

### Abstract

The article examines patterns of asymmetry in international relations. It aims to analytically identify the principal patterns of asymmetry and to theorize them as a structural principle of international relations. The focus is on grasping the essence of asymmetry not just as an inequality of resources or capabilities, but as a systemic condition that is formative of interaction between states, productive of hierarchies, and impactful on the dynamics of stability and change in the international system. Particular attention is devoted to the patterns of emergence, reproduction, and transformation of asymmetry. Drawing on a relationally oriented analysis of asymmetric relations, the article shows that asymmetry operates through durable recurring mechanisms observable across historical and regional contexts. The study offers a conceptual systematization of the main manifestations of asymmetry, including the distribution of material and non-material resources, institutional influence, asymmetric interdependence, structural inertia, and crisis-induced change. Methodologically, the research combines systemic, structural-functional, and comparative approaches. The analytical framework combines analytical and synthetic methods, induction, deduction, and content analysis of the literature on international relations theory and political science. The interdisciplinary orientation of the study ensures a comprehensive examination of asymmetry and facilitates the integration of key theoretical perspectives. As its original contribution, the article develops a coherent analytical framework that conceptualizes asymmetry as a set of interconnected patterns that both reproduce inequality and generate conditions for the transformation of the international system.

### # Keywords

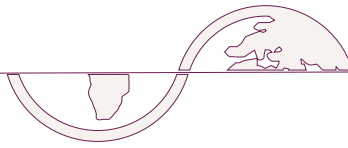
asymmetry, international relations, asymmetric interdependence, structural inertia, international crises

### Abstrakt

Artykuł analizuje wzorce asymetrii w stosunkach międzynarodowych. Celem jest analityczne wyodrębnienie podstawowych wzorców asymetrii oraz ich teoretyczne ujęcie jako strukturalnej zasady stosunków międzynarodowych. Wywód koncentruje się na istocie pojęcia „asymetria” rozumianym nie tylko jako nierówności zasobów lub możliwości, lecz również jako systemowy warunek decydujący o charakterze interakcji między państwami, kształtujący hierarchie oraz oddziałujący na dynamikę stabilności i zmian w systemie międzynarodowym. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono prawidłowościom powstawania, reprodukcji oraz przemian asymetrii. Na podstawie relacyjnej analizy stosunków asymetrycznych wykazano, że asymetria przejawia się w postaci trwałych mechanizmów obserwowanych w różnych kontekstach historycznych i regionalnych. Artykuł przedstawia konceptualną systematyzację głównych przejawów asymetrii, zwłaszcza w obszarach dystrybucji zasobów materialnych i niematerialnych, wpływów instytucjonalnych, asymetrycznej współzależności, inercji strukturalnej oraz zmian powodowanych przez kryzysy. Metodologia badań łączy podejście systemowe, strukturalno-funkcjonalne oraz porównawcze, zaś na aparat analityczny składają się metody analizy i syntezy, indukcji, dedukcji oraz analizę treści literatury naukowej z zakresu teorii stosunków międzynarodowych i nauk politycznych. Oryginalność artykułu polega na zaproponowaniu spójnych ram analitycznych umożliwiających ujęcie asymetrię jako zbioru powiązanych ze sobą prawidłowości, które reprodukują nierówności, a jednocześnie wytwarzają warunki sprzyjające transformacji systemu międzynarodowego.

### # Słowa kluczowe

asymetria, stosunki międzynarodowe, współzależność asymetryczna, inercja strukturalna, kryzysy międzynarodowe.



## Problem statement

In the contemporary model of the world order, which is characterized by complex and multilayered interactions, the assumption of equality of international actors is increasingly questioned. As a matter of fact, international relations are far removed from the principles of equality and mutual respect as major powers continue to impose conditions on less powerful actors and the operations of global institutions tend to be aligned with the interests of stronger states. Globalization processes, transformations of international institutions, and the intensification of economic, technological, military, and informational competition further exacerbate inequalities among states. Consequently, the issue of inequality or, in other words, of asymmetry in international relations comes to the center of attention, and understanding its mechanisms is essential for envisioning a more just international order.

