's largest contract chipmaker. It plays a crucial role in the supply chains of numerous American companies, including those in the defense sector. This competitive advantage grants Taipei some leverage in its dealings with both the US government and its big tech enterprises. As the US-China strategic competition deepened, Washington adopted the decoupling and derisking policies, seeking to onshore the semiconductor production and to reduce its dependence on the Taiwanese manufacturers. The patron state's policies seek to restructure the global supply chains to bypass the PRC and incentivize Taiwanese companies to open new factories in the US (Li and Cheng, 2020).
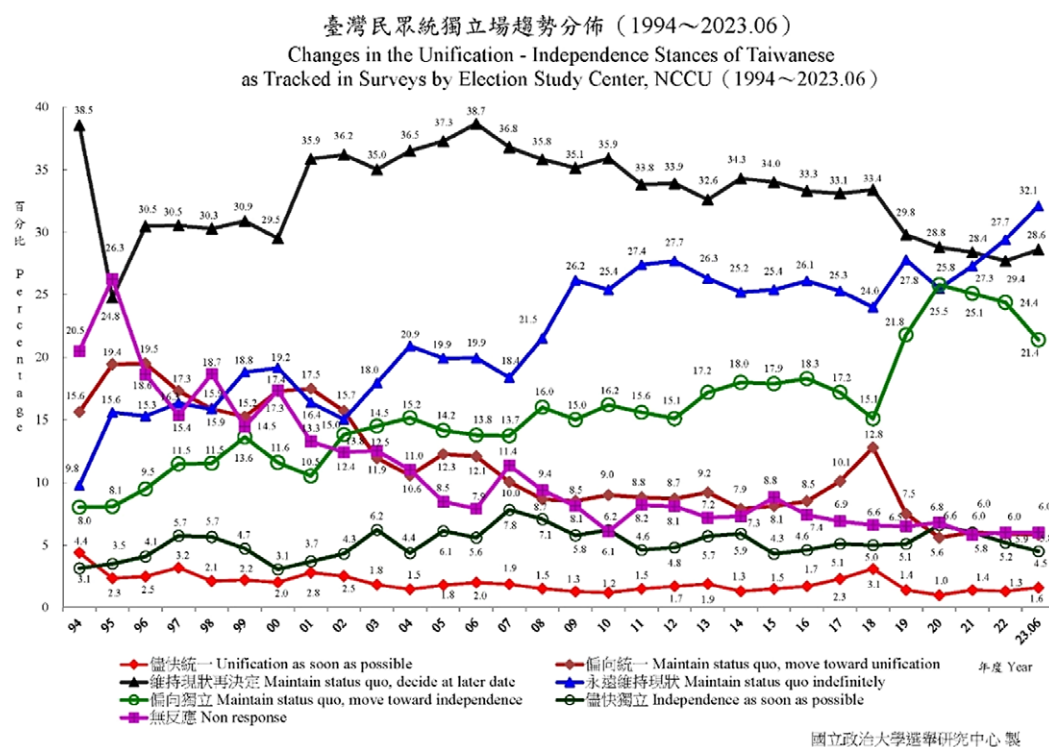
Figure 2. Public support for independence, unification, and the status quo.
Source: Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7801&id=6963.

