Power Transition Theory Revisited

When Rising China Meets
Dissatisfied United States

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Abstract: Dissatisfaction is a major concept in power transition theory, which postulates that a rapidly rising power tends to be dissatisfied with the international system and would thus attempt to reform or replace it, whereas the hegemonic power would, by default, be satisfied with and work to maintain the status quo. This paper, however, offers an alternative outlook on the reigning-rising power dynamics by examining the conditions for and implications of hegemonic dissatisfaction and rising power satisfaction. It argues that although China, as a potential systemic challenger harboring grievances against the existing global regimes, has been a recurrent subject for studies, it is the United States, the established hegemon, that appears

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increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo. The U.S. dissatisfaction is informed by a set of internal and external factors often justified with a reference to China as a challenger, and is manifested in a number of anti-system strategies, including unconventional diplomatic rhetoric, as well as withdrawal from various international institutions or attempts to undermine them. The U.S. discontent, as contrasted with China's satisfaction as a rising power, has a number of potential geopolitical and economic implications at the bilateral, regional, and global levels, endangering the viability and sustainability of the universally accepted political and economic regimes.

Keywords: Hegemonic dissatisfaction; international system; power transition; the United States; China.

Introduction

In international relations theory, it has been widely argued that systemic tensions occur when an emerging great power increasingly challenges all or some of the aspects of the international order that is established, shaped, and controlled by the reigning power. Liberal and realist theorists agree that peace and stability ensue if, in one way or another, the states in the lower stratum of the global hierarchy are kept satisfied through either consent or coercion. On the liberal side, hegemonic stability theory conditions a stable and open international system on the existence of a hegemon that is necessarily a satisfied one.¹ Hegemony — either benevolent (consensual), opportunistic (exploitative), or coercive (autarchic) — exists to ensure that the countries with the capacity to cause systemic crises are satisfied to the degree that they continue to be cooperative with the hegemonic state and committed to the maintenance of the existing order.²

¹Kim Woosang, "Alliance Transitions and Great Power War," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (November 1991), p. 842; Jonathan Joseph, *Hegemony: A Realist Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2013); and Andrew Carl Sobel, *Birth of Hegemony: Crisis, Financial Revolution, and Emerging Global Networks* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

²Charles P. Kindleberger, "Dominance and Leadership in the International Economy: Exploitation, Public Goods, and Free Rides," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (June 1981), pp. 242–254; Michael C. Webb and Stephen D. Krasner, "Hegemonic Stability Theory: An Empirical Assessment," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1989), pp. 184–186; and Robert Gilpin, "The Politics of Transnational Economic Relations," *International Organization*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Summer 1971), pp. 398–419.

On the realist side, balance of power theory deems rising power satisfaction as a primary condition for international stability, holding that actors with more or less similar capabilities (albeit asymmetric, as there would not possibly be an absolute alignment in power capacity) would maintain a delicate peace equilibrium.³ This, too, requires that the rising powers remain satisfied and willing to participate in the international regime in which they are bound by the rules originally set by the hegemonic state.

The school of thought that is perhaps the most interested in the question of satisfaction (or lack thereof) is power transition theory (PTT). In this school of thought, degree of satisfaction influences the behavior of a contending state and the nature of its relationship with the international status quo (defined as the established and generally accepted rules, norms, principles, and arrangements) as represented by the hegemonic custodian state and its auxiliary institutions.⁴ A country might be dissatisfied, thus considered anti-status quo, if it views the international system as operating according to norms and rules that undermine the contending state's interests and aspirations. This dissatisfaction may be informed by historical, ideological, religious, territorial, personal, or cultural conditions. The argument goes that a dissatisfied nation, if it has enough national power and political will, is inclined to challenge the hegemon by attempting to change the established rules and norms to create new realities in its favor, thereby inciting, at times, inter-state war.⁵

PTT particularly sets out to identify the factors that result in satisfaction or dissatisfaction. As such, whereas the former would likely lead to cooperative behavior within the hierarchical distribution of international obligations and benefits, the latter would lead to grievances, competition, and revolt against hegemonic rule. PTT holds that the chances are greater

³John Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism," in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, eds., *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 71–88; William Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 5–41; and Richard Ned Lebow and Robert Kelly, "Thucydides and Hegemony: Athens and the United States," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (October 2001), pp. 593–609.

⁴Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke, *Parity and War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

⁵Ronald L. Tammen et al., *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2000).

for discontent on the part of the contending state toward the hegemon when the two actors reach a rough parity in national power and capabilities, and being overtaken by the rising power looks possible or even inevitable. The challenger is more likely to be unhappy with the international setup due to the integral mechanisms established by the satisfied dominant state with the aim of guaranteeing its status, as well as restricting and regulating challenger state behavior in a benign or hostile manner. Even a preventive war waged by the hegemonic state, then, would not be considered to be out of dissatisfaction, but rather, out of a desire to maintain the international system challenged by the dissatisfied power. As A.F.K. Organski points out, in the grand scheme of things, "the dominant nation is necessarily more satisfied with the existing international order than any other since it is to a large extent its international order."⁶ Thus, much like other realist approaches, PTT, too, seeks to locate the question of systemic dissatisfaction in the agency of a rising power.

This paper, while referring to the methodological tools offered by the power transition framework, sets out to approach the question of state dissatisfaction from a different perspective. Instead of subscribing to the assumption that a rising contender would have a greater inclination to be dissatisfied than an established system-initiating hegemon, it examines the conditions for and implications of a scenario or situation in which the challenging state grows demonstrably more content with the way the current international political and economic systems operate, while the hegemonic state displays signs of dissatisfaction and is actively engaged in status quo-disturbing behavior. To this end, this research examines the recent cases of U.S. displeasure with the international system against the backdrop of a rising and contented China that is poised to match and overtake the hegemon in multiple aspects of national power. Hence, the primary, two-pronged question in this paper is: what are the contemporary indicators of U.S. dissatisfaction and what would be the implications of this for the international order?

