

# The United States and the Status Quo: Is Hegemonic Satisfaction Innate?

Written by Tom Barber

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TOM BARBER, NOV 26 2017

Considering the vicissitudinal character of the current U.S. Administration, the plethora of academic analyses it has elicited is hardly surprising. Irrespective of the numerous issues already and potentially affected by Trump; that his appointment exemplifies the erosion of the liberal world order has become a discernible leitmotif. What is less obvious however, is why? 'Make America great again' was a simple and effective rallying call that mobilised Trump's populist constituency – yet its inferred articulation of dissatisfaction exposes incongruities within Organski's Power Transition Theory (hereafter PTT).[1] If one accepts the precepts of PTT, the dominant state atop the international power hierarchy – i.e. the United States of America – should, by definition, be satisfied. U.S. dissatisfaction *per se* is not a new phenomenon – but it has previously pertained to ancillary elements or particular incidents occurring within the parameters of the extant order, rather than with the actual order itself. An aggregate of indicators suggests that contemporary U.S. dissatisfaction, as evinced by Trump's election and his administration's rhetoric and action, is unprecedented in its magnitude. The significance of this is twofold; theoretically, it exposes lacunae within the PTT literature that assumes hegemonic satisfaction as innate; and practically, it poses novel questions regarding the potential malleability of the extant liberal global order, absent a staunch incumbent defender.

This paper is divided into four sections, the first of which comprises a literature review of PTT and its progenies, with emphasis on the function and measurement of state satisfaction. The second part is a critique of the literature's assumptions and appraisal of satisfaction, and an elucidation of this paper's hypothesis. In the third section, U.S. satisfaction is analysed in three spheres, namely globalised trade, security architecture, and institutional participation and international norm adherence. The theoretical implications of hegemonic dissatisfaction, and the practical implications of U.S. dissatisfaction are then analysed in the fourth section.

Within the wider International Relations discipline, PTT has carved out an appreciable and conspicuous niche since it was first articulated by A. F. K. Organski in 1958. Conceptually, the lineage of PTT can be traced back to the fifth century BC. Robert Gilpin's Theory of Hegemonic War credits Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War as the forebear of international relations theories whose logic stems from differential and dynamic state power distributions.[2] Whereas the majority of wars are said to result from escalation in a self-help international milieu, i.e. "one thing leads to another until war is the consequence";[3] wars involving actual and aspiring hegemonic powers, according to Thucydides, have implications for both the structure and the leadership of the international system.[4] Underpinning Gilpin's Theory of Hegemonic War is an "incompatibility between crucial elements of the existing international system[,] and the changing distribution of power among the states within the system".[5] Viewed through a classical realist lens that holds pessimistic assumptions of human nature and motivation, and that ascribes significance to structural dynamics; the resultant disequilibrium inexorably produces war. In this sense, while the Theory of Hegemonic War is explanatory; it lacks predictive utility given the homogeneity of its fatalistic conclusions.[6]

Although it predates Gilpin's theory, Organski's PTT represents a refinement of the wider, somewhat deterministic Thucydidean perspective; clearly conveying the endogenous origins of changing power distributions, and introducing the concept of state satisfaction to the literature. Borne from a critique of the contemporary political orthodoxy, PTT's act of "academic heresy"[7] was to essentially invert the balance-of-power logic of stability – specifically, the

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correspondence of parity with peace and asymmetry with war. Hence, while PTT and balance-of-power share select “basic realist assumptions”, as DiCicco and Levy argue, they nonetheless “generate mutually contradictory propositions”[8] on the relationship between concentrations of power and systemic stability. Organski’s original theory rests upon two core tenets: firstly, that the relative power distribution among states is in constant flux, with intersecting trajectories at the apex of the international hierarchy periodically eliciting power transitions; and secondly, that the level of an ascendant states’ dissatisfaction with the status quo will determine if that transition occurs peacefully or otherwise.[9] In other words, parity is the prerequisite, and dissatisfaction the determinant of war.[10]

As is the case with quantifying any subjective trait, empirical measurements of dissatisfaction are problematic.[11] Organski initially advocated 1) the lack of an alliance with the dominant power; and 2) the absence of input in creating the existing order, as apposite indicators of a given state’s dissatisfaction.[12] Although heuristic, such qualifications were nevertheless broad and underdeveloped; serving a preliminary rather than a definitive purpose.[13] Acknowledging this inchoateness, Organski’s invitation for further academic refinement of the nascent PTT framework has led to substantive and robust scholarship.[14] Ensuing attempts to conceptualise and operationalise state satisfaction have focused on various aspects of state agency; some prominent examples being military build-ups, alliance portfolio concurrence, economic and security coordination, domestic structures, and trust.[15] As Chan astutely observes, “[although none is individually perfect, one can imagine an ensemble of indicators *attempting* to gauge a state’s satisfaction with its status in the international system”.[16] Yet despite this growing body of work, a uniform definition of state satisfaction as it pertains to PTT has yet to emerge.

