

SIGNALING, ALLIANCE SUPPORT, AND PATRONAGE: REINTERPRETING U.S.-ALBANIA RELATIONS THROUGH STRUCTURAL REALISM

**SİNYAL, İTTİFAK DESTEĞİ VE PATRONAJ: YAPISAL REALİZM
ÇERÇEVESİNDE ABD-ARNAVUTLUK İLİŞKİLERİNİN YENİDEN
YORUMLANMASI**

Yazar/ Author	Kurum/ Institution	ORCID	e-posta/ e-mail
Dr. Özdemir Akbal	Trakya Üniversitesi, İpsala Meslek Yüksekokulu	0000-0001- 7030-7946	ozdemirakbal@gmail.co m

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Abstract

This study examines the relations between the United States and Albania within a Structural Realist framework through the concepts of patron-client relations, alliance support, and signaling. The study

employs a theory-guided qualitative historical analysis and process tracing to examine four major periods in the evolution of bilateral relations. The study analyzes bilateral relations across four major periods: the World War I era, the World War II era, the Cold War period, and the post-Cold War period. The findings demonstrate that shifts in the distribution of capabilities within the international system played a decisive role in shaping Albania's foreign policy orientation and its relations with major powers. During the first stage, Wilsonian principles and the discourse of self-determination were interpreted as early signaling mechanisms. During World War II, the support provided by the United States, the United Kingdom, and the USSR to Albanian resistance movements was analyzed within the framework of proxy warfare and competitive patronage relations. During the Cold War, Albania's relations with the USSR and China were examined through the lens of alternative patronage strategies. In the post-Cold War era, U.S. economic, political, and security assistance evolved into a broader

framework of alliance support rooted in patron-client relations.

Keywords: Structural Realism, patron-client relations, alliance support, signaling, U.S.-Albania relations

Öz

Bu çalışma, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ile Arnavutluk arasındaki ilişkileri Yapısal Realist perspektif çerçevesinde patron-client ilişkileri, alliance support ve signaling kavramları üzerinden incelemektedir. Çalışmada, ikili ilişkilerin gelişimi dört temel tarihsel dönem çerçevesinde, teori temelli nitel analiz ve süreç izleme yöntemi kullanılarak incelenmektedir. Çalışma, ilişkileri dört temel dönem bağlamında ele almaktadır: I. Dünya Savaşı dönemi, II. Dünya Savaşı dönemi, Soğuk Savaş dönemi ve Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönem. Araştırma, uluslararası sistemik yapıdaki yeteneklerin dağılımı değişimlerinin Arnavutluk'un dış politika

yönelimlerini ve büyük güçlerle ilişkilerini şekillendirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. İlk dönemde Wilson ilkeleri çerçevesindeki kendi kaderini tayin hakkı söylemleri erken dönem sinyal faaliyetleri olarak değerlendirilmiştir. II. Dünya Savaşı sürecinde ABD, Birleşik Krallık ve SSCB'nin Arnavutluk'taki direniş hareketlerine verdikleri destek rekabet savaşı ve rekabetçi patronaj ilişkileri bağlamında analiz edilmiştir. Soğuk Savaş döneminde Arnavutluk'un SSCB ve Çin ile ilişkileri alternatif patron arayışları üzerinden incelenmiştir. Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde ise ABD'nin ekonomik, siyasi ve güvenlik temelli destekleri ittifak desteği yapısına dönüşen patron-bağımlı devlet ilişkileri çerçevesinde değerlendirilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yapısal Realizm, patron-bağımlı devlet ilişkileri, ittifak desteği, sinyal, ABD-Arnavutluk ilişkileri