Rising China appears more contented with the international system than the reigning U.S.

⁶A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1958), p. 366.

Literature on China's real and potential choices as a dissatisfied challenger is plenty.⁷ Related scholarly studies draw on a methodical toolbox with a rich and diverse set of instruments for analysis and extrapolation, producing a plethora of opinions, each of which generally falls into either of the following two categories: the first sees China as a system disrupter and defector; and the second views it as a participant and potential contributor. In any case, with few notable exceptions, analyses have so far only sparsely considered the possibility that the hegemonic power as the architect and custodian of the international system may grow dissatisfied with the rules and demand an overhaul or, otherwise, threaten with defection or disruption.⁸ Since President Trump took office in early 2017, the United States has at numerous times shown strong dissatisfaction toward a number of well-established international arrangements involving politics, economics, and technology. In some cases, Washington has worked actively to weaken such global or regional arrangements by simply pulling itself out while, in others, it has sought to undermine those regimes. These developments contrast sharply with China's general satisfaction — in the form of compliance, participation, and contribution — with the global order.

A reassessment of certain PTT postulations on hegemonic state satisfaction and rising state dissatisfaction would help make better sense of the contemporary great power relations and the general condition of international order.⁹ Our purpose is to transpose the traditionally defined roles of a

⁷See, for example, Richard C. Bush and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *A War Like No Other* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 2007); Brantly Womack, "China between Region and World," *China Journal*, No. 61 (January 2009), pp. 1–20; Avery Goldstein, "Power Transitions, Institutions, and China's Rise in East Asia: Theoretical Expectations and Evidence," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4/5 (August/October 2007), pp. 639–682; and Arthur Waldron, "The Rise of China: Military and Political Implications," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (October 2005), pp. 715–733.

⁸For example, although Rapkin and Thompson refer briefly to the possibility of a dominant power dissatisfaction, they still maintain that "assessing the (dis)satisfaction of the declining dominant power seems a questionable conceptual extension." See David Rapkin and William Thompson, "Power Transition, Challenge and the (Re)Emergence of China," *International Interactions*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2003), pp. 315–342.

⁹Tom Barber, "The United States and the Status Quo: Is Hegemonic Satisfaction Innate?," *e-IR*, November 26, 2017, <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/11/26/the-united-states-and-the-status-quo-is-hegemonic-satisfaction-innate/>.

contented hegemon and discontented rising power by analyzing the ongoing multifaceted crisis and its implications for the contemporary international system. We begin by providing a survey of the literature on power shifts and state dissatisfaction, directing our attention to the postulations made under the PTT framework. We then take a closer look at the studies on the rise of China, detailing their measurement of rising power discontent and the scenarios for its anticipated course of action. Following that, we set out to examine the instances of U.S. dissatisfaction and introduce a set of indicators with the hope of better understanding its root causes. Finally, we debate the implications of dominant power dissatisfaction for the existing global regimes in general, and for China's international role as a great power, in particular.

The Question of State Dissatisfaction

Power transition theory emerges as a counter-argument to the balance of power paradigm, which, unlike the latter, views the international system as hierarchical, but not necessarily anarchic. As is the case with hegemonic stability theory, states are seen as belonging to a certain category on the vertical scale of national capabilities, and classified into either small, medium, or great powers, all clustered under a hegemonic power. Yet, unlike hegemonic stability theory, power transition theory considers inter-state peace to be more conditional than deterministic because the states are not defined merely by their aggregate power and structural conditions (although structure may also play a certain role), but also by their internal dynamics, which lead to varying outcomes in behavior.¹⁰ In general, in the global hierarchical architecture, great powers, which are not too many, are viewed either as revisionist or status quo-oriented. According to Organski, whereas most great powers (those potentially capable of challenging the hegemonic state) are satisfied with the existing global order because it provides the best conditions to achieve their national goals, some are not satisfied mainly because they "have grown to full power after the existing

¹⁰Brian Efid, Jacek Kugler, and Gaspare M. Genna, *From War to Integration: Generalizing the Dynamic of Power Transitions*, Working Paper Series No. 2002-33 (Claremont Institute for Economic Policy Studies, 2003), <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/31408>.

international order was fully established and the benefits are already allocated.”¹¹

As such, even if a great power grows within the existing global regime by utilizing the instruments, such as open sea lanes for trade, international arbitration for dispute resolution, or membership chances in elite institutions, it may still not implicitly endorse it — first, because of the lack of a sense of full utilization (e.g., threats or use of sanctions on key technologies by the hegemonic state); and second, because of certain perceived or real inequalities within the system from which the late comers suffer (e.g., the appropriation of secure and stable regions of natural resources by the hegemon, leaving less secure and stable areas to rising powers). Balance in power and capabilities, in this regard, leads to less stability, not more. Thus, unlike neo-realist theories, which suggest that in case of preponderance, strong countries will take advantage of the weakness of the lesser powers until equilibrium, hence peace, is achieved among states, PTT holds that peace is dependent on the power advantage of one dominant state and the support of a host of satisfied states or allies.¹² International peace is more in

danger when there is power parity or near parity between a rising power and the reigning state than when there is absolute hegemonic preponderance. Dissatisfaction is therefore viewed as the primary reason for a potential contention between the challenger (the rising power) and the hegemon (status quo power).¹³

Similar to discords at the global level, parity and dissatisfaction may also lead to conflict between the regional hegemon and the

Power transition theory views dissatisfaction of a rising power as the root of its contention with the status quo power.

¹¹Organski, *World Politics*, p. 366.

¹²Kenneth Organski and Jacek Kugler. *The War Ledger* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).