Whether owing to Organski’s initial conceptual ambiguity, or the tendency for scholars to employ satisfaction as an independent variable, or both;[17] it remains “underdeveloped from a theoretical, conceptual and methodological [standpoint]”, [18] and requires further refinement.[19] The most obvious indication of this is the array of sometimes divergent measurements of satisfaction,[20] and the tendency for scholars to ascribe dichotomy to it.[21] These factors will be touched upon in this paper, but more detailed analyses are beyond its scope, and have been undertaken elsewhere.[22] The focus here is on the much less discussed, almost unanimous – but ultimately erroneous – assumption of dominant state satisfaction.

A significant proportion of the indicators used by scholars to determine satisfaction are comparative to the hegemon, reflecting an underlying “*a priori* stipulation”[23] that the dominant state is, by definition, satisfied. Indeed, PTT explicitly makes such an assertion.[24] Should not all states’ satisfaction – including that of the dominant state – be empirically measured rather than asserted or assumed?[25] Steve Chan adroitly illuminates this point using offensive realism and its logic of power maximisation – if every state is offensively minded and constantly seeking relative power gains, why would the dominant state arbitrarily be satisfied with the status quo?[26] Similarly extrapolating from PTT logic, should not the “reasoning that gaining more power does not necessarily make a rising state more satisfied ... also be equally applicable to a dominant power”?[27] Even from a purely non-theoretical perspective, would epistemological integrity not be better served through enquiry rather than facile assertion? By exempting dominant state satisfaction from scrutiny, PTT betrays an inconsistency that limits its theoretical accuracy and, in turn, its analytical utility.[28]

Such shortfalls become patent when seeking to determine the satisfaction of the United States. Indicators whose purchase relies on comparison – such as alliance portfolio or domestic policy similarity – become redundant when the benchmark and assessed state are indistinguishable. Under these conditions, dominant state satisfaction results simply because it is the only possible outcome. A caveat is therefore appropriate, in that these findings will not be translatable to other studies that exclusively utilise indicators of satisfaction that are comparative to the dominant state. Rather than a weakness however, this impediment to academic interchangeability corroborates the core argument presented here; that PTT is encumbered by assumptive theoretical limitations concerning the dominant state. This paper does not claim to be a comprehensive study of the United States’ dissatisfaction, much less a detailed framework of how to qualify or quantify it. Rather, the following is a preliminary foray intended to provoke further debate by challenging the theoretical assumptions of satisfaction so prevalent within the PTT literature, and exploring the ensuing practical implications.

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The indicators of U.S. satisfaction used in this study – namely globalised trade, security architecture, and international norm adherence and institutional participation – can be justified on two grounds. Firstly, they cast a wide net over the International Relations paradigmatic field; with security architecture, globalised trade and institutional participation, and norm adherence respectively reflecting the primary concerns of broader realist, liberalist and constructivist schools. This breadth helps to paint a more comprehensive picture, whilst mitigating against any biases that could arise from taking a narrower approach. Secondly, that these aspects of state agency can be indicative of satisfaction is not under dispute – rather, it is the assumption of hegemonic satisfaction, and the subsequent tendency toward comparative analyses with the dominant state that is critiqued here. Conflation of the dominant state with the status quo can incorrectly construe bilateral differences as systemic challenges.[29] Accordingly, the justifications used by other scholars focusing on these areas apply, albeit tweaked to a temporally contrastive or prevailing systemic comparative, rather than purely state-to-state comparative logic. Put another way, by evaluating a state's contemporary agency against the predominating norms of the extant order, as well as its own past behaviour – rather than merely against one predetermined state – one can discern satisfaction more accurately. With that in mind, the next section will gauge current U.S. dissatisfaction.