Introduction

U.S.–Albania political relations display patterns similar to those observed in U.S. relations with other Balkan states. This pattern unfolds across four distinct stages: first, the World War I era, defined by support for national liberation; second, the World War II era, characterized by backing for resistance against Nazi forces; third, the Cold War period; and finally, the post–Cold War era. During the first stage, as in other Balkan states, U.S.–Albania relations were grounded in Wilsonian principles promoting national self-determination and liberation. The second stage coincided with a transformation of the international structure and the reconfiguration of systemic units, during which the United States supported resistance movements against Nazi forces in coordination with the USSR. The third stage was characterized by a restructured international politics in which the two superpowers—the United States and the USSR—consolidated opposing blocs and established distinct spheres of influence. Although Albania formally aligned first with the Soviet Union and later with China, Tirana sought to preserve a degree of strategic autonomy by shifting between alternative patrons whenever ideological and strategic disagreements emerged. This policy orientation maintained strategic openness toward other major powers, notably the United States and China. Tirana’s foreign policy orientation laid the groundwork for the fourth stage of relations. In the fourth stage—the post–Cold War period—U.S.–Albania relations intensified, grounded in common interests in democratization, security cooperation, and economic integration.

In this light, the study analyzes the transformation of U.S.–Albania relations within the limitations and constraints of the international systemic structure. The study examines U.S.–Albania relations as a form of supportive state interaction shaped by patron–client dynamics and alliance support within the constraints of the systemic structure. Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative historical case study informed by Structural

Realism and employs theory-guided historical interpretation together with process tracing. The analysis is based on diplomatic documents, official publications, archival materials, and the relevant secondary literature. The four-stage periodization is derived from major transformations in the distribution of capabilities within the international system, each representing a distinct systemic context that reshaped Albania's external alignments. Albania is selected as the case because it experienced successive shifts in patronage relationships across different systemic configurations, making it an appropriate case for examining the interaction between patron–client relations, signaling, and alliance support.

To this end, the study first examines the initial stage of U.S.–Albania relations. In this context, U.S. support for Albania's independence and state formation produced an early pattern of patron–client relations. This initial patron–client dynamic developed into a pattern of alliance support during the second stage. Despite supporting the anti-Nazi coalition in coordination with the United States and the USSR during the second stage, Albania did not integrate into the Western alliance structure after World War II. During the third stage, corresponding to the Cold War period, although Albania formally aligned with the socialist bloc, it sought to preserve strategic autonomy by shifting between alternative patrons whenever ideological and strategic disagreements emerged. This third era can be viewed as a transitional period shaped by Albania's political choices; despite adopting communist rule, Tirana assumed an increasingly central strategic role within the Balkan sub-system. Under these conditions, the United States was able to sustain political relations with Albania, albeit at a minimal level. The defining characteristics of the third stage, shaped by Tirana's political orientation, created the conditions for the emergence of the fourth stage. The fourth stage—the post–Cold War period—was marked by substantial U.S. economic and military assistance, which contributed to the reconfiguration of Albanian statehood within the systemic structure. The transformation across these stages can be conceptualized within a

framework of patron–client relations and alliance support, while also being shaped by systemic-level influences. The United States engaged in patron–client relations with Albania as a means of facilitating liberal state formation. Furthermore, the United States cultivated alliance support relations with Albania in order to secure a reliable strategic ally within the Balkan sub-system. Given these conditions, the study begins by examining the concepts of patron–client relations and alliance support within a Structural Realist framework and subsequently analyzes the Albanian case through this analytical lens.

Patron-Client Relations and Alliance Support within a Structural Realist Framework

States are the main acting units at the systemic level. Within Structural Realism, the distribution of capabilities is the key determinant of interactions among units within the systemic structure. The distribution of capabilities may manifest itself in the form of patron–client relations between states. Once established, a patron–client relationship may, if sustained over time, evolve into a form of alliance support. For the patron state, this relationship functions as a means of exerting influence over client states, thereby orienting sub-systemic units in its favor. Accordingly, an examination of patron–client relations is required as a first step in understanding this framework.

Patron-Client Relations Across Systemic and Sub-Systemic Level

Although early formulations of patron–client relations emphasized the individual and state levels (Kaufman, 1974, pp. 285–287; Powell, 1970, pp. 412–413, 415–423), the framework can be extended to the study of international politics. This extension adopts a bottom-up approach to analysis. U.S. economic and political assistance sought to reconstruct Albania’s statehood along lines compatible with Washington’s preferences, ultimately facilitating Albania’s alignment with the United States. Although

the United States pursued this objective throughout all the stages outlined above, it was achieved only during the final two stages. This outcome can be attributed to changes in the distribution of capabilities; following the collapse of the USSR, the United States was able to engage Albania more directly. This case suggests that the collapse or disappearance of a principal patron compels client states to seek a new patron in order to build or sustain their institutional capacity. Furthermore, the case indicates that weaker client states depend upon patronage to ensure their survival within the systemic structure. A client state's choice of patron is shaped by the systemic structure and the relative capabilities of major actors. Accordingly, patron-client relations generate consequences at both the systemic and sub-systemic levels.