¹³Kim, “Alliance Transitions and Great Power War,” pp. 833–850; and Robert Powell, “Stability and the Distribution of Power,” *World Politics*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (January 1996), pp. 239–267. It should be noted that there is no universal agreement on the positive correlation between the level of satisfaction and likelihood of war. See, for example, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and David Lalman, *War and Reason — Domestic and International Imperatives* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992).

dissatisfied states within a regional cluster positioned under the global hegemony. However, conflict between the systemic hegemon and the contending power within the larger international system would have greater consequences since, unlike a competition within regional boundaries, there would be no higher authority or systemic checks over the hegemon.¹⁴ In the theory, a distinction is also made between states being dissatisfied with each other and with the international system.¹⁵ The former may lead to competition and conflict more often, but its scale remains small, whereas in the latter case, challenge to the system itself may result in a deeper crisis such as a large scale armed confrontation, although its occurrence remains less frequent. Nevertheless, the contrast between these two types of dissatisfaction is blurred in a great power vs. reigning power dyad. Given that the hegemonic power assumes a key role in establishing and then revising and protecting (through an effective alliance network) the international order, dissatisfaction leveled at the system leader would by default be leveled at the system itself. However, not all cases of dissatisfaction would lead to war.¹⁶ Numerous reasons exist for the challenger to tone down its anti-system rhetoric (such as joining in alliances to achieve greater bargaining power, and seeking preferential treatment politically or economically in return for compliance) and for the leader to seek compromise (such as setting up institutions to integrate the potential challenger into the established rules and norms, and offering certain security and trade-related public goods).¹⁷

In any case, "dissatisfaction with the status quo" is viewed as "an essential precondition for conflict."¹⁸ The assumption is that the dominant

¹⁴Douglas Lemke and Suzanne Werner, "Power Parity, Commitment to Change, and War," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (June 1996), pp. 235–260.

¹⁵Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, "Pride of Place: The Origins of German Hegemony," *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (October 1990), pp. 28–52.

¹⁶Kugler and Lemke, *Parity and War*.

¹⁷The analytical strength of power transition theory depends, to a great extent, on the measures applied and cases selected, which constitutes a major critique of the theory. See Indra de Soysa, John R. Oneal, and Yong-Hee Park, "Testing Power Transition Theory Using Alternative Measures of National Capabilities," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (August 1997), pp. 509–528.

¹⁸Jacek Kugler and A.F.K. Organski, "The Power Transition: A Retrospective and Prospective Evaluation," in Midlarsky Manus, ed., *Handbook of War Studies* (Oxon, OK: Routledge, 1989), p. 187.

power would have no incentives for dissatisfaction so long as it remains preponderant and the challenger does not show any tendency, along with actual capacity, to overthrow the existing order. Only if parity in power is achieved and overtaking seems likely or imminent, would the dominant power resort to preemptive action through sanctions, covert measures, or open military conflict. Even in this case, first of all, the hegemon needs to be challenged by the dissatisfied contender (if the challenger is satisfied, war is not anticipated) as the dominant state remains committed to the prevailing global order so long as its supremacy and control is not fatally challenged, given that "a weak dissatisfied challenger is not to be feared."¹⁹ Second, and related to the first point, the hegemon acts to preserve and protect the established regimes (even to the effect of initiating wars), but not to question or endanger them. Hence, it is essentially still a satisfied actor.

A number of studies have offered various factors for measurement to highlight the relationship between the rising power's dissatisfaction with the status quo and the likelihood of an armed conflict. For Organski, a favorable view of the international system and its rules indicates satisfaction. On the extreme end of the scale is the dissatisfied state which rejects working within the established order and wishes to replace the old with a new one deemed more favorable. Alternatively, in an effort to measure the degree of satisfaction, Kim Woosang first ascertains the dominant power according to the national capability score of the states, and then pairs the great powers with the dominant state to find out "the utility score" between each pair in a 20-year period.²⁰ If a country is found to have engaged in a positive alliance over a long period of time with the dominant power (similarity of alliance portfolios), that country is considered satisfied. Similarly, for Douglas Lemke, participating in military alliances with the

¹⁹Douglas Lemke, "The Continuation of History: Power Transition Theory and the End of the Cold War," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (February 1997), p. 24.

²⁰Kim, "Alliance Transitions and Great Power War," p. 842. Also see, Kim Woosang, "Power Transitions and Great Power War from Westphalia to Waterloo," *World Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (October 1992), pp. 153–172.

global hegemon demonstrates the presence of a satisfied state actor.²¹ On the contrary, as Suzanne Warner and Jacek Kugler observe, engaging in extensive military build-up indicates a state's dissatisfaction and a greater likelihood of war.²²

In a more recent study, Liao Hsiao-chuan introduces two more specific units of analysis to measure state dissatisfaction. The first is "revisionist attitude," which suggests that dissatisfied states tend to be more revisionist. In what Liao quotes from Daniel Jones and other analysts,²³ the three indicators of a revisionist state include "making claims to territory, attempting to overthrow a regime, or declaring the intention not to abide by another state's policy."²⁴ The second measurement is "gravity of dissatisfaction," which is reflected in the perception of threat by the states that are targeted by the hegemonic power. In this regard, seven kinds of threats are identified, including "economic threat, limited military threat, political threat, territorial threat, threat to influence in the international system or regional subsystem, threat of grave damage, and threat to existence."²⁵ Thus, as Liao puts it, if the number of threats as perceived by the target state exceed two in a given year, it indicates a serious dissatisfaction on the part of the acting state and the possibility of war increases considerably.

A hegemonic power is generally expected to try to preserve the established regimes.

Rising China and Its Multiple Futures

As China continues to rise on the world stage, scholarly studies focusing on its attitude toward the existing international order and its interaction with

²¹Douglas Lemke, *Regions of War and Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²²Suzanne Werner and Jacek Kugler, "Power Transitions and Military Buildups," in Kugler and Lemke, eds., *Parity and War*, pp. 187–207.

²³Daniel Jones, Stuart Bremer, and J. David Singer, "Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816–1992: Rationale, Coding Rules, and Empirical Patterns," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1996), pp. 163–212.