Before analysing the actions and rhetoric coming out of the White House since Trump's inauguration, his ascension is in itself worthy of examination. Indeed, Trump's election is "less a cause than a consequence"[30] of American dissatisfaction; reflecting the "erosion of the legitimacy of political elites, representative institutions and the globalist orientation that has long dominated U.S. politics".[31] Mead encapsulates this phenomenon by contrasting presidential philosophies; with the resurgence of Jacksonian parochialism challenging the hitherto orthodox Hamiltonian liberal economic, and Wilsonian values-driven approach to U.S. global order-building.[32] Whether exaggerated or not,[33] the narrative of unfettered globalisation negatively impacting the American socioeconomic model – specifically through the disproportionate distribution of its benefits, and the decline of manufacturing in the 'rust belt' – has become conventional discourse.[34] Populism thrives on dissatisfaction,[35] and it was this domestic discontent that candidate Trump so effectively exploited and appropriated.[36] Regardless of whether or not the President can actually address these concerns,[37] the fact he was elected on a platform to do so reveals a profound dissatisfaction emanating from the world's preeminent power. While nebulous at a broader level, this sentiment can be broken down into less abstract constituents; namely globalised trade, security architecture, institutional participation and adherence to international norms.

An integral component of the extant global order – indeed, one could argue its ballast – has been international liberalised trade.[38] Far from being coincidental, global economic integration has pervaded precisely because of the United States' deliberate post-war role in its defence, institutionalisation, and advancement.[39] Moreover, as Ikenberry contends, this U.S.-built economic order has developed a self-reproducing quality that conceivably renders American leadership dispensable.[40] The flipside to this argument is that the supposed self-sufficiency of the globalised trade regime can undermine the accrual of disproportional benefits it was assumed to afford its initial benefactor in Washington, if it no longer exerts decisive influence. While the merits of such an argument are debateable (and beyond the scope of this essay), what is germane is the *perception* of unfairness and the sense of grievance it engenders amongst Americans.[41]

Several examples reveal the Trump Administration's comprehensive dissatisfaction with international liberalised trade. On the more lurid end of the spectrum, candidate Trump described China's trade relations with the United States as rape;[42] similarly, during his inauguration speech the President "portrayed U.S. trade policy as a form of political violence [perpetrated] against the American people".[43] In both cases his solution was economic nationalism; an archaic strategy that would likely invite reciprocity, and risk inflicting irreparable damage on the global economy.[44] In terms of White House appointees, both the United States Trade Representative, Robert Lighthizer, and the Director of the National Trade Council, Peter Navarro, are vocal protectionists that advocate a zero-sum approach to trade – particularly with respect to China.[45] Trump's withdrawal of the U.S. from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, absent any analogous replacement, signifies the emergent anti-multilateralist approach to trade within the Administration.[46] Each of these examples controvert the bipartisan U.S. consensus that has endured for decades; that is, the positive-sum logic of the theory of comparative advantage that associates geopolitical stability with economic interdependence.[47] Incipient U.S. mercantilism,[48] alongside an apparent embrace of protectionism over neoliberal market economics, and the inclination toward bilateral trade agreements over their

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multilateral equivalent, portends a clear break in U.S. trade policy and strategy.[49] If dissatisfied states seek “to change the rules to structure the system in a way that gives them greater advantages”,[50] then the contemporary United States is dissatisfied.

Another important area to consider in determining U.S. dissatisfaction is security architecture. Whilst alliance portfolio correspondence – a recurrent indicator used within the PTT literature – cannot be applied to the dominant state, elements of its logic nonetheless remain pertinent. The purpose of such comparisons is to determine a given state’s congruity – or lack thereof – with the prevailing security architecture of the day. The more a state’s alliances converge with those of the dominant power, the higher the degree of complicity they are likely to evince in upholding the extant order.[51] This suggests a greater amount of satisfaction with an international system that they are willing to reinforce.[52] Without another hegemon for comparison, the United States contemporary and previous approaches to its own alliances can be compared and contrasted using the same logic.