Classically, patron-client relations are defined as asymmetrical relationships between actors unequal in economic resources and political influence, based on reciprocal exchanges of goods and services and typically sustained through direct interaction (Powell, 1970, p. 412). Within this framework, it is necessary to ask why such mutually beneficial relationships emerge. At first glance, such relationships appear to be driven by mutual benefit. In patron-client relations, the patron state secures a cooperative partner within the systemic structure, while the client state obtains the resources necessary to develop state institutions and confront both internal and external threats. Patron-client relations encompass economic, military, political, and cultural dimensions. While both parties pursue the shared objective of state survival, the patron may use economic and military assistance as instruments of reward or coercion, thereby ensuring the client's alignment, solidarity, and cohesion (Carney, 1989, p. 44). These conditions suggest that, within the structure of international politics, states pursue differentiated interests across multiple levels of interaction. In this respect, patron-client relations can be conceptualized as an attempt by the patron state to shape the sub-systemic structure through the deployment of its power capabilities toward the client state.

During periods of systemic crisis, patron–client relations may function as instruments for the reconfiguration of sub-systemic structures. Accordingly, the deployment of economic, military, and cultural resources by the patron state toward the client may create or transform sub-systemic structures through the reconfiguration of client states.

Alliance Support Across Systemic and Sub-Systemic Level

Alliance support built upon patron–client relations generates mutual security benefits and enables the formation of a security architecture directed against common threats. The security needs of the client state generate the conditions for the emergence of a social structure based on dependence on the patron state. Alliance support may serve as a mechanism that constrains the client state from realigning when relations with the patron become strained. Under these circumstances, alliance support can be conceptualized through three dimensions: first, it contributes to the formation of a security arrangement; second, dependency fosters the emergence of a new social structure within the client state; and third, it facilitates the realignment of the client state when relations with a former patron become strained.

The patron state employs signaling in order to establish alliances and deter adversaries (DiGiuseppe & Shea, 2021). Fearon distinguishes between two types of signals: tying-hands signals and sunk-cost signals. Tying-hands signals consist of public commitments made by state leaders that generate audience costs in the eyes of domestic political actors and other states, including potential future client states. In contrast, sunk-cost signals involve costly actions—such as military build-ups or troop mobilizations—through which states demonstrate the credibility of their commitments by incurring costs in advance (Fearon, 1997, p. 70). Audience costs emerge from domestic political audiences—such as political parties, parliaments, voters, and the media—that may punish leaders who fail to follow through on their commitments. State capacity plays a crucial role in alliance formation and the emergence of new blocs within the systemic

structure. Furthermore, audience costs may arise for both patron and client states within the relationship. Moreover, audience costs are not confined to tying-hands signals but may also be associated with sunk-cost signals. This situation demonstrates that domestic political factors are closely intertwined with foreign policy decision-making.

During the Korean War, the Emperor of Ethiopia deployed a military unit in support of the United Nations forces; in return, he—at least temporarily—consolidated domestic unity under his rule with the backing of the United States (Lyons, 1986, p. 56). This example demonstrates that patron–client relations and signaling operate through dyadic interactions between patron and client states, ultimately contributing to the formation of a bloc structured around social, economic, and military dimensions. This finding indicates that patron–client relations are maintained through signaling activities that reinforce commitment and credibility between the patron and the client.

In summary, patron–client relations, signaling, and alliance support represent analytically distinct but closely interconnected dimensions of interstate relations within a Structural Realist framework. Patron–client relations constitute the initial asymmetrical political relationship established between stronger and weaker states under the constraints imposed by the distribution of capabilities. Signaling functions as the mechanism through which credibility, commitment, and strategic intentions are communicated between the patron and the client. As these signaling activities become institutionalized through sustained political, military, and economic cooperation, patron–client relations may evolve into a broader framework of alliance support. Accordingly, alliance support should be understood not as an alternative to patron–client relations, but as their institutionalized and strategically consolidated form operating across both systemic and sub-systemic levels.