Scholarship has yet to reach a consensus on the nature of asymmetry as a regular and constitutive element of international order. The relevance of this issue stems from the need to conceptualize asymmetry as an inherent feature of the structure of world politics, rather than as an exception or an anomaly. Analyzing the operational patterns of asymmetry operates leads to a deeper understanding of the functional mechanisms and possible evolutionary trajectories of today's international system. A rigorous theoretical understanding of asymmetry is also crucial in devising effective foreign policy strategies by middle powers, including Ukraine. Accordingly, the study of asymmetry patterns in international relations is not only theoretically significant but also practically relevant to sustaining global stability and developing new models of international interaction.

## The Aim and Objectives

The aim of this article is to analytically identify the principal patterns of asymmetry at work in the contemporary international system. To achieve this aim, the study explores the conceptual content of the notion of "asymmetry" and proposes the criteria by which patterns of asymmetry are identified as structural mechanisms of international interaction.

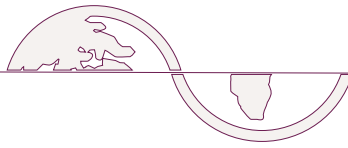
## The Main Discussion

Before identifying specific patterns, it is necessary to elucidate asymmetry in international relations as an analytical phenomenon. If understood only as a quantitative inequality of power or resources, asymmetry is analytically insufficient to explain why some patterns of interaction recur across time, regions, and political systems. By contrast, a relational interpretation makes it possible to conceptualize asymmetry as a structuring condition of interaction, which can generate stable and observable patterns.

To better understand asymmetry in international relations, we must move beyond interpreting it as a simple disparity in material capabilities. In this regard, Brantly Womack's relational approach provides a particularly productive analytical framework. Womack argues that asymmetry is not defined primarily by differences in power per se, but by the unequal significance of relationships for the interacting parties (Womack, 2016, 3–5; 2024). In asymmetric relationships, the weaker actor is structurally more dependent on the interaction, while the stronger actor tends to perceive the same relationship as marginal within a broader strategic horizon.

These circumstances generate what Womack terms an "asymmetry of attention," where smaller or weaker states devote disproportionately heightened political, strategic, and cognitive attention to stronger partners, whereas stronger states only pay limited attention to weaker ones (Womack, 2016, 6–7). As a result, asymmetry is reproduced not only through material inequality but also through persistent differences in expectations, sensitivity to change, and perceptions of risk. The weaker actor tends to interpret changes in the relationship as existential, while the stronger actor often views them as secondary or peripheral.

Importantly, Womack emphasizes that asymmetry is a structural norm rather than pathology. It only becomes destabilizing when the stronger actor refuses to recognize the autonomy and dignity of the weaker one. To address this issue, he introduces the concept of "asymmetric respect," according to which asymmetric relationships can be stable if the inequality of capabilities is combined with the recognition of sovereign equality (Womack, 2010; 2016, 9–12). On this model, asymmetry does not necessarily entail domination; rather, it produces a specific configuration of interaction that may generate either



stability or conflict, depending on how it is managed.

In analytical terms, Womack's approach is crucial because it explains why asymmetry tends to produce recurring patterns of interaction. Uneven distributions of attention, vulnerability, and strategic dependence yield predictable behavioral outcomes, including heightened sensitivity on the part of weaker actors, structural complacency on the part of stronger ones, and a tendency toward asymmetric escalation of misunderstandings (Womack, 2004, 354; Womack, 2010, 143–146). These outcomes are not accidental but structurally embedded, which makes them observable across different regions and historical contexts.