Since the end of the Second World War, the United States, via its global alliance network, has underpinned global stability through the provision of public security goods.[53] While it has incurred a disproportionately high cost, successive administrations have maintained the U.S. role because they have adjudged it to confer correspondingly high benefits. Allies have periodically been encouraged to assume a greater burden,[54] however – and despite the ostensible *raison d’être* of several treaties receding with the conclusion of the Cold War – sustained investment in globalised American engagement was the consensus amongst U.S. policymakers. Until now.[55] Trump’s conception of U.S. alliances downplays the benefits side of the ledger while accentuating the cost; free-riding allies who practice “‘exploitation’ of the great by the small”[56] must “pay up”. [57] The President’s derision of NATO as obsolete (and his failure to clarify comments implying a conditional interpretation of Article 5 and its provision of collective defence),[58] his heated phone exchange with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and subsequent critical tweet related to an already established refugee resettlement agreement, and his suggestion that Tokyo and Seoul procure nuclear weapons if they are unprepared to foot a larger alliance security bill; all point to an unprecedented transactional reframing of U.S. alliance commitments as contingent and negotiable. If one interprets the consistent support Washington had provided its post-war international alliance system as representative of U.S. satisfaction, then the present disruption implies an attitudinal inversion. In this sense, ‘America First’ is not just empty rhetoric – it espouses a neo-Jacksonian philosophy of narrow interests that is at odds with the erstwhile globalist orthodoxy of U.S. alliance management,[60] and one that is symptomatic of dissatisfaction.

Such an inclination is likewise evident in the Administration’s approach to international norms and institutions. “Institutions matter”, Ikenberry asserts, because they

are tools of states and mechanisms that shape the political formations that sit atop the international distribution of state power. Institutions can alter the way in which power is expressed, security dilemmas are manifest, and the hierarchy of order is constructed and maintained.[61]

Similarly, international norms derive importance from the delineation of acceptable behaviour they provide states with, who inhabit an otherwise conditionally anarchic international environment. Put simply, norms can be cognised as the organising principles of International Relations, with institutions their enforcement mechanisms (however imperfect).[62] As the dominant power, the United States has been able to establish and maintain norms and institutions that enhance systemic stability while simultaneously advancing American interests.[63] These soft-power mechanisms are efficient and cheap methods of status quo reinforcement,[64] but they still come at a cost. To ensure its legitimacy, the dominant state must also conform to the norms and institutions of the extant order; “its actions are inhibited by adherence to the status quo that it has devised”. [65] In the case of the liberal order built by the United States, this has “made American power both more far-reaching and durable but also [paradoxically] more predictable and malleable”. [66] For Trump and his key staffers such as political strategist Steve Bannon, this U.S. predictability is antithetical to their disruptive and capricious approach to foreign policy.[67] Subsequent actions and rhetoric on the part of the current Administration can thus be interpreted as a response to manifest dissatisfaction with several defining norms and institutions of the liberal international order.

While they would deviate on many issues, America’s detractors and proponents alike would agree that it has

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embedded its own liberal values within the extant order. The precise means of embedment have varied – from Jimmy Carter’s ‘foreign policy of human rights,’ to George W. Bush’s neoconservative ‘democracy promotion’ and Barack Obama’s ‘cautious pragmatism’ – but they have been motivated by essentially the same ends.[68] To be sure, Washington’s objectives have never been entirely idealistic or altruistic; a cynic might label them hypocritical,[69] whereas a more sympathetic pundit would see an overlap where the United States’ interests and values converge.[70] Nevertheless, liberal value promotion has remained a defining characteristic of American foreign policy, so too the global normative and institutional framework it decisively shaped.[71] With the ascendancy of Trump however, there has been a palpable diminuendo in such sponsorship, and a concomitant challenge – both rhetorical and substantive – that decouples U.S. values from interests, and undermines fundamental norms and institutions of the liberal order.

The Jacksonian philosophy that many – including Steve Bannon – contend most accurately captures Trump’s own outlook is decidedly *realpolitik* in tack; evincing a Hobbesian view of interstate relations.[72] Such an outlook holds “little faith in international law or international institutions. Rather than normative commitments to promote democracy, human rights or free trade, Jacksonians are pragmatists not evangelists abroad”.[73] President Trump’s 2017 U.S.-Japan Joint Vision Statement with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reflects such sentiments – myopically focusing on security, defence and economic issues, while omitting topics emblematic of the liberal order such as human rights and nuclear non-proliferation (in contrast to the 2015, and other previous Joint Vision Statement’s).[74] On occasions where Administration officials have explicitly invoked the U.S.-led rules-based order, it has been articulated purely in strategic, rather than liberal cosmopolitan terms.[75] The President’s public admiration of authoritarian leaders such as the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte, Egypt’s Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Russia’s Vladimir Putin – and Trump’s downplaying of the various human rights abuses and democratic repression associated with their respective regimes – implicitly sanctions illiberal methodologies,[76] signalling a contemporary decoupling of U.S. values from American foreign policy, and a subversion of existing liberal norms and institutions.[77] Juxtaposed against previous administrations – Obama’s in particular – this reflexive change in approach is not evocative of a state satisfied with the status quo. On the contrary, if one accepts “[a] state’s status quo orientation [as indicative of] its basic attitudes toward the prevailing institutions and rules of conduct in international relations”, then the United States would not appear a status quo, *ergo* a satisfied power.[78]