Figure 1. Analytical Relationship between Structural Realism, Patron–Client Relations, Signaling, and Alliance Support¹



The First Stage of Albania and United States Relations: Attempts to Establish Patron-Client Relations

During Albania's struggle for independence, Albanian political actors viewed the United States as the most desirable great power to support their independence (Luku, 2012, p. 291). This preference reflected a search for a patron, while the attitude of the United States suggested a potential search for a client, accompanied by signaling activities between the two sides. During the Wilson administration, the United States signaled its support for Albanian independence through President Wilson's public

¹ The figure illustrates the analytical relationship between the distribution of capabilities, patron–client relations, signaling mechanisms, alliance support, and the strategic realignment of client states within a Structural Realist framework.

statements, reflecting an early form of political signaling toward a potential client state (Gashi & Idrizi, 2020). In this process, the United States initially pursued a policy of avoiding involvement in European conflicts—especially in the Balkans—consistent with its traditional foreign policy orientation. However, as evidenced in the Albanian case, U.S. foreign policymakers adopted a stance of strategic caution, closely observing developments while preparing for potential outcomes. In a report to the Secretary of State, Schurman, the American Minister to Greece, emphasized that observations on the Balkans during the war—particularly in Albania—highlighted key social components, notably the distribution of Christian and Muslim communities in the region (Shurman, 1913). In his message to the Senate and House of Representatives, President Taft noted that the unrest in Europe, including developments directly related to Albania, did not constitute a primary political interest for the United States; nevertheless, precautionary measures were taken to protect American citizens and institutions (Message of the President, 1911). In 1917, the United States declared war on Germany. In his 1918 address to Congress, President Wilson rejected the era of conquest and affirmed the principle of self-determination as a foundation for the post-war international order. The eleventh point of Wilson’s speech directly addressed the self-determination of the Balkan states and emphasized their political and economic independence.

Both President Taft’s and President Wilson’s addresses to Congress were fundamentally driven by the objective of protecting U.S. interests. However, this objective necessitated a change in strategy as the distribution of capabilities among actors within the systemic structure shifted and imposed new constraints. Under these conditions, as in the case of other Balkan states, the United States laid the foundations of patron–client relations with Albania through signaling grounded in the principles of self-determination and political and economic independence. This signaling, initially rooted in the commitments of Wilson’s Fourteen Points and later

reinforced by U.S. efforts to shape the policies of the victorious powers—particularly Italy—during the Paris Peace Conference in support of Albania’s emergence as an independent state, constituted a tying-hands signal. This was because Wilson’s commitments—framed around the establishment of peace and the right of self-determination for smaller states—were internalized and endorsed by U.S. decision-making institutions. This internalization increased the credibility of U.S. commitments by generating audience costs within domestic political structures.

Wilson’s concept of “peace without victory” shaped his understanding of the post-World War I international structure (Wright, 1957). Within this framework, his approach can be interpreted as involving significant signaling efforts that also laid the groundwork for future patron-client relations. This signaling operated on two levels: domestic and international. At the domestic level, Wilson’s relatively cautious approach to war—seeking to minimize immediate costs while securing greater long-term gains through a new structure of international politics—generated a tying-hands effect vis-à-vis Congress by publicly committing the administration to principles such as self-determination and just peace. At the international level, Wilson’s stance functioned as a signal to smaller states, including Albania, indicating the potential for U.S. support. In this sense, while grounded in liberal ideas such as lasting peace and justice, Wilson’s policy can also be understood as aligned with U.S. strategic interests, reflecting a combination of normative commitments and pragmatic considerations (Wright, 1957, pp. 65–66). Wilson’s approach helped secure the confidence of smaller states such as Albania while simultaneously testing the institutional limits of U.S. legislative bodies vis-à-vis his administration. In sum, under Wilson’s leadership, U.S. foreign policy during World War I can be interpreted as supporting the freedom of the Balkan states, thereby facilitating U.S. engagement with these states. Nevertheless, this policy remained constrained by domestic political

dynamics, even though Wilson's discourse on self-determination proved highly influential during the Paris Peace Conference.