²⁴Liao Hsiao-Chuan, "State Dissatisfaction: Predicting the Occurrence of Interstate War," *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2014), p. 222.

²⁵*Ibid.*

the reigning state have also increased significantly. The majority of these studies view China as a big unknown that has to operate against the backdrop of a satisfied hegemon, the United States, a dedicated guardian of the prevailing global order and its apparatus, including military alliances (such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, and allied relationships in the Asia-Pacific), economic regimes (such as free trade and regional trade agreements), security arrangements (such as non-proliferation and arms control accords), and global governance mechanisms (such as climate change and Arctic governance). Numerous postulations of power transition are operationalized to this effect in which China is assigned into a variegated array of actual and/or potential categories (e.g., revisionist, reformist, conformist, or indifferent) as they relate to the country's foreign policy choices.

In the first two decades of the post-Cold War era, China indeed represented a handy theme for scholarly attention as the international conditions seemed to leave little room for alternative futures. Instead of a multipolar order preceded by bipolarity, the world evolved into a "unipolar moment" in which "the center of world power [was] the unchallenged superpower, the United States, attended by its Western allies."²⁶ China, on the other hand, while standing on the threshold of a decades-long explosive growth, was economically and technologically weak, and faced a number of geopolitical challenges, including the third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996 in which the United States dispatched two aircraft carrier groups near the Taiwan island,²⁷ the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade by the

²⁶Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (1990/1991), p. 23.

²⁷The First Taiwan Strait Crisis refers to incidents between August 1954 and April 1955 centered on the Jinmen (Kinmen) and Mazu (Matsu) Islands in the Taiwan Strait. The United States supported Chiang Kai-shek by signing the U.S.-ROC (Republic of China) Mutual Defense Treaty on December 1, 1954, and passing the Formosa Resolution on January 29, 1955, which authorized the Eisenhower administration to utilize U.S. military to defend Taiwan and the adjacent islands. The Second Taiwan Crisis took place in August 1958 in which the PRC (People's Republic of China) and Taiwan forces in Jinmen (Kinmen) Island exchanged artillery fire. The live bombardment lasted more than a month; and the crisis continued with the two sides firing shells containing leaflets on alternate days of the week until the establishment of diplomatic relations between the PRC and the United States in 1979.

U.S.-led NATO forces in 1999, and the mid-air collision of a U.S. reconnaissance plane with a People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy fighter jet near the Hainan Island in 2001. In essence, whereas the United States seemed to have all the reasons to be satisfied with the international status quo, China increasingly looked like a proper candidate for a rising but dissatisfied challenger both in the regional (East Asia or Asia-Pacific) and international arenas.²⁸

Over time, a complex set of factors were introduced to measure China's dissatisfaction with the status quo and its potential course of action to effect more favorable conditions. For example, in one of the early studies, Alastair Iain Johnston introduced five indicators listed along two categories. In the first category, the nature of a state's participation in international institutions is analyzed based on three criteria: inadequate participation (when the state had the capacity to take part), participation without acceptance of the institutional norms, and participation and temporary acceptance with an intention to change the rules when the state is capable of doing so. The second category includes two more rigorous standards involving the question of revisionism: one is the internationalization of a preference for "a radical redistribution of material power in the international system"; and the other is acting toward "realizing such a redistribution of power" — through military means, if necessary.²⁹ Having operationalized the indicators, Johnson concludes that, although not in absolute terms since "the quality and quantity of revisionism in a state's policy are not static properties," China has come to be more accommodative of and participative in international institutional arrangements "than ever before."³⁰

Contrary to Johnston's attempt to measure state behavior, Ronald L. Tammen and Jacek Kugler identified five material indicators to gauge

²⁸Jonathan M. DiCicco and Jack S. Levy, "Power Shifts and Problems Shifts: The Evolution of the Power Transition Research Program," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (1999), pp. 675–704; Douglas Lemke, *Regions of War and Peace* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²⁹Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?," *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Spring, 2003), p. 11.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 49.

China's satisfaction with the U.S.-led international system. The five units include the existence of territorial disputes, military buildup, participation in international and regional institutions, existence of rivalry and disputes between the two ideological systems, and the existence of sustained and "binding patterns of trade and cooperation" between the two sides.³¹ They found that the unipolar strength of the United States, as was demonstrated in the First Gulf War in 1991, created a strong sense of power imbalance between China and the United States, which may be a short-term window of opportunity to place China-U.S. relations on a more stable ground.

Some other analysts assume that domestic challenges in China such as those related to economy and environment would generate internal dissatisfaction and eventually boil over to influence the country's external behavior. Thus, they maintain that only an internally satisfied China would generate conditions for external satisfaction.³² Nevertheless, most analyses have taken the externally-imposed factors (Taiwan and the question of national unification being the recurring case in most literature) as the key determinants for state satisfaction. For instance, according to Breslin, even though China is a dissatisfied great power, it is still a responsible one largely due to the fact that its economic development needs such a favorable environment in which only participation in and compliance with the multitude of regimes such as the Bretton Woods, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) would make it possible.³³ Thus, even if China demands some reforms in international institutions in the future, those would mostly be limited to economics and not require systemic alterations.

³¹Ronald L. Tammen and Jacek Kugler, "Power Transition and China-US Conflicts," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Summer 2006), pp. 35–55.

³²Goldstein, "Power Transitions, Institutions, and China's Rise in East Asia: Theoretical Expectations and Evidence," pp. 639–682.

³³Shaun Breslin, "China's Emerging Global Role: Dissatisfied Responsible Great Power," *Politics*, Vol. 30, No. S1 (November 2010), pp. 52–62.