Accordingly, instead of being construed as a static imbalance of power, asymmetry should be understood as a relational condition that structures interaction. It is precisely this structuring capacity that makes asymmetry appear in identifiable patterns. The persistence of unequal attention, differentiated vulnerability, and asymmetric expectations creates stable mechanisms through which asymmetry is reproduced over time. Thus, identifying patterns of asymmetry is not an arbitrary classificatory exercise but a logical extension of relationality intrinsic to asymmetry itself.

Before these patterns can be substantively analyzed, the criteria for identifying them and the analytical principles for distinguishing among them must be defined. Without this, any discussion of asymmetry may remain purely descriptive and, consequently, reduce patterns to loosely observed contingencies, rather than capturing analytically grounded mechanisms.

In this article, "a pattern" is not understood in a deterministic or law-like sense. Following traditions in the social sciences and theory of international relations, patterns are viewed as stable, recurring mechanisms or tendencies that emerge from the structure of social interactions and are observable across various empirical contexts (Bunge, 2009; King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994, 8–9). In international relations, patterns do not imply immutability; rather, they refer to probabilistic and relational mechanisms that persist over time due to underlying structural conditions. As Alexander Wendt notes, social patterns arise from the interaction of material structures and intersubjective meanings, which both constrain and enable actors' behavior (Wendt, 1999, 37–38). Thus, a pattern does not refer to isolated events, but reflects a recurring logic of interaction that makes a systema-

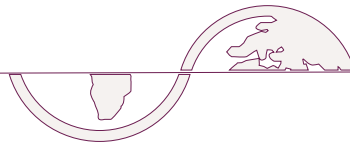
tic analysis of asymmetry possible. Accordingly, in this study a pattern of asymmetry is defined as a stable and recurring mechanism through which unequal positions of actors are created, sustained, or transformed in the international system.

With this definition, asymmetry can be fruitfully explored not only as inequality but also as a structural condition of international interaction. The identification of such patterns is grounded in a relational understanding of asymmetry, itself underpinned by Womack's theory of asymmetric relationships as outlined above (Womack, 2016; 2024). This relational perspective is methodologically decisive. If asymmetry were reduced to measurable power differentials alone, why similar inequalities lead to different outcomes across cases would be difficult to explain. By contrast, the relational approach helps identify mechanisms that recur across diverse empirical settings, which is a key criterion for recognizing patterns of asymmetry (Womack, 2004). Building on this model, the article proposes four interrelated criteria for the analytical identification of patterns of asymmetry.

First, a pattern must be structurally embedded in the international system rather than dependent on individual decisions or short-term events. Structural embeddedness means that the phenomenon arises from permanent features, such as the distribution of resources, institutional arrangements, or patterns of interdependence. This criterion draws on structural realism and historical institutionalism, both of which emphasize that recurring outcomes result from systemic constraints rather than from actors' preferences (Waltz, 1979, 79–81; Pierson, 2004, 20–22).

Second, a pattern must be observable across different regions, historical periods, and types of actors. Identical outcomes need not be produced, but similar causal mechanisms must reappear under comparable conditions. This criterion involves an inductive logic, where patterns are identified through comparative observation of multiple cases, rather than inferred from a single empirical example (George & Bennett, 2005, 75–78). For instance, asymmetric interdependence surfaces in relations between major and minor powers regardless of the cultural or regional context, which indicates that a generalizable mechanism is at work.

Third, a pattern must exhibit causal relevance; that is, it must shape behavior, expectations, and/or outcomes of inter-



national interaction. Descriptive inequalities that do not affect interaction do not qualify as patterns. This criterion corresponds to Robert Keohane and John Nye's insistence that asymmetries of dependence matter insofar as they translate into differential vulnerability and political influence (Keohane & Nye, 1977; 2012, 9–11). Consequently, a pattern does not just reveal that inequality exists, but crucially explains how asymmetry affects interaction.