The Second Stage: World War II

Following World War I, disputes among the great powers resurfaced in the late 1930s, contributing to the reconfiguration of the systemic structure. This crisis necessitated the reconfiguration of systemic units through the large-scale mobilization and use of military power. It also facilitated the emergence of a new form of power projection later conceptualized as proxy warfare. This form of power projection necessitated the development of alliance networks and an alignment structure for the United States during World War II. This strategic necessity also extended to the USSR, which functioned as an ally of the United States during the war. In the case of Albania, both the United States and the USSR provided support to paramilitary organizations engaged in resistance against Nazi and Italian forces, reflecting a convergence of strategic interests.

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At this stage, the patronage strategies of both the United States and the USSR, implemented through signaling mechanisms, should be examined with particular reference to the Albanian case. The signaling efforts of both the United States and the USSR toward Albania emerged almost simultaneously, reflecting competing patronage strategies at the beginning of World War II. As a member of the Allied powers, the British government recognized Albania on 17 December 1942; the United States and the USSR followed with similar recognition shortly thereafter, reflecting converging strategic interests in the region (Petrov, 2006, p. 90). This situation suggests that, during the early stage of patron-client relations, both the United States and the USSR pursued similar strategic motivations toward Albania despite their broader ideological differences. However, the Albanian resistance against the Italian occupation was divided into two principal ideological orientations: communist and nationalist (Balli Kombëtar) partisan movements (Pula, 2008, p. 593). This situation

illustrates that both the United States and the USSR sought to obtain strategic advantages against the forces of Hitler and Mussolini while minimizing direct military risks and costs through indirect forms of engagement. The emergence of ideological divisions among Albanian resistance groups constituted a significant challenge for the Allied powers in developing coherent strategic policies toward Albania. However, Enver Hoxha, who would later emerge as the leader of Albania, also recognized that cooperation between Balli Kombëtar and the socialist Fronti Nacionalçlirimtar would likely result in a more effective resistance movement against occupation forces (Kasmi, 2025, p. 326). The attempt to establish limited unity against the occupation forces demonstrates that the Allied powers—despite their later separation—possessed the capacity during World War II to consolidate their client groups around a shared strategic objective. Nevertheless, Balli Kombëtar asserted that the increasing influence of communist elements within Fronti Nacionalçlirimtar raised the prospect of Albania falling under the sphere of influence of the USSR (Best, 2021, p. 363). This situation reflects a dual process in which actors simultaneously pursued strategic unity against the occupation forces while also seeking to establish superiority through the prioritization of their own interests, both at the patron level (the USSR vis-à-vis the United States and the United Kingdom) and at the client level (Fronti Nacionalçlirimtar vis-à-vis Balli Kombëtar).

The Special Operations Executive (SOE) became engaged in Albania from the onset of the Italian occupation in April 1939 with the aim of strengthening and coordinating resistance movements (Bailey, 2000, p. 21). In this context, approximately 200 individuals associated with networks in Istanbul, Athens, and Belgrade were transferred from Yugoslavia into Albania in support of resistance activities (Bailey, 2000, p. 21). In contrast, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) initiated its activities in the Balkans in August 1943 by establishing operations in Yugoslavia under the authority of the SOE's Middle East Headquarters, partly as a consequence

of the requirement to operate within the SOE framework (Bailey, 2000, p. 24). The superior–subordinate relationship that emerged between the SOE and the OSS constituted a significant operational problem by creating ambiguity and confusion in the distribution of responsibilities (Jakub, 1999, pp. 22–45). This operational confusion, coupled with the relatively weaker position of Balli Kombëtar compared to Fronti Nacionalçlirimtar, contributed to the gradual alignment of the Albanian resistance movement with the USSR.