As with those in academia who question China's future world system orientation,³⁴ policy-makers in the United States, too, have taken a somewhat more pessimist turn over the past two decades or so. As the perceptions shift, China is seen as an increasingly dissatisfied growing power nurturing hard revisionist or soft reformist strategies. With the rise of the skeptical school, the early liberal views of China being socialized into the U.S.-dominated international norms and regulations have gradually lost ground, while pessimist views have found stronger representation in

China is determined to seek a model that best suits its needs rather than follow the path advertised by the West.

various U.S. administrations. In terms of policy response, whereas each government has administered different sets of packages, their content remains more or less similar, increasingly involving strategies such as multi-modal engagement, indirect confrontation, and containment. Especially over the last decade, faith in China's political, economic and cultural socialization within the U.S.-led global order has come to a halt as China demonstrates a less ideological posture that refrains from subscribing to absolutist or determinist meta-narratives of governance discourse. In other words, China's realism has enabled it to pragmatically seek a model that is most suitable to the realities and needs of the country, rather than strictly follow a predetermined ideological route as advertised by the West. When, in 2013, Beijing took another significant step and announced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) without directly challenging any existing global institutions and regimes, the remaining

³⁴The literature on China's dissatisfaction abounds, reflecting realist, liberal, and constructivist views. See, for example, Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998); Michael D. Swaine and Ashley J. Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past, Present, and Future* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2000), pp. 197–229; David Shambaugh, "Sino-American Strategic Relations: From Partners to Competitors," *Survival*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Spring 2000); Steven W. Mosher, *Hegemon: China's Plan to Dominate Asia and the World* (San Francisco, Calif.: Encounter Books, 2000); John J. Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History*, No. 105 (2006), pp. 160–162; and Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

trust in the country's interest in building itself into a form long envisioned by the U.S. power elite practically dissipated, paving the way for more hardline ideas to become mainstream in U.S. politics.³⁵

Hegemonic Dissatisfaction and Its Consequences

It is clear that research on the prospects for and implications of power transition between the hegemon and the challenger has focused on China as a potentially dissatisfied contender that seeks a different kind of international system in place of the existing one. Yet, as opposed to what has been predicted, China has so far neither attempted to overthrow the existing international regimes, demanded radical restructuring, nor directly confronted the sole hegemon. To the contrary, China's participation in and contribution to international institutions has increased both qualitatively and quantitatively.³⁶ The U.S. approach to global governance, on the other hand, has in recent years shifted considerably, indicating a growing dissatisfaction with a number of international arrangements. This inherent dilemma poses a particular challenge for the long-held assumptions that have come to take the dominant power's overall satisfaction for granted, which requires an alternative outlook on one of the primary concepts in the literature.

For brevity and clarity, we divide the causes for the growing dissatisfaction in the United States toward the international system into two main categories as internally and externally-induced.³⁷ Internally, we observe that domestic politics in the U.S. has become deeply fractured and antagonistic. Leadership style, which is both the cause for and outcome of

³⁵Joel Gehrke, "State Department Preparing for Clash of Civilizations with China," *Washington Examiner*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/state-department-preparing-for-clash-of-civilizations-with-china>.

³⁶Xie Zhihai, "The Rise of China and Its Growing Role in International Organizations," *ICCS Journal of Modern Chinese Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2011), pp. 85–96; Yang Na, "Fortieth Anniversary of Reform and Opening-Up: The Features and Enlightenment of China's Participation in Global Governance," *Teaching and Research*, Vol. 52, No. 8 (2018), pp. 39–49; and James F. Paradise, "The Role of Parallel Institutions in China's Growing Participation in Global Economic Governance," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2016), pp. 149–175.

³⁷It should be noted that the elements within the two categories are not independent but mutually inclusive, influencing each other in various combinations and at varying degrees.

frustration, stands out as a critical factor in this deterioration of the country's domestic political life.³⁸ Although these features are not entirely alien to the political tradition in the United States, what is interesting is that, aside from the general constituency, a sizeable portion of the political and business elites seem to be sharing similar characteristics and sentiments.³⁹ Furthermore, domestic political conditions effectively influence the country's foreign policy discourse in which popular or interest group dissatisfaction translates quickly into state dissatisfaction. In some cases, internally informed economic, political, and social dissatisfaction is transferred onto external targets in an effort to deflect the frustration that might have otherwise been directed at the political upper class. Indeed, the ruling elite in the United States appears to have often succeeded in channeling the existing popular discontent onto external factors — countries such as China, and institutions such as the WTO.

The second internal factor that reinforces U.S. dissatisfaction is the perception of the rise of China. It is possible, in this regard, to detect a strong reaction to the shifts in national power and capabilities (no matter how minute or relative they might be) among the U.S. elite and the general population. The United States as a state actor appears to be less able to adapt to the changing internal and external environment caused by a multitude of historical factors, including the rise of China. In contrast, China, as a developing country that has experienced profound socioeconomic changes in a relatively short span of time, has been more successful in accommodating itself to new conditions and responding to emerging challenges without showing signs of strategic frustration. Thus, China's international discourse has been positive, constructive, and conciliatory — as has been

The U.S. tends to blame other countries and globalization for the issues that cause domestic popular discontent.

³⁸Douglas Kellner, "Donald Trump as Authoritarian Populist: A Frommian Analysis," in Jeremiah Morelock, ed., *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2018), pp. 71–82.

³⁹Alan Ware, "The United States: Populism as Political Strategy," in Yves Mény and Yves Surel, eds., *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 101–119.

observed in various instances, such as the Korean Peninsula peace process, the Iranian nuclear deal, and the disputes in the South and East China Seas. The United States, on the other hand, responds to the evolving international circumstances (including, among others, its perception of China's rise) in a less composed fashion, which is reflected in its often negative, pessimistic, and alarming domestic and foreign policy discourse.