Fourthly, and finally, a pattern must be relatively stable over time, while remaining amenable to modification under specific conditions, such as systemic crises or major shifts in the distribution of power. This criterion steers clear of both determinism and voluntarism. As Womack emphasizes, asymmetry is persistent but not immutable as its forms and intensity can change under pressure, particularly during crises (Womack, 2016, 73–75). This criterion permits crisis-induced transformation to be incorporated as a pattern, without contradicting the overall stability of asymmetric structures.

Methodologically, the four patterns were identified based on a combined inductive–deductive logic. Inductively, recurring mechanisms were captured through comparative analysis of the literature on power asymmetry, interdependence, hierarchy, and systemic change in international relations. Deductively, these mechanisms were then assessed against the criteria listed above to determine whether they qualify as patterns rather than being descriptive themes. This dual logic corresponded to Robert Merton's notion of middle-range theorizing, in which empirical observation and theory mutually reinforce each other (Merton, 1968, 39–41).

By applying these criteria, four patterns of asymmetry can be identified: structural–resource asymmetry, asymmetric interdependence, structural inertia, and crisis-induced transformation. They all meet the criteria of structural embeddedness, cross-contextual reproducibility, causal relevance, and temporal stability combined with conditional variability.

Emphatically, the proposed list is not conclusive and does not cover all possible instances of asymmetry in international relations. The focus of this study is on systemic foundational patterns that exemplify the key mechanisms of the formation, reproduction, and transformation of asymmetry. Other patterns may emerge as objects of future research or appear as derivative, context-specific, or level-dependent variations of these mechanisms. Nevertheless, these four patterns meet the abo-

ve-defined criteria most consistently and represent conceptually grounded mechanisms through which asymmetry operates, which makes them the suitable analytical core of the study of asymmetry in international relations.

With the criteria for identifying patterns of asymmetry in international relations clearly defined, the patterns themselves can be investigated. The aim of this section is not only to describe various manifestations of inequality, but first and foremost to show how mechanisms of asymmetry function as recurring and causally significant patterns that shape international interaction. Consistently with the methodological framework adopted for this study, four principal patterns are examined; these are structural-resource asymmetry, asymmetric interdependence, structural inertia, and crisis-induced transformation of asymmetry.

The structural-resource pattern epitomizes the unequal distribution of material and non-material resources and the unequal capacity to convert these resources into structural influence, which add up to the most fundamental dimension of asymmetry. However, following Womack, resources only have political significance in relational and structural contexts. Power does not derive from resources alone; rather, it stems but from the ability to embed them within networks, institutions, norms, and rules that structure interaction (Womack, 2016, 14–16).

This understanding resonates with Susan Strange's concept of structural power, which is defined as the ability to shape the frameworks within which states interact (Strange, 1988, 24–26). States that possess superior economic, technological, and/or institutional resources are better positioned to define standards, set agendas, and control access to key domains of interaction. Over time, this capacity produces structural asymmetry that exceeds mere quantitative inequality.

In Kenneth Waltz's view, international structures are defined by the distribution of capabilities among states, and such capabilities are inherently unequal (Waltz, 1979, 79–81). No international system has ever had a symmetrical distribution of economic, military, technological, or demographic resources. This persistent inequality generates a hierarchy of actors and makes asymmetry a systemic condition, rather than an anomaly.

Importantly, this pattern has been reproduced across historical periods and geopolitical configurations. Whether in the bipolar system of the Cold War, the unipolar moment after 1991, or the emerging multipolar order, disparities in resource possession



have been consistently formative of patterns of influence and constraint. As Robert Gilpin notes, international order changes not because asymmetry disappears, but because its material foundations shift (Gilpin, 1981, 9–11).

From the perspective of patterned regularity, the crucial point is that resource asymmetry tends to be structurally reproduced. Actors with greater resources can invest them in ways that reinforce their central position—through infrastructure, institutions, legal regimes, or knowledge production—while weaker actors face significant constraints in altering their structural roles. Thus, the structural-resource balance is a foundational mechanism that generates and sustains asymmetry in the international system. It does not determine outcomes mechanically, but it establishes durable constraints that influence patterns of interaction.