Yet, the US decoupling and derisking negatively affect Taiwan's economy. Taiwan's growth depends on China, its main trading partner since the early 2010s. Moreover, Taiwan is one of the largest investors in the PRC. This new interdependence poses a dilemma for Taiwan and the US, as increased cross-strait commerce may be beneficial for the Taiwanese economy while limiting its autonomy.[12] Taiwan's major parties and voters understand this conundrum. As China's economy was expanding, the KMT negotiated several economic agreements with Beijing. Despite significant domestic opposition, the KMT concluded the Economic Cooperation Agreement Framework in 2010, which resulted in more flights across the Taiwan Strait, the inflow of tourists from mainland, and the free conversion of the yuan.[13] Improved trade relations with China turned into a controversial issue pitting the KMT led by President Ma Ying-jeou against the Sunflower Movement, a loose network of civil society groups, politicians, and activists, which staged mass rallies against the proposed trade liberalization with China in 2014, specifically against the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA). Signed in 2013, the trade arrangement would have facilitated the bilateral commerce in services (Ho 2015). To block it, the Sunflower Movement occupied the Legislative Yuan for several weeks. Backed by the DPP and the Taiwan Solidarity Union, it framed the trade liberalization bill as a step toward rendering Taiwan dependent on the mainland, undermining its agency, and pursuing covert unification. Some of the movement's factions evolved into new political parties of which the New Power Party advocating for complete independence gained representation in the Legislative Yuan. The New Power Party was just one of the several pro-independence parties forming the DPP-led pan-Green camp, which competes with the KMT-led pan-Blue Alliance favoring the 1992 consensus.[14] Thus, the successful movement blocked trade liberalization and paved the path to the 2016 pan-Green victory, when Tsai Ing-wen acceded to presidency on a China-critical platform.[15]
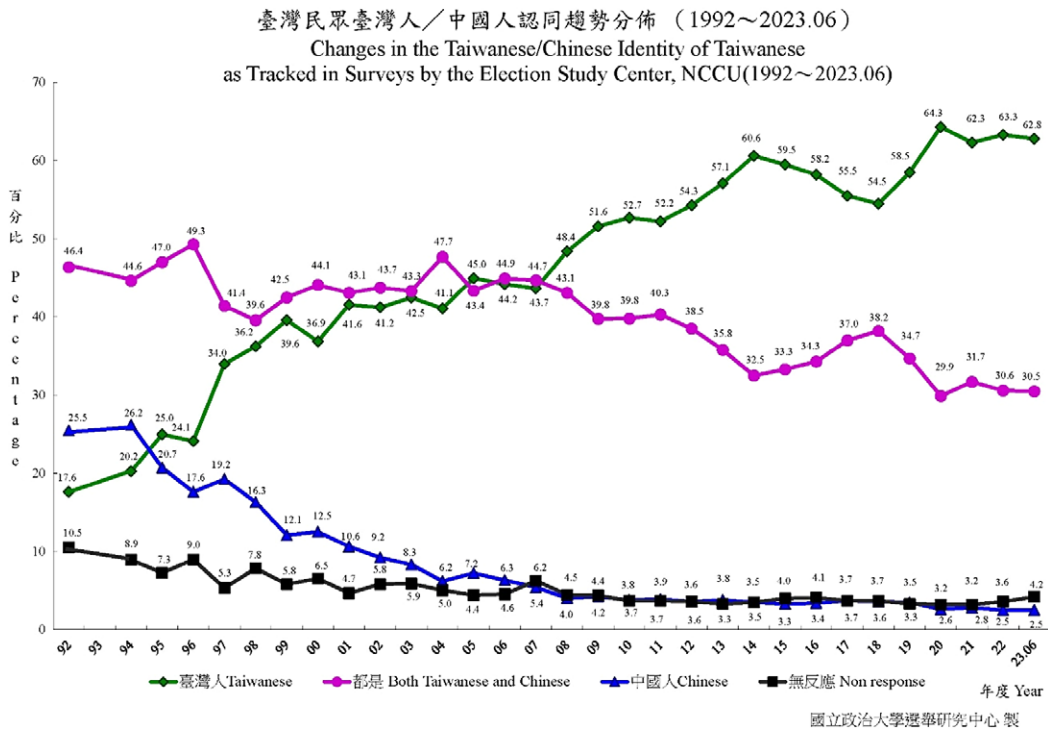
Figure 3. Taiwanese Identity (green line) on the Rise 1992–2023.
Source: Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/upload/44/doc/6961/People202306.jpg.

Support for independence and opposition to increased trade with China reflect the gradual emergence of a robust Taiwanese identity, which shapes voting behavior, lending support to the pan-Green alliance. In this sense, the Sunflower Movement built on and strengthened the Taiwanese identity as distinct from Chinese as the protesters were backed by pro-independence advocates self-identifying as Taiwanese (Au 2017). Some researchers have documented the rise of a civic Taiwanese identity in the late 1990s (Schubert 2004). Indeed, surveys confirm that the proportion of residents preferring Taiwanese rather than "Chinese" or "both Taiwanese and Chinese" has grown over the last three decades from 18% to over 60% (Figure 3). These identity shifts correlate with distinct orientations toward the US and China. In 2020, 68% of Taiwan's population held a positive view of the US, whereas only 35% held a favorable perception of mainland China (Devlin and Huang 2020). These divided orientations toward the patron state and the parent state mirror the sentiments of American public. In 2023, 66% of Americans expressed a favorable view of Taiwan, whereas less than 20% viewed China positively, with half of the respondents expressing concerns over a potential cross-strait conflict (Huang 2023). Despite the favorable public opinion toward the US, the high degree of pluralism in Taiwan means that some groups on the island will inevitably express skepticism vis-à-vis the patron state. For instance, in November 2020, the "Autumn Struggle" protesters and politicians from the KMT-led pan-Blue camp marched against imports of US pork, which they described as a food safety hazard due to the presence of ractopamine, a substance banned in Taiwan (CNA 2020). To improve trade ties with the US, the DPP lifted the US pork ban in 2020, but civic groups and the KMT protested the new policy and organized a referendum in 2021, which failed.