Although communist movements attracted a degree of sympathy in Albania following 1917, this support did not initially translate into a formal process of political party institutionalization (Czekalski, 2013, p. 14). However, during World War II, the emergence of Yugoslav-supported resistance networks and the strengthening of the Albanian resistance movement around Fronti Nacionalçlirimtar established a significant political and organizational foundation for the communist movement to gain influence in the postwar period. Support provided through Fronti Nacionalçlirimtar, together with Yugoslav and Soviet influence, ultimately facilitated the establishment of the Albanian Communist Party under the leadership of Enver Hoxha on 8 November 1941 (Skendi, 1948, p. 260). The establishment of the Albanian Communist Party during the resistance period serves as a significant example of the comparatively greater influence capacity exercised by the USSR and its allies over Albania in relation to the U.S.–UK partnership. In conclusion, although Soviet military assistance remained significantly more limited (Gavri, n.d., p. 21) than the support provided by Britain and the United States, Yugoslavia’s supportive stance during the occupation (Nikolić, 2019) and the leadership role of Enver Hoxha contributed substantially to Albania’s post–World War II alignment with the Soviet Union.

Third Stage: Cold-War Era

As during the resistance period, Yugoslavia played a significant role in facilitating Albania's alignment with the USSR (Xhaferri, 2022, p. 104). This situation highlights the importance of regional intermediary actors within broader patron-client and alliance structures. However, this situation was transformed following Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Cominform on 28 June 1948, as Albania gained heightened strategic significance for the USSR due to its position on the Adriatic coast (Swain, 1992). This development also illustrates an important example of the signaling phase in Soviet-Albanian relations, particularly in terms of strategic alignment and patronage formation. Soviet-Albanian relations, initiated through the first economic agreement signed in September 1948 (Manjola & Mirela, 2024, p. 8), were shaped significantly by the USSR's superior economic capacity, resulting in a bilateral relationship characterized by pressure and subordination (Manjola & Mirela, 2024, p. 11). In fact, the nature of Soviet-Albanian relations represents an important example of signaling processes within patron-client structures. Despite the USSR's superior economic capacity, Soviet-Albanian relations were still marked by the emergence of tensions and disagreements. Following Stalin's death and the onset of the de-Stalinization period, Albania's commitment—more specifically, Enver Hoxha's determination—to preserve his leadership position was perceived as problematic by the USSR's emerging political approach (Marku, 2020, p. 814). These tensions ultimately encouraged Albania to seek an alternative patronage relationship within the systemic structure.

The inability of the USSR to meet Albania's expectations—especially concerning agricultural support—contributed to Albania's rapprochement with China (Tretiak, 1962, p. 137). This process culminated in the signing of economic agreements between China and Albania beginning in 1961, which ultimately led to the collapse of Soviet-Albanian cooperation (Tretiak,

1962, p. 143). At the core of Albania's shift from its alliance with the USSR to an alliance with China was the logic of power maximization pursued by states within the systemic structure. Patron-client relations cannot be conceptualized merely as a master-slave dialectic. Even client states retain a degree of agency and therefore seek to align themselves with patrons capable of providing the most advantageous forms of political, economic, and strategic patronage. In contrast, Albania pursued a strategy of diversifying its external relations in order to reduce dependency within a single patronage structure.

By the end of 1976, Albania had established diplomatic relations with seventy-four states, including numerous members of the Non-Aligned Movement as well as European countries such as France, Italy, and Greece, reflecting Tirana's broader strategy of diversifying its external relations (Bishku, 2013, p. 84). The principal exceptions to this diversification strategy were the United States and the United Kingdom, with which Albania continued to maintain limited relations. This exception stemmed largely from the involvement of both the United States and the United Kingdom in covert operations aimed at destabilizing and overthrowing the Enver Hoxha regime during the early Cold War period (Long, 2025). This situation illustrates how failed intervention and regime-change attempts may produce long-term mistrust within patron-client and alliance relations. However, the collapse of the communist bloc and the enduring pursuit of power maximization by states generated new strategic orientations for Albania in the post-Cold War period, while simultaneously leading the United States, as a major power, to develop new patronage and signaling strategies toward the Balkan region.