While structural-resource inequality explains the very existence of asymmetry, it does not fully account for its operational dynamics. This analytical gap is bridged by addressing the pattern of asymmetric interdependence, which captures how unequal actors become mutually connected in ways that unevenly distribute costs and benefits. In this context, Keohane and Nye famously argued that interdependence is rarely symmetrical; instead, it is characterized by differing degrees of sensitivity and vulnerability (Keohane & Nye, 2012, 9–13). This insight is central to understanding why weaker actors often depend more heavily on relationships, while stronger actors retain greater freedom of action.

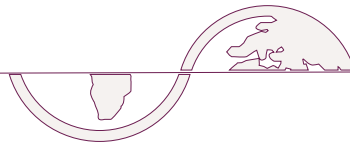
Womack extends this logic by demonstrating that asymmetry is a matter not only power of differentials but also of relational significance. In asymmetric relationships, interaction matters more to the weaker party than to the stronger one, producing asymmetries of attention, expectations, and strategic risk (Womack, 2016, 4–6). Empirically, this pattern can be observed in contexts as diverse as U.S.-Canada relations, China-Vietnam relations, and the dynamics between the European Union and the Eastern Partnership. They all embody asymmetrically structured forms of interdependence. The causal relevance of this pattern lies in that it explains why asymmetry does not automatically result in domination. As Womack shows, stability is possible when asymmetry is mutually recognized and managed through what he terms “asymmetric respect” (Womack, 2006, 155–157). At the same time, asymmetric interdependence also functions as a mechanism for reproducing hierarchy, since the stronger

actor typically possesses more tools to manipulate institutional rules, market access, and security guarantees. In this sense, interdependence does not negate asymmetry, but channels it into stable relational patterns.

The pattern of structural inertia pertains to one of the central questions of asymmetry theory specifically to why unequal relationships persist even when weaker actors experience economic growth or enhance their political capacity. Womack’s relational approach explains this phenomenon by arguing that mechanisms of expectations and behavioral routines develop in asymmetric relationships and constrain the transformative effects of incremental change (Womack, 2004, 354). In this logic, asymmetry is reproduced not only through material disparities but also through stabilized patterns of interaction.

This argument is closely aligned with historical institutionalist approaches, particularly the concepts of path dependence and increasing returns. As Paul Pierson demonstrates, institutional or structural advantages, once established, tend to be reproduced through positive feedback mechanisms, making alternative developmental trajectories increasingly costly and politically difficult (Pierson, 2004, 20–22, 44–45). In international relations, this means that dominant actors derive systemic benefits from established rules, norms, and networks, while weaker states face high transaction costs when attempting to alter their position.

In terms of regularity criteria, structural inertia clearly meets the requirement of temporal stability with asymmetry often outliving the conditions that gave rise to it. A telling example is found in the voting and decision-making structures of international financial institutions, which continue to reflect the post-World War II balance of power despite significant shifts that have since redrawn the global distribution of economic weight. In causal terms, structural inertia considerably curbs agency. Even states that accumulate new resources may struggle to convert this potential into influence as a result of entrenched rules, institutional procedures, and the expectations of other actors. This helps explain why rising states typically pursue strategies of institutional reform, rather than radical exit from the existing regimes, and why weaker states often internalize subordinate roles as “normal” or inevitable. Structural inertia thus reinforces asymmetry not through overt domination but through the gradual normalization of unequal positions in the international system.



The final pattern redirects analysis to the dynamic dimension of asymmetry. The regularity of crisis-induced transformation captures the conditional nature of asymmetry since despite their general stability and tendency toward self-reproduction, asymmetric structures are not entirely immutable. Economic, security, and/or systemic crises can disrupt the established patterns of interaction, expose structural vulnerabilities, and alter actors' perceptions of risk, legitimacy, and acceptable strategies.