The rise of a Taiwanese identity is associated with calls for a formal declaration of independence and demands for new cultural policies. Indeed, supporters of Taiwanese nationalism (臺灣民族主義) insist on the desinicization (去中国化) of the school curriculum, the renaming of the urban

Figure 4. Pro-independence supporters watching the vote count in January 2016 (Ximending, Taipei).
Source: Author.

spaces, and the adoption of a new constitution (Figure 4). This indigenization drive reflects a generational divide, with the elderly viewing the island as culturally Chinese in contrast to the youth self-identifying as Taiwanese. Such perceptions were reinforced through long-standing cultural policies such as, for instance, the intentional preservation of the traditional Han characters and the rejection of the simplified Chinese writing system introduced in the PRC in the 1950s to increase mass literacy. The same holds for transliteration. Although Taiwan's Ministry of Education adopted the Hanyu pinyin as the official transliteration system back in the 2000s, cities such as Kaohsiung and Tainan retained the Tongyong pinyin to distance themselves from the transliteration norms prevailing on the mainland. In this sense, the Taiwanese authorities often emphasized that, unlike the PRC, the island, unaffected by Mao's cultural policies, preserved the authentic traditional Chinese culture. Such claims were further bolstered by the large number of artifacts held by the Taipei National Palace Museum, which includes collections from the Forbidden City brought by the Nationalist Party during the civil war. To demonstrate the continuity between post-1949 Taiwan and imperial China, Chiang Kai-shek even claimed to be a descendant of the Duke of Zhou. Such identity politics helps explain why some residents would self-identify as both Taiwanese and Chinese rather than simply Taiwanese.

Partisan polarization is another significant factor driving identity shifts in Taiwan. The KMT and the DPP hold contrasting positions on major cultural issues, mainly because their electoral support comes from certain geographical areas and distinct ethnic groups. Most of the KMT supporters reside in the North, are "mainlanders" and Hakka, and predominantly self-identify as "Chinese" and "both Chinese and Taiwanese" in surveys. Some of them consider the PRC as their cultural homeland. On the other hand, the progressive DPP attracts the voters in the South, those from the Minnan group, and those who predominantly self-identify as Taiwanese (Tsai 2017). The DPP, proud of its long-standing anti-KMT democratic activism, advocates for justice for the White Terror victims, the renaming of public places, and the removal of KMT's cultural legacy. Its party platform proposes an independence referendum to resolve Taiwan's status.[16] Such divisions are

well understood by the decision makers in Beijing, who often invite KMT politicians to tour the PRC and offer them media support to boost their domestic popularity relative to the pro-independence actors.

One such pro-independence group is the Taiwan Independence Flag Team (台獨旗隊), which I have observed throughout 2016 during my yearlong research stay in Taiwan. In Figure 4, one can see how on election day (January 16, 2016) the activists from the Taiwan Independence Flag Team, rooting for the DPP candidate, hosted an election watch party. They enjoyed cups of green tea while closely observing the vote count on a large screen TV, next to the bustling Ximending subway station, located in one of Taipei's busiest tourist and shopping districts. In every direction, one could spot banners carrying messages in both Mandarin and English. These included a central message written in traditional characters "Taiwan Independence" (台灣獨立)—flanked by secondary messages such as "The People Are the Masters of the State," "Abandon the Greater China Ideology," "Take Roots in Taiwan," "Protect Our Homeland," "Write a New Constitution and Establish a New State," "Taiwan—A Free, Diverse, Plural, and Democratic Society," "Realize Our Ancestors' Hopes and Create a Future for Our Children," and "Taiwanese Are Not Chinese," among others, all linking the independence cause to other issues.[17] On regular days, they would ride tricycles throughout the neighborhood flying large pro-independence banners (Figure 4).