This shift is quantitatively expressed in the Administration’s budget proposal to reduce State Department funding by twenty-eight per cent in order to subsidise a fifty-four billion dollar increase in defence spending.[79] Inside the Jacksonian worldview of Trump, military force represents a straightforward way to cut through the Gordian knots of international politics.[80] Indeed, the budget proposal’s headline, ‘America First’,[81] implies a dissatisfaction with, and tacit critique of, previous Administration’s priorities; rejecting conventional notions of military capability as a blunt instrument of statecraft ill-equipped to confront every foreign policy challenge.[82] At least equally as pertinent as its hard-power focus is the budget blueprint’s soft-power neglect. Proposed State Department cuts would eliminate all UN climate change related funding and emergency refugee and migration assistance; withdrawing financial support from any UN agencies that “do not substantially advance U.S. foreign policy interests”.[83] As the preponderant global power, the U.S. has the ability to unilaterally defy international norms and institutions,[84] however, “[a] satisfied state is one that accepts [rather than seeks to change] the existing ordering principles of the international system”.[85] PTT related works regularly cite Beijing’s apathy toward, and activity against international norms and institutions as indicative of Chinese dissatisfaction,[86] however if one subjects Washington’s normative and institutional engagement to the same scrutiny – particularly climate change in the wake of President Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Paris climate accord[87] – it is hard not to come to a similar conclusion regarding the United States.[88] While there remains “an evident tendency in the international relations literature to sanctify the status quo and to treat bilateral differences with the hegemon as necessarily a systemic challenge to the existing order”,[89] such a conflation is obviated when evaluating the dominant state itself. Accordingly, in the absence of another hegemon for misdiagnosis, contemporary U.S. dissatisfaction must be educed as being levelled at the existing global order.

Cumulatively, the preceding paragraphs depict a United States no longer satisfied – largely due to a perceived disjuncture between costs incurred and benefits received – with the international liberal order it constructed.[90] Of course, there have been previous instances of hegemonic dissatisfaction: The United States’ exercise of its Security

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Council veto since 1971 – the highest of all permanent five members – has been interpreted as dissatisfaction; as has the Bush Administration's military unilateralism in the Middle East in defiance of the United Nations.[91] However, while such incidents have indeed evoked dissatisfaction, it has been of limited scope. Exercising a veto may reveal dissatisfaction with a particular situation or proposal, but it is an action undertaken within the parameters of the existing order, and one that arguably reinforces UN institutional legitimacy.[92] Similarly, while George W. Bush's unilateralism ostensibly implied a dissatisfaction with emergent multilateralism,[93] it was nevertheless undertaken – however misguided – with promotion of the U.S.-led orders liberal-democratic norms and institutions in mind. In this sense, neither case was indicative of U.S. dissatisfaction writ large.

This essay's observation of a comprehensively dissatisfied United States is novel in its contradiction of PTT, namely, the assumption of hegemonic satisfaction as innate. Such an assumption predisposes analyses toward rising 'challenger' powers, which are invariably afforded independent variable status against the dependent variable of systemic stability. Because the dominant state is presumed to be satisfied, the role it plays in the power transition equation has hitherto remained subsidiary to the primary function of the rising state; being limited to either its ability to socialise and induce satisfaction in,[94] or pre-emptively thwart,[95] potential challengers. The findings presented here amend such a configuration by introducing a second independent variable of dominant state (dis)satisfaction. The remainder of this essay will consider the theoretical and practical implications of a dissatisfied, dominant power.[96]