Fourth Stage: Post-Cold War Era

With the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, Albania's policy of diversifying its external relations evolved into a new strategic framework shaped by post-Cold War dynamics. During this period, Albania

experienced a multidimensional transformation involving democratization, the adoption of a free-market economic system, and the establishment of a new security architecture within the post-Cold War era. Following the signing of the Bilateral Investment Agreement between the United States and Albania in 1994, bilateral economic relations increasingly developed on the basis of the Most Favored Nation principle, reflecting Albania's integration into Western-oriented economic structures (Investment Treaty with Albania, 1994). This agreement reflected the United States' comprehensive signaling efforts toward Albania while simultaneously demonstrating Albania's strategic orientation toward the United States within the framework of patron-client relations, particularly in the absence of credible alternative alignments in the post-Cold War environment.

It is evident that the emergence and transformation of patron-client relations through signaling mechanisms required a corresponding transformation in the political conditions that had previously enabled such relations to develop. The transformation of these conditions is closely linked to the economic capacity that the patron state is capable of providing, together with the sustainability of the security structure constructed around that economic capacity. The durability of patron-client relations depends not only on ideological alignment, but also on the patron state's ability to sustain economic and security-based support while adopting a relatively non-directive approach toward the domestic political attitudes and behavior of the client state. The deterioration of Soviet-Albanian relations was driven not merely by disagreements over economic capacity, but also by the declining acceptance of the Enver Hoxha regime in Moscow during the post-Stalin era. Consequently, Tirana sought an alternative strategic orientation within the communist bloc through closer alignment with China.

Although the United States, together with the United Kingdom, pursued regime-change operations in Albania during the Cold War, Albania nevertheless developed closer relations with the United States in the post-

Cold War period. This transformation was driven not only by the extensive economic capacity of the United States and its ability to support Albania's emerging security architecture, but also by the systemic transformation accompanying the end of the Cold War, which enabled Western values such as human rights, freedom of speech, and democratization to shape governance practices within Albania. During the Cold War, statements and sanctions imposed by patron states were often interpreted as interventions in the domestic governance of client states. In the post-Cold War period, however, these measures increasingly came to be viewed as necessary commitments for remaining within the U.S.-centered alliance structure and benefiting from the economic and security capacities associated with it. Within this framework, the United States shaped Albania's post-Cold War transformation through economic capacity-building and the restructuring of the security architecture, ultimately paving the way for Albania's integration into NATO.

As part of this process, the U.S. administration allocated \$30 million to the Albanian-American Enterprise Fund in 1995, reflecting Washington's broader strategy of supporting Albania's economic transformation and integration into Western-oriented structures (Hendrickson, 1999, p. 110). Furthermore, the democratization reforms implemented during this period illustrated the broader transformation of Albanian state institutions in the post-communist era (Çullhaj, 2016, p. 103). During this period, the United States actively contributed to the transformation of Albania's security bureaucracy and security architecture as part of the country's broader post-communist restructuring and Western integration process. Within this framework, beginning in 1995, U.S. Armed Forces were stationed in Albania under the Implementation Force (IFOR) mission connected to the Bosnian conflict, while the CIA had already been conducting reconnaissance and surveillance flights based in Albania since early 1994, reflecting the growing strategic integration of Albania into U.S.-led regional security structures (Hendrickson, 1999, p. 111). Consequently, under U.S. patronage, Albania

emerged as one of the most pro-American states in the Balkans, reflecting the success of post-Cold War economic, political, and security-oriented alignment strategies.

Conclusion

This study has analyzed U.S.–Albania relations within a Structural Realist framework through the concepts of patron–client relations, alliance support, and signaling. It examined these concepts across four major periods—the World War I era, the World War II era, the Cold War period, and the post-Cold War period—in order to evaluate the transformation of Albania’s relations with different states within the international system. The study demonstrates that the transformation of Albania’s external relations across these periods was largely driven by shifts in the distribution of capabilities within the systemic structure of international politics.

During the first stage, U.S. support for Albania’s right to self-determination within the framework of Wilsonian principles emerged as an early signaling mechanism that contributed to the formation of a patron–client relationship between the United States and Albania. The discourse of the Wilson administration reflected not only a normative commitment to self-determination, but also a strategic positioning effort aimed at securing future influence in the Balkan region. During this period, the United States reinforced its signaling efforts through tying-hands mechanisms and, as in the case of other Balkan states pursuing independence, emerged as a secondary strategic point of support for Albania amid the crisis of Tsarist Russia and the early consolidation of the Soviet Union.