Repeated visits to the site indicated that such activism was a common occurrence. The pro-independence campaigners deliberately chose Ximending as a site for their collective action due to its popularity among foreign visitors, particularly the large groups of tourists from mainland China, who were among the primary targets of such messaging.[18] Even though survey data (Figure 2) indicate that most Taiwanese prefer the status quo, the mobilization of such groups revealed the presence of grassroots support for independence.

Taiwan's agency vis-à-vis the patron state is contingent on the intensity of the US-China strategic competition. In this context, the US has laid out the policy of strategic ambiguity, specifying the parameters of its Taiwan policy. These include deliberate vagueness on whether the US would defend Taiwan, a commitment to ongoing arms sales without a specified end date, non-involvement in the cross-strait relations, support for the One China policy, which acknowledges Taiwan as part of China, and the abstention from endorsing any formal declaration of independence by Taiwan. The policy of strategic ambiguity has contributed to peace across the Taiwan Strait as long as the US did not perceive the PRC as a strategic rival. Since its creation, Taiwan was embroiled in only three limited military disputes with Beijing, although none of them have occurred since the mid-1990s. Nevertheless, Taiwan remains a critical component of the first island chain and plays a crucial role in the American pivot to Asia. This strategic shift, initially implemented by the Obama administration, involved a redirection of the US military forces from Europe and the Middle East toward the Asia-Pacific region, a policy upheld by both the Trump and Biden administrations. The pivot was coupled with American efforts to increase Taiwan's self-defense capabilities. For instance, in 2022 the US announced a $1 billion arms sale to Taiwan. This also reflects DPP's concerns about Beijing's intentions, which resulted in increased defense spending and the reintroduction of the one-year conscription. Besides the security aspect, the US-Taiwan economic relations under DPP have progressed, as both sides have signed in 2022 the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade. To reduce its economic dependence on the PRC, the Tsai administration launched the New Southbound Policy in 2016, which was supposed to diversify Taiwan's investments and commerce across the ASEAN region.

Even though Beijing lacks direct control over Taiwan's territory, it treats the island as being de jure part of China. In the white paper released in 2022 by the Taiwan Affairs Office, the PRC officials support achieving a "peaceful reunification," introducing the "one country, two systems" as in Hong Kong and Macao and stopping the growing Taiwan pro-independence movement.[19] In September 2023, Beijing announced the creation of the Fujian-Taiwan Economic Integration Zone to attract Taiwanese entrepreneurs and, in particular, residents of the Kinmen and Matsu islands in Fujian, the province closest to Taiwan. Beyond the economic tools of statecraft, numerous reports point to

China's resolve to resort to military force by 2049 or earlier in case Taiwan moves closer to a declaration of independence. Beijing's intentions are illustrated by the adoption of the 2005 anti-secession law (反分裂国家法), its repeated incursions into the Taiwanese airspace, and military exercises in which the People's Liberation Army practices various incursion scenarios. All these steps are associated domestically with the broader theme of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (中华民族伟大复兴) meant to erase the century of humiliation (*bainian guochi* 百年国耻), a discursive reference to the 19th century when the Western colonial powers dominated China.

In all, Taiwan's agency vis-à-vis its patron state is influenced by domestic and external factors, including democratic competition, the rise of a civic Taiwanese identity, and the economic interests of the big business favoring more trade with the PRC. The largely positive view of the US in Taiwan stands in contrast with the lack of consensus on how to manage the cross-strait relations. The advocates of the independence cause and those agitating for a peaceful unification are generally marginal actors. Instead, mainstream politicians adopt varying but moderate positions on cross-strait relations, opting for the status quo and abstaining from a formal declaration of independence. Because Taiwan relies solely on the patron state for military supplies, it is interested in developing more advanced weaponry but may withhold such information from the US, as happened with its last nuclear program, which was terminated in the 1980s after US President Ronald Reagan found out about it.[20] In contrast, in low-politics areas Taipei enjoys substantial autonomy, trading with both China and the US, its main commercial partners. The emerging geopolitical rivalry between the US and China risks upsetting this fragile equilibrium mostly because China frames the Taiwan problem as a domestic issue, whereas some US-based interest groups call for an end of America's policy of strategic ambiguity and support strategic clarity, which would include firm defense guarantees for Taiwan and stationing troops on the island, a scenario reminiscent of the US-Taiwan relations during the early Cold War era.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Taiwan-Transnistria comparison has yielded several important findings with implications for the study of conflict resolution involving de facto states.