Externally, U.S. dissatisfaction emanates, in large part, from new international realities in which developing countries, China included, appear to be benefiting from the existing arrangements (especially those related to economic, political, and cultural globalization) that used to be primarily beneficial to the United States. For example, functioning under the guidelines of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)/WTO regime, developing countries — especially those manufacturing-driven, export-oriented East Asian states — have seen their trade grow exponentially, resulting in a positive balance of payments, while the United States has over time amassed the highest external debt in the world. Grievances against the existing international system are further aggravated by a popular sentiment that the United States is being treated unfairly in global institutions which favor developing countries in the event of a dispute.⁴⁰ Thus, frustrated efforts to achieve desired outcomes within the framework of an international regime such as the WTO or the International Court of Justice (ICJ) have generated widespread discontent toward those institutions and provoked counteraction.⁴¹

Furthermore, on the political and cultural front, globalization has enabled once-sidelined voices and ideas to emerge and spread. In this respect, the advent of some indigenous ideas of governance led by China and other developing countries as viable alternatives to the dominant Western narrative has created strong negative reaction in the United States, which is historically accustomed to propagating a set of well-articulated (and often

⁴⁰Guo Liqin, "[Exclusive] Win in US Anti-Subsidy Tussle Leaves China Free to Retaliate, WTO Says," *Yicai Global*, July 18, 2019, <https://www.yicaiglobal.com/news/exclusive-win-in-us-anti-subsidy-tussle-leaves-china-free-to-retaliate-wto-says>; and "USTR Criticizes WTO Appellate Ruling that Hands Victory to China," Reuters, July 16, 2019, <https://news.yahoo.com/ustr-criticizes-wto-appellate-ruling-154704941.html>.

⁴¹Natasha Turak, "US Rejects International Court of Justice Ruling on Iran, Continuing Its Isolationist Charge," CNBC, October 5, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/10/05/us-rejects-international-court-of-justice-ruling-on-iran-continuing-its-isolationist-charge.html>.

self-aggrandizing) political and economic ideas.⁴² While China has frequently refrained from imposing its model of governance on others,⁴³ the United States nonetheless finds it intolerable that China follows an alternative model that might be attractive in the developing world, thereby creating a global marketplace of ideas and undermining the U.S. monopoly over the meta-narrative of a universal historical trajectory for all mankind.⁴⁴ What is more unacceptable and frustrating for the United States, in this respect, has been the introduction of a number of regional/global institutions under the umbrella of the BRI for those new ideas to be put into practice. As the global appeal of the new institutions grows, U.S. dissatisfaction grows as well, often leading to abject hostility.⁴⁵ Thus, being the largest developing country and the second largest economy in the world, China has found itself on the receiving end of U.S. dissatisfaction.⁴⁶

The U.S. is hostile
to China's BRI
because it breeds
many new ideas and
institutions.

⁴²Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); and Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001).

⁴³Xu Hailin, "Unlike US, China Never Seeks to be World Leader," *Global Times*, July 28, 2019, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1159492.shtml>.

⁴⁴Chan Lai-Ha, Pak K. Lee, and Gerald Chan, "Rethinking Global Governance: A China Model in the Making?," *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2008), pp. 3–19; William H. Overholt, "Is the China Model a Threat?," *East Asia Forum*, July 7, 2019, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/07/07/is-the-china-model-a-threat/>; and G. John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 1 (January/February 2008), pp. 23–37.

⁴⁵"China's 'One Belt, One Road' is Threat to US in Latin America-US Commander," *Sputnik News*, February 17, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/business/419080-china-initiative-threat-us/>.

⁴⁶An interesting display of this dissatisfaction has been the recent introduction of new concepts by the U.S. academic and policy circles into the global discourse, such as fair trade (as opposed to free trade), sharp power (as opposed to soft power), and debt trap (as opposed to foreign direct investment). See, Joseph S. Nye, "How Sharp Power Threatens Soft Power," *Foreign Affairs*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-01-24/how-sharp-power-threatens-soft-power>; and "Is the BRI Debt Trap Real?," *The ASEAN Post*, December 11, 2018, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/bri-debt-trap-real>.

As for the manifestations of U.S. dissatisfaction at the global level, it is possible to identify a number of reactions, including unconventional rhetoric in diplomacy, a display of vulnerability to external elements, withdrawal from international institutions and agreements, and attempts to undermine them. A prominent insignia of the Trump administration has been the unusual anti-globalist rhetoric on issues that are deemed to be hurting the U.S. national interests. Thus, from international trade regimes to currency valuation, and from cybersecurity to climate change, and to non-proliferation, the United States has frequently moved outside the established conventions of diplomatic discourse in favor of a more simplified, slogan-like language. Although the discourse has been largely built on the central theme of "America First" and a nostalgia for past preeminence, it also conveys negative messages, invoking anger, frustration, vulnerability, and violation.⁴⁷

The second display of hegemonic dissatisfaction with the international status quo is withdrawal and undermining.⁴⁸ For example, in the past few years, the United States has denigrated and pulled out of a number of agreements, treaties, and conventions.⁴⁹ The fundamental motivations for the United States to withdraw from such global governance mechanisms are: (1)

⁴⁷Vulnerability, in this respect, is a theme that often surfaces in U.S. political discourse and serves as a basis for state action. A noteworthy example is the economic sanctions placed on a number of Chinese technology companies that are deemed to be endangering U.S. national security and aggravating the country's many vulnerabilities in infrastructure such as telecommunication, transportation, and energy. See, for example, "Spy Trains? US Senators Demand Washington Metro Refuse Deal With Chinese Company," *Sputnik News*, January 21, 2019, <https://sputniknews.com/business/201901211071660762-washington-subway-chinese-contract-letter/>; and Silvia Amaro and Hadley Gamble, "US Government Is 'Exceptionally Vulnerable' to Cyberattacks, Security Expert Says," *CNBC*, February 17, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/17/us-government-is-exceptionally-vulnerable-to-cyber-attacks-security-expert-says.html>.

⁴⁸Wen Yao, "Understanding China's Rise: Overcoming the Myth of 'Revision/Status Quo' Dichotomy [理解中国崛起: 走出 '修正——现状'二分法的迷思]," *Foreign Affairs Review*, No. 5 (2017), p. 36.