In Womack's relational framework, crises enhance the consequences of asymmetric attention; weaker actors experience heightened uncertainty and vulnerability, while stronger actors may either distance themselves from interaction or, conversely, intensify intervention (Womack, 2016, 73–75). In this sense, crises function as stress tests for asymmetric relationships, revealing both the limits to their stability and their capacity for adaptation. This conclusion is consistent with broader theories of systemic change. For example Charles Kindleberger's theory of hegemonic stability shows that crises can undermine the existing leadership arrangements (Kindleberger, 1986), while G. John Ikenberry argues that post-crisis periods open windows of opportunity for institutional reconfiguration (Ikenberry, 2011, 58–61). At the same time, no matter how deep, transformational crises rarely eliminate asymmetry altogether; more often than not, they alter its form, redistributing influence without abolishing hierarchical logic itself.

A similar dynamic is captured by the long-cycle theory proposed by George Modelski and William Thompson, according to which systemic crises—particularly wars and large-scale economic disruptions—accelerate shifts in leadership and patterns of dominance (Modelski & Thompson, 1996, 25–27). Crises expose the vulnerabilities of dominant actors and create structural opportunities for challengers, but they do not dismantle the principle of asymmetry itself. Thus, crisis-induced transformation is itself a regularity and, as such, does not imply constant volatility in the international system. Rather, it reflects patterned conditionality with the probability of asymmetry being modified increasing amid systemic stress, when established structures lose legitimacy or functional effectiveness.

## Conclusion

The four patterns identified in this article add up to a coherent analytical model of asymmetry in international relations. Each highlights a distinct dimension of inequality, but only when combined do they promote a comprehensive understanding of how asymmetry emerges, is reproduced, and changes in the international system. Structural-resource inequality establishes the baseline conditions of asymmetry by determining unequal access to material and non-material capabilities. Asymmetric interdependence explains how these inequalities are translated into durable relational patterns in which actors assign different significance to interaction. Structural inertia accounts for the persistence of asymmetry over time, even amid gradual change, while crisis-induced transformation captures moments in which the established hierarchies are revised or reconfigured.

Crucially, these patterns are not alternative or mutually exclusive explanations. Rather, they function as interrelated and reciprocally reinforcing mechanisms. Resource inequality creates conditions for asymmetric interdependence; for its part, interdependence is consolidated through the institutional and normative mechanisms of structural inertia; and crises periodically disrupt this equilibrium, opening opportunities for a partial transformation of asymmetric relationships. This approach moves beyond simplified conceptions of asymmetry as a static power gap and instead conceptualizes it as a dynamic, multidimensional process.

The analytical value of the model proposed in this paper lies in that it can explain not only the existence of asymmetry but also the mechanisms through which it operates. Asymmetry appears not as a temporary deviation from an imagined equality, but as a structural principle of international relations that simultaneously underpins the stability of the system and delimits change. It is through asymmetry that the international system maintains relative order, while also accumulating tensions, which periodically erupt in the form of crises.

The model also provides insights into the behavior of the various categories of states. For strong actors, asymmetry generates opportunities for institutional influence and rule-setting, but also imposes responsibility for sustaining systemic stability. For weaker states and middle powers, asymmetry does not eliminate choice, but it significantly restricts available strategies, making the management of interdependence, institutional adaptation,



and the strategic use of crisis moments particularly important. Overall, the findings imply that any relevant study of asymmetry must move beyond the purely normative or descriptive approaches. Conceptualizing asymmetry as a systemic regularity fosters a more realistic understanding of contemporary global dynamics, including transformations of world order, the evolution of international institutions, and the increasing role of unequal yet interdependent actors. As a result, this model can be a theoretical foundation of further research on asymmetry and provide a good starting point for exploring the practical strategies of states that operate in the structurally unequal international environment.

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