First, the degree of de facto state agency vis-à-vis their patron states and parent states varies across policy areas. Transnistria enjoys a limited degree of economic and political autonomy vis-à-vis Russia and the Sheriff oligarchs. In contrast, Taiwan's innovative economy provides it with substantial resources to actively pursue domestic and external policy initiatives without the US involvement. Such autonomous action is, usually, limited to areas of low politics. In both cases, the patron states do not interfere with Taiwan's and Transnistria's cultural and economic policies unless they affect their security interests. Instead, the patron states enmeshed in strategic rivalries with other powers are primarily seeking to retain the client states as political and military allies. The two patron states offer security commitments of varying degrees. Whereas for three decades Russia stationed troops, mediated, and deployed peacekeepers in Transnistria, displaying readiness to defend the de facto state, the US security policy has shifted from the firm defense guarantees provided to Taiwan in the 1950s to the policy of strategic ambiguity in place since the 1970s. Once the US as a patron state significantly improved its relations with the parent state, the US withdrew its military from the island and its political support for Taiwan weakened, culminating in the diplomatic derecognition of the late 1970s. Strategic ambiguity was a compromise that accommodated Chinese interests and alleviated Taiwanese fears of a complete abandonment. Without US security guarantees, Taiwan attempted to develop nuclear capabilities, but, under pressure from the US, abandoned two such initiatives. Conversely, much in line with Shoemaker and Spanier's (1984) argument, as the US and China become entangled in a new geopolitical rivalry, various policy actors within the patron state call for increased political and military support for Taiwan. In the case of the US–Taiwan–PRC strategic triangle, such calls reflect the US perception that the rapid increase in the parent state's capabilities might result in Taiwan being overpowered in case of a cross-strait

crisis. Azerbaijan's 2023 military intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh illustrates how the disbalance in terms of capabilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan resulted in a brief war as a way to resolve the protracted conflict.

Second, de facto state agency is contingent on whether the parent state is a great power. The US–Taiwan–PRC and Russia–Transnistria–Moldova triads are shaped by Moldova's and, respectively, China's ability to interfere with the domestic policymaking of the patron state and of the de facto state. In this sense, Moldova as a small state lacks the tools to influence Russia's foreign policy or the internal politics of Transnistria. Moldova's constant weakness generates a situation around Transnistria that the Russian patron state is seeking to preserve until it finds an opportunity to establish a land bridge to the de facto state.[21] In contrast, China's rise constrained Taiwan's agency in international affairs. This is mostly due to Beijing's ability to exert, as a major power, some influence within the US and Taiwan as well as internationally. Unlike the prevailing consensus among Transnistria's elites vis-à-vis Russia, Taiwan's domestic elites are divided on the issue of cross-strait relations, so China's growing focus on "economic unification" is backed by one political camp but meets the resistance of the DPP.

Third, close patron–client ties constrain de facto states' agency to advance conflict resolution initiatives. Even though Taiwan possesses sufficient resources to act independently, its exclusive military reliance on the US means that it abides by the policy framework set by the patron state. Declaring formal independence would go against the US-Taiwan policy and leave the island without American support. Similarly, Transnistria's leaders never contested Moscow's security guidelines. For instance, they have not requested Russia's military withdrawal from Transnistria or voiced disagreements with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In contrast, when it comes to their economic relations with the parent states, Taiwan and Transnistria are similar in that they would rather not trade too much but do so for practical reasons and due to the influence of the big business on policy making. Transnistria's agency in the economic field is not closely monitored by the patron state but constrained due to the near-complete control over its domestic politics and economy exercised by Sheriff. Similarly, Taiwan deepened its economic cooperation with the PRC mostly due to KMT's determination to accommodate the interests of the major business groups in maintaining stable cross-strait relations and benefitting from China's economic rise.