During the second stage, U.S.–Albanian relations evolved within a highly complex structure of patron–client relations shaped by wartime alliance dynamics and competing strategic interests. The support provided by the United States, the United Kingdom, and the USSR to the Albanian resistance movement emerged as a form of proxy warfare characterized by indirect military engagement and strategic power projection. At the same

time, this process represented a period in which Albania was able to articulate its own political and strategic preferences within the broader framework of great-power competition. The process revealed not only the struggle among the aforementioned great powers through support and patronage mechanisms, but also the emergence of a sub-systemic structure in which Albania, despite its client status, was capable of making strategic choices among competing patron states. The support provided by Yugoslavia and the USSR to Fronti Nacionalçlirimtar on the basis of communist ideology, together with the assistance extended by the United States and the United Kingdom to Balli Kombëtar, revealed the multidimensional and competitive structure of patron–client relations during the second stage.

The third stage reflected a structure in which Albania’s communist ideological foundation—formed during the resistance period—played a decisive role in shaping its positioning within the systemic structure of international politics. The relations established with Yugoslavia and the USSR led to the emergence of an asymmetrical patron–client relationship, particularly shaped by Moscow’s superior economic capacity, at a stage when Albania increasingly emerged as an active unit within the international system. This outcome demonstrated that, within the framework of Albanian–Soviet patron–client relations, the distribution of capabilities extended beyond economic capacity to include ideological influence, through which the patron state sought to shape the domestic political orientation of the client state. Particularly during the post-Stalin period, the tensions between Moscow and Tirana illustrated that patron–client relations cannot be conceptualized merely as a master–slave dialectic, but instead involve reciprocal strategic calculations and limits to patron influence. Albania’s growing relations with China during this period demonstrated that client states are capable of pursuing alternative patronage structures and exercising a limited degree of strategic agency,

while simultaneously revealing that ideological proximity remained the primary determinant of alignment during the third stage.

The fourth stage illustrated how the systemic crisis following the collapse of the USSR reshaped Albania's search for a new patron-client relationship within the post-Cold War international order. Following the collapse of the USSR, U.S.-led economic and security structures emerged as increasingly decisive forces in shaping the political and strategic order in the Balkans. During this process, U.S. economic assistance, contributions to the restructuring of Albania's security bureaucracy, and support for NATO integration institutionalized a patron-client relationship rooted in signaling activities, which subsequently evolved into a broader framework of alliance support. The incorporation of Western norms such as democratization, human rights, and free-market economics into patronage mechanisms further demonstrated that post-Cold War patron-client relations evolved beyond purely military and economic dimensions to acquire a significant normative character.

More broadly, the findings suggest that patron-client relations should be understood as dynamic political arrangements whose form and durability depend upon changes in the distribution of capabilities within the systemic structure. Rather than constituting fixed patterns of dependency, these relationships evolve through signaling activities, strategic bargaining, and alliance formation. Consequently, the Albanian case illustrates how small states may exercise limited yet meaningful agency by adjusting their external alignments in response to systemic transformation while simultaneously pursuing regime security and state capacity.

The study demonstrates that, within the framework of U.S.-Albanian relations, patron-client relations should not be conceptualized as static dependency models. Instead, changes in the systemic structure of international politics following the First and Second World Wars, together with the systemic crisis that emerged after the collapse of the USSR in the

post–Cold War era, transformed the distribution of capabilities and produced a dynamic structure shaped by signaling activities. The Albanian case demonstrates that smaller states cannot be conceptualized merely as passive extensions of great powers; rather, they act as strategic actors capable of choosing among competing patrons and seeking to maximize state capacity in accordance with regime security concerns. Accordingly, within a Structural Realist framework, patron–client relations should not be interpreted solely through the distribution of capabilities, but rather as a multilayered form of interaction shaped by signaling processes, alliance support mechanisms, and sub-systemic structures.

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