⁴⁹"U.S. Withdraws from International Accords, Says U.N. World Court 'Politicized,'" *Reuters*, October 4, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-diplomacy-treaty-idUSKCN1MD2CP>.

to avoid the perceived unfair treatment within those mechanisms (e.g., withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP, North America Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, and the Paris Accord on Climate Change); (2) to defend national interests (e.g., withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, or INF); (3) to protest against the biased and flawed structure of some international institutions (e.g., withdrawal from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO, and the UN Human Rights Council); and (4) to share the obligations and costs of the global public goods it provides (e.g., military alliances in Asia and Europe).⁵⁰ Furthermore, in an effort to weaken the international institutions that create dissatisfaction, the United States has threatened to reduce financial and administrative support.⁵¹ As some studies suggest, these reactions are not simply momentary exhibitions of nationalist or isolationist sentiment, but specific geopolitical calculations in the face of multiple geopolitical and geo-economic challenges.⁵²

Dissatisfied Hegemon vs. Satisfied Challenger

As opposed to the pessimistic and skeptical predictions, since the end of the Cold War, China has been content with and supportive of the international order.⁵³ Beijing has shown itself to be able to survive and thrive within the global system, recognizing that its development has both benefited from the

⁵⁰Shen Yamei, "Trump's 'America First' Policy: Aspirations and Restrictions [特朗普 '美国优先' 的诉求与制约]," *International Studies*, No. 2 (2018), pp. 96; and Pan Yaling, *American Political Culture Transformation and Diplomatic Strategy Adjustment* [美国政治文化转型与外交战略调整] (Shanghai: Fudan University Publishing House, 2018), p. 225.

⁵¹Mark Hensch, "Trump Order to Target UN, Other Global Organizations: Report," *The Hill*, January 25, 2017, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/un-treaties/316148-trump-order-to-target-un-other-global-orgs-report>.

⁵²Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas, "Hello, Goodbye: When Do States Withdraw From International Organizations?," *Review of International Organizations*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (June 2019), pp. 335–366.

⁵³Yu Zhenyan, "The Power Transition Theory and Sino-U.S. Relations [权力转移理论与中美关系]," *International Relations Studies*, No. 2 (2018), p. 116.

existing international arrangements and contributed to global stability and prosperity.⁵⁴ China has aligned its economic interests with the prevailing arrangements, actively promoting multilateralism by supporting traditional institutions and introducing complementary ones such as the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Washington, on the other hand, has grown increasingly dissatisfied with the global status quo because it believes others are deriving huge benefits from it while the strategic gains to the U.S. are diminishing. The contrast between U.S. dissatisfaction and Chinese satisfaction may create geopolitical and economic implications at the bilateral, regional, and global levels.

Bilaterally, first and foremost, U.S. dissatisfaction against the backdrop of a rising China has impacted China-U.S. relations in trade, technology, and security, which is perhaps best embodied in the trade war launched by the Trump administration. Although U.S. grievances against the unbalanced structure of its bilateral trade are not singularly aimed at China, Beijing is still a prime target of the U.S.' trade-related punitive measures, imposing sanctions on a number of Chinese-based companies specialized in advanced technologies, such as telecommunications, artificial intelligence, and renewable energy, in an attempt to disrupt their production chain. Other than trade, U.S. dissatisfaction has also intensified institutional rivalry. The BRI has become the focal point of a U.S. "smear" campaign in which this regional integration project is portrayed as a frontal challenge to established developmental institutions.

As a dissatisfied
hegemon, the U.S.
may cause severe
damage to the world
order and economic
well-being.

At the regional level, U.S. dissatisfaction entails both political and economic implications. The United States has tried to force its regional allies to take its side and adopt a more explicit position against China on various issues such as the Taiwan question, South China Sea disputes, and cooperation in critical technologies and industries. It has worked to squeeze the room for strategic

⁵⁴Tim Worstall, "China's Only 15% of the Global Economy but Contributes 25–30% of Global Growth," *Forbes*, October 30, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2016/10/30/chinas-only-15-of-the-global-economy-but-contributes-25-30-of-global-growth/#4f30bf9a7b76>.

maneuver that gives small and medium states certain flexibility to pursue national interests without committing themselves to any particular camp, obliging them to pick a side. It is obvious that such an absolutist approach has the potential to disturb the regional economic and security structure and lead to new tensions in East Asia and beyond.⁵⁵

Finally, at the global level, U.S. dissatisfaction places significant pressure on the global governance mechanisms, challenging the viability and sustainability of various key regimes in such areas as trade, climate change, nuclear non-proliferation, and human rights. Such abrupt decisions to withdraw from international agreements and default on financial commitments have certainly undermined the post-World War II order and its prime institutions, such as the United Nations, WTO, and the ICJ. Also, given that the ongoing trade war is not limited to China in its scope, it has the potential to endanger the entire global economy and darken the prospects for economic growth in developing countries. This may eventually create resentment toward the United States, impairing its "benign hegemon" image. U.S. dissatisfaction toward China and desire to curb the rising contender's development is somewhat anticipated. What seems out of place in the natural order of things, however, is the fact that the U.S. resentment extends beyond China and is directed at the international system per se. This is one of the major reasons why even some steadfast U.S. allies, which otherwise would not object to Washington's containment and encirclement strategies toward China, find it difficult to endorse a policy that endangers their own economic and security prospects.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Antoine Berthou, Caroline Jarret, Daniele Siena, and Urszula Szczerbowicz, "The Macroeconomic Implications of a Global Trade War," *VOX CEPR Policy Portal*, February 8, 2019, <https://voxeu.org/article/macroeconomic-implications-global-trade-war>; and Eewida Maulia, "East Asia Suffers Most from Trade War, While Europe Gains: UN," *Nikkei*, February 05, 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Trade-war/East-Asia-suffers-most-from-trade-war-while-Europe-gains-UN>.