Economic relations with the parent state are not purely an economic matter but are intertwined with other issues. Both the Transnistrian and Taiwanese elites were divided on the issue of trade with the parent state because some political players perceived the growing dependence as a security, economic, and cultural threat. In Taiwan, the cross-strait trade was transformed into a salient issue among voters by elites competing for political power. Economic interdependence became a contentious issue, which generated a protest movement accompanied by identity-related discourses and the subsequent election victory of Tsai Ing-wen as the pro-independence candidate. Those parties against trade liberalization engaged in collective action and blocked it fearing a "covert reunification" with China. In Transnistria, the initial resistance to the new trade arrangements with Moldova and the EU was overcome by Sheriff's influence over the policies of the de facto state. In this sense, interdependence theories about the benefits of trade for peace need to be revisited as, at least in Taiwan's case, some politicians oppose trade with the PRC due to security and cultural concerns.

Another finding concerns the cultural dimension of the de facto state phenomenon, which deserves more scholarly attention. Both Taiwan and Transnistria claim to preserve a unique cultural legacy, which makes them distinct from the parent state. In Taiwan, the authorities maintain that they protect the authentic traditional Chinese culture from the Communist influence, but in Transnistria the officials contend that they defend the "true" culture of the ethnic Moldovans as well as the Soviet legacy from Romanianization and Westernization. Both de facto states enforce the use of distinct writing systems abandoned by the parent states—the Moldovan language written in Cyrillic in Transnistria and the traditional Chinese characters in Taiwan. Moreover, in Taiwan democratization has been accompanied by the formation of an identity-related cleavage with DPP-related groups demanding the desinicization and consolidation of the Taiwanese identity. Such calls for a deeper appreciation of Taiwan's indigenous traditions stand in contrast with the significant

cultural Russification of Transnistria, whose leaders emphasize their belonging to the Russian World, the patron state's civilizational space.

Finally, scholars analyzing the effects of great power competition on de facto states need to consider the ways in which a slew of domestic factors such as democratic processes, identity politics, and powerful business groups shape the agency of the de facto state elites. In contrast to the oligarchic-authoritarian turn observed in Transnistria, Taiwan remains a democracy where policy issues such as cross-strait relations and independence are openly debated. Unsurprisingly, the main conclusion from this structured focused comparison is the observation that protracted conflicts facilitate the emergence of new identities, which influence how de facto states pursue greater autonomy in international affairs. Unlike Transnistria, which has declared its formal independence but remains unrecognized and pursues in fact a "reunification" with Russia, grassroots groups and political parties in Taiwan oppose reintegration with China and support actual independence, an aspiration that seems at odds with the status quo in the Taiwan Strait.

Notes

1 The contention that the self-proclaimed republics in Donetsk and Luhansk were autonomous was mostly popularized by Russian state officials, who insisted that Kyiv should negotiate a ceasefire directly with the breakaway regions rather than with Moscow. That is why the leaders of the two self-proclaimed republics were among the signatories of the Minsk agreements. The Western mediators were thus engaging with the DPR and the LPR as distinct parties to the conflict. A similar process unfolded in the case of Transnistria, where the parent state was opposing direct negotiations with Tiraspol, changing its position on the issue after the OSCE, Ukraine, and Russia insisted that Transnistria was not simply Moscow's agent but had some voice when it came to deciding its future. The notion that Transnistria, the DPR, and the LPR possessed significant autonomy was backed by Russia because Moscow sought to publicly minimize its involvement in both conflicts.

2 Scholars have used various labels to describe the 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 (Jackson 1993). To avoid terminological controversies, I emphasize the lack of international recognition as the shared feature of such cases and refer to Transnistria and Taiwan as "de facto states" and unrecognized states The cumbersome term "de facto state" is widely used in the English-speaking academia to refer to Transnistria, but, for various reasons, not applied so much with respect to Taiwan. Next, I refer to Moldova and the People's Republic of China as "parent states," whereas the "patron state" designation is reserved for the United States and the Russian Federation. Client state in this context is used in a neutral sense, without any pejorative connotation, to refer to a high degree of dependency rather than the total lack of autonomy. This kind of terminology is generally accepted by the researchers studying the phenomenon of de facto states in international relations.

3 The PRC as the parent state has long insisted that Taiwanese officials use in international venues terms such as "Chinese Taipei" (zhonghua taibei) and "Taiwan, China" (zhongguo taibei) instead of Republic of China or Taiwan.

4   In 2000, Scott Pegg called Kosova—"the Taiwan of the Balkans." See Pegg (2000). Another example of a cross-regional comparison is Katherine Kurata's comparative examination of the phenomenon of disinformation in Moldova and Taiwan. See Kurata (2022).