One aspect of the PTT model that warrants reconsideration is the dominant state's perception of, influence over, and synonymy with the global status quo. At inception, any global order is inherently "decisively shaped by the dominant nation";[97] though the prospect of a dissatisfied hegemon indicates that its stewardship of the order is not necessarily constant, and that it is determined as much by willingness as it is by capability or resources.[98] Whilst this development need not foment a radical departure from PTT – the theory is already underpinned by the logic of temporal transition; of change rather than inertia[99] – it still merits closer inspection. Principally, this is due to the almost ubiquitous employment of PTT – at least in western discourse[100] – as a theoretical framework for analysing China's rise and Sino-American relations.[101]

The causal function that satisfaction performs in PTT is reflected in the nomenclature of status quo and revisionist powers. Assuming a state has the prerequisite capacity to contest the status quo, its level of dissatisfaction will be the determinant of that contingency. Revisionist and status quo attributions therefore assimilate the flawed assumption of dominant state satisfaction, and consequently inherit the analytical limitations that come with it. This is significant because PTT is so regularly cited both explicitly within academic debate, but also within public discourse more implicitly, where its terminology is often misappropriated to disparage peer competitors whose behaviour the hegemon dislikes, but which may not necessarily amount to revisionism.[102] Many analyses of China especially focus on specific aspects or instances of behaviour, then ascribe to it a wholesale revisionist orientation by way of extrapolation.[103] But satisfaction is neither monolithic nor binary, and the prevailing discourse that dichotomises revisionist and status quo orientation remains "too crude and simple to account for the complexity and variety of behaviour that states exhibit".[104]

The Sino-American relationship, it would be fair to say, has conventionally been demarcated along such lines, with Beijing the revisionist, and Washington the status quo power – and there are patently examples today where such a taxonomy is applicable. One conspicuous illustration would be China's island-building efforts in the South China Sea, which have continued in violation of international law and despite an arbitration ruling against Beijing;[105] and the American response in the form of freedom of navigation operations and diplomatic pressure. But stemming from contemporary U.S. behaviour and attitudes, there are contrary examples too. For instance, the aperture created by Trump's apparent abdication of U.S. global economic leadership has (ironically) propelled China forward as the champion of international liberalised trade.[106] This was most clearly demonstrated in President Xi Jinping's speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, which, in stark contrast to Trump's protectionist rhetoric, read as a defence of economic globalisation.[107] Similarly, the fervour with which Beijing promotes its Belt and Road Initiative, including the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, typifies a Chinese approach that may challenge the stewardship, but not the substance of global multilateral economic institutions.[108] Clearly, in this instance China is playing the status quo foil to a revisionist, or at least an anti-status quo, United States. Consequently, the most

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significant implication of a dissatisfied United States is that it blurs the previously distinct revisionist/status quo demarcation of the Sino-American dyad.

This in turn begs another important question – indeed one that dovetails with the original rationale of PTT – how will this resultant definitive status quo power vacuum impact upon systemic stability? Within the PTT literature, debate persists as to whether it is the rising revisionist challenger, or the declining status quo defender, that ultimately initiates hegemonic wars.[109] Rather than attempting to adapt this binary debate to the less bifurcated specifications described above however, the final section of this essay will consider the ways in which a dissatisfied hegemon, and ensuing status quo power vacuum, could affect global stability.

It is important to note that a dissatisfied United States could theoretically mitigate against confrontation with China. Within PTT, the unabated presence of a dissatisfied revisionist challenger means war with the status quo defender becomes unavoidable, primarily due to the incompatibility of their desired global order configurations.[110] If the orientations of a dyad are less dichotomised, with neither power evincing a categorically status quo or revisionist posture, this suggests compromise is possible. In this sense, although major power dissatisfaction would remain ‘an essential precondition for conflict’,[111] it would no longer be a guarantee. Even if U.S. global retrenchment materialises in some form, China’s desire and ability to fill the void will be tempered and constrained by numerous domestic and external obstacles.[112] In any case, America’s favourable geography and capability advantage,[113] not to mention its core strategic interests, will preclude its total withdrawal from the global stage. Similarly, although it may run counter to the post-Cold War liberal internationalist approach of Trump’s predecessors, a prudent transactional pragmatism on the part of the United States could reduce frictions with, and diminish revisionist impulses that drive, prospective challengers such as China and Russia.[114] Hence, one could make the case that a dissatisfied hegemon will permit sufficient systemic malleability to avert the ‘Thucydides Trap.’[115]