⁵⁶ "EU to Hit US With 35 Billion-Euro Duties If US Tariffs Cars, Says Trade Chief," *Sputnik News*, July 24, 2019, <https://sputniknews.com/world/201907241076338204-eu-to-hit-us-with-35-billion-euro-duties-if-us-tariffs-cars-says-trade-chief-/>; and Patrick Smyth, "EU Determined to Preserve Iran Nuclear Deal After US Pulls Out," *Irish Times*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/middle-east/eu-determined-to-preserve-iran-nuclear-deal-after-us-pulls-out-1.3488449>.

The phenomenon of hegemonic dissatisfaction vs. rising power satisfaction presents a particular dilemma: the United States cannot effectively hinder China's development without harming the established international arrangements, since China is deeply embedded in the global regime in all aspects of governance (economic, political, and cultural).⁵⁷ Thus, the United States will encounter difficulties in re-molding a new reality akin to the Cold War, because, first, it does not command similar political and economic advantages as it did during the Cold War, and, second, China is anything but a Soviet Union in terms of its global engagement, relevance, and significance. For China, the task is monumental but does not involve any contradiction: Beijing will continue on its path of sustained economic and political development, and continue to further strengthen global mechanisms by participating in them actively and, where necessary, introducing new inclusive institutions complementary to the existing ones. A new approach to key global questions under a reconfigured analytical light is needed — an approach that does not appeal to the deterministic duality of a satisfied hegemon and dissatisfied contender, as it no longer reflects the new realities.

Conclusion

U.S. dissatisfaction as a hegemon is attributable to both internal and external factors. These factors operate in a mutually inclusive way, reinforcing each other and creating a cycle. Indeed, instances of frustration with some international arrangements at the state and societal levels have been seen in much of U.S. history, such as the trade conflicts in the 1970s and 1980s.⁵⁸ However, current U.S. dissatisfaction appears to be potentially more consequential since it takes place against the backdrop of a rising contender that is both well-integrated into almost all existing international regimes and has demonstrated its capacity to actively introduce alternative sets of theoretical ideas and practical mechanisms for global governance, rather than passively subscribe to the U.S.-led political and economic

⁵⁷Zhou Jinghao, "Does China's Rise Threaten the United States?," *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2008), pp. 171–182.

⁵⁸Robert E. Litan, "The 'Globalization' Challenge: The U.S. Role in Shaping World Trade and Investment," *Brookings Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (April 2000), pp. 35–37.

meta-narratives. The current hegemonic dissatisfaction with the satisfied rising power endangers the very ideological core of a number of post-WWII institutions and is potentially more consequential.

U.S. discontent with the international system generates an intriguing contrast to China's satisfaction and growing optimism, as reflected in the country's new round of reform and opening up, introduction of new inclusive global ideas and institutions, and lack of dramatic increase in defense spending.⁵⁹ Unlike what has been predicted in the existing scholarly studies, China has not transformed itself into a frustrated and angry great power, threatening the global order and thereby creating systemic instability. On the contrary, it has emerged as a calm and responsible major power, positioning itself as one of the centers of stability in the international political and economic systems. It may as well be argued that U.S. dissatisfaction results in part from China's satisfaction, which is reflected in the two countries' very different reactions to various external stimulus. In most instances, even in case of a major disagreement, Beijing seeks constructive engagement (e.g., South China Sea disputes), whereas the United States uncharacteristically demonstrates hostility to the regime that generates disagreement by trying to undermine it (e.g., the Iran nuclear agreement).

It is anticipated that the hegemonic frustration will grow stronger if the United States feels its many efforts — to devise an effective strategy to counter China and guarantee more favorable conditions for itself without hurting its alliance system and the longstanding global arrangements — do not produce the desired outcome. If the discontentment continues to mount, individuals that represent fringe ideologies will likely assume greater control over the state and its apparatus such as foreign relations and defense,⁶⁰ producing a new class of political elite who tend to stress culture and ideology in absolute terms to magnify differences and promote a sense

⁵⁹"China's Defense Expenditure Reasonable, Appropriate: White Paper," Xinhua News, July 24, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253501.htm.

⁶⁰Jerry Harris, Carl Davidson, Bill Fletcher, and Paul Harris, "Trump and American Fascism," *International Critical Thought*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (2017), pp. 476–492; Sophia Moskalenko, "Mass Radicalization in the USA: We are More Radical than Before. Why?," *Psychology Today*, December 05, 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/friction/201812/mass-radicalization-in-the-usa>; and "The Steady Radicalization of American Politics," *TSG Intel-Brief*, June 16, 2017, <http://www.soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-steady-radicalization-of-american-politics/>.

of economic and political crisis worldwide, involving multiple theaters such as the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, the Persian Gulf and Latin America. The U.S. hegemon, in the final analysis, may seek to create a situation in which China does indeed become dissatisfied and act as a defiant great power.

Deterministic postulations in international relations help analyze agent behavior and make prediction. Theories on power transition, in this respect, have been particularly instrumental for system-level studies. In this paper, we discovered that an analysis in which the roles in the traditional dissatisfied-satisfied dyad are swapped opens up new pathways in the comprehension of contemporary dynamics of China-U.S. major power relations. The key question, then, is whether the same power transition postulations of systemic conflict and war on the premise of a dissatisfied challenger and satisfied hegemon would hold against the empirical reality of a dissatisfied hegemon and satisfied challenger. Would the dissatisfied dominant state be able to convince its partners to assist in the containment and war efforts against a satisfied rising state? How would the rising challenger be able to convince the international community at large of its good intentions and proactively prevent a global governance crisis? And, other than having a dissatisfied hegemon and satisfied challenger, what would be the conditions to ensure a warless transition of power? Clearly, these questions deserve further analysis. In this study, we attempt to draw a general categorization of the causes and potential implications of U.S. dissatisfaction toward the international order against the backdrop of the rise of China as a satisfied challenger. The indicators and potential outcomes of the phenomenon under study are by no means exhaustive. This paper, in this respect, represents an introductory effort on the subject matter which can be further explored under more rigorous conceptualization and testing.