5   It is noteworthy that the Russian patron state did not hand over Shevchuk to unrecognized Transnistria so that he could serve his sentence there.

6   The website of the All-Transnistria Popular Forum features the President of Transnistria as its leader—https://www.onfpmr.ru/. (Accessed September 18, 2023.)

7   Dmitri Chervyakov from Berlin Economics, who was involved in providing technical assistance during the negotiations of the EU-Moldova Association Agreement with Tiraspol, mentioned that the Transnistrian counterparts were selectively rejecting certain proposals most likely because they interfered with Sheriff's business interests. Communication with the author during the panel "Managing Conflicts with De Facto States: Do Economic Actors and Interests Matter?" *Zentrum für Osteuropa- und Internationale Studien* (ZOiS), October 17, 2023.

8   The phenomenon of state capture has been researched in the Moldovan context as well. See Marandici (2021).

9   The local population protested the KMT rule; however, the ruling party brutally suppressed demonstrations. During the 228 incident in 1947, thousands of civilians were killed, tortured, and imprisoned. For more background information on how this event is remembered in present Taiwan, see the website of The Memorial Foundation of 228, https://228.org.tw/en_index.php. (Accessed December 21, 2023.)

10 See Kandell (2020).

11 For instance, the World Health Organization, a UN agency, did not invite Taiwan to participate in its meeting. In contrast, the World Trade Organization, which does not require statehood as a criterion for membership, allowed Taiwan to join in 2002 as a "separate customs territory" and on the condition that it will be referred in all the WTO documents as Chinese Taipei. See Chen and Cohen (2020).

12 It should be noted here that China's rise is due in part to the so-called *taishang*, the Taiwanese entrepreneurs moving to the mainland, who benefited from the dense cross-strait relations and contributed to China's rapid economic growth. For more on the role of the *taishang* in the context of cross-strait relations see Schubert (2016) and Rigger (2021).

13 The text of the Economic Cooperation Agreement Framework can be accessed on the website of the Mainland Affairs Council, https://www.mac.gov.tw/public/data/051116322071.pdf.

14 Harshly criticized by the DPP, the 1992 consensus is a reference to the agreement reached between the KMT and the CCP regarding the existence of "One China," with both the ROC and the PRC interpreting in their own ways what One China is.

15 The stances of different Taiwanese politicians vis-à-vis the CSSTA have changed depending on circumstances. During the 2024 presidential campaign, Ko Wen-je, Taipei's mayor and presidential candidate from Taiwan People's Party, which partook in the Sunflower Movement and rejected trade liberalization with the mainland, stated that the CSSTA should be renegotiated because mostly the big businesses benefit from the current cross-trade ties. Ko's turnaround was criticized by both Lai Ching-te, the DPP candidate, and the KMT politicians, who blamed him for CSSTA's failure in 2014. See Hoe (2023); Yu-chen et al. (2023).

16 See DPP Party Platform, Official Website, https://www.dpp.org.tw/en/upload/download/Party_Platform.pdf.

17 The Constitution of the Republic of China (Taiwan) was adopted in Nanjing and treats mainland China as a rebel area under ROC's jurisdiction. The document draws heavily on the political views of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, who was declared Father of the Republic (guofu) and is mentioned in its preamble. Given its links to the mainland and authoritarianism, the staunch pro-independence activists and the DPP have called for a new constitution since the mid-2000s.

18 A similar strategy of taking advantage of popular destinations in Taiwan was employed by Falun Gong, a religious group banned in the PRC, who held permanent rallies at Taipei 101, a site visited daily by thousands of Chinese tourists.

19 See "The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era" (white paper, The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, August 10, 2022).

20 The USA was stationing nuclear weapons in Taiwan from the 1950s up until the early 1970s, when the Nixon administration removed them. After the PRC's successful nuclear tests, the Taiwanese leadership worried about a nuclear strike from the mainland and initiated the Hsin Chu project in the 1970s, followed by another attempt in the 1980s. In both cases, international and US pressure compelled Taiwan to abandon its nuclear ambitions. See Hersman and Peters (2006).

21 The Russian General Rustam Minnekaev involved in the Russian invasion of Ukraine stated that the Russian armed forces were seeking to occupy the South of Ukraine and reach Transnistria. See Interfax.ru (2022).

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