Conversely, there is a credible argument to make that is decidedly more pessimistic. Borrowing from psychology, Wohlforth posits that states’ “relative status concerns will come to the fore when status hierarchy is ambiguous”;<sup>[116]</sup> such as in times when no definitive status quo power is discernible. Similarly – and echoing Schweller’s succinct line that “[i]f everyone has high status, no one does”<sup>[117]</sup> – relationships between dissatisfied states are interactions where relative, rather than absolute gains predominate.<sup>[118]</sup> Compounding these resultant zero-sum attitudes is the comparatively lower risk aversion of dissatisfied states, who generally lack the range of options available to their satisfied, status quo counterparts. If a powerful, dissatisfied state cannot achieve its objectives by acting within, or perceives itself to be constrained by the established parameters of the extant order, then it is more likely, by default, to resort to force as an elementary tool of statecraft.<sup>[119]</sup> Moreover, although dissatisfaction can be discerned in both Washington and Beijing, the fundamental origins of their dissatisfactions are discordant: U.S. dissatisfaction is directed toward perceived impediments to the maintenance and consolidation of its dominant power position; whereas China’s grievances derive from the inequity of a global order it had no part in constructing, and which it sees U.S. domination perpetuating. In this sense, the two are largely irreconcilable; minimising the opportunities for, and prospects of impactful compromise. Accordingly, this more pessimistic interpretation would anticipate an intensification, rather than an alleviation of manifest security dilemmas within the U.S.-China dyad, and an increase in instability.

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In conclusion, the rhetoric emanating from, and actions undertaken by the Trump Administration – not to mention Trump’s election itself – signal a magnitude of dissatisfaction hitherto unseen in the modern-day United States. The White House’s protectionist and anti-multilateralist approach to trade stands in juxtaposition to, and explicitly articulates dissatisfaction with, the previous globalist positive-sum orthodoxy. Another outcome of dissatisfaction, namely the transactional reframing of U.S. alliance commitments as contingent and negotiable, arose from perceptions of unfair, disproportionate burden-sharing within alliance relationships. Such sentiments are similarly echoed in the evident decoupling of U.S. values from American foreign policy – and through the apathy shown toward, and withdrawal of funding from, institutions and norms emblematic of the liberal order, that no longer serve narrowly redefined U.S. interests. Stewart Patrick borrows from Oscar Wilde in describing Trump as “man who knows the cost of everything but the value of nothing”<sup>[120]</sup> – perhaps this notion captures best the materialisation of

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U.S. dissatisfaction as described above. In any case, the demeanour of the United States under President Trump clearly refutes the assumption of hegemonic satisfaction as innate.

Importantly, the findings presented here need not be incongruous with the principal logic of PTT. On the contrary, the introduction of hegemonic satisfaction as an independent variable is entirely compatible with the PTT equation; it merely allows for additional permutations. PTT has made substantial and progressive heuristic and epistemological contributions to the wider International Relations discipline.[121] Both its longevity and durability, not to mention the plethora of scholarship it has engendered, stand testament to this impact.[122] Accordingly, the preceding work is intended not as a refutation, but as a refinement. Concomitant with this modification, however, is an acknowledgement that U.S. dissatisfaction – and the resultant blurring of the previously distinct status quo/revisionist demarcation it engenders – poses new questions. That a dissatisfied United States bodes ill for the future of the liberal order seems a credible assessment; its implications regarding the separate matter of ensuing systemic stability within the context of Sino-American relations, however, remains uncertain.

## Notes

[1] See A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1958).

[2] Robert Gilpin, 'The Theory of Hegemonic War', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (1988): 591.

[3] Ibid., 593.

[4] Ibid., 601.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 605.

[7] Ronald L. Tammen, 'The Organski Legacy: A Fifty-Year Research Program', *International Interactions* 34, no. 4 (2008): 314.

[8] Jonathan M. DiCicco & Jack S. Levy, 'Power Shifts and Problem Shifts: The Evolution of the Power Transition Research Program', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 43, no. 6 (1999): 679.

[9] Organski, *World Politics*, 364.; Jacek Kugler & A. F. K. Organski, 'The Power Transition: A Retrospective and Prospective Evaluation', *The Handbook of War Studies*, ed. Manus Midlarsky (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 173.; A. F. K. Organski & Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 39.

[10] Yves-Heng Lim, 'How (Dis)Satisfied is China? A power transition theory perspective', *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 92 (2015): 281.

[11] Steve Chan, *China, the U.S., and the Power-Transition Theory: A critique* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 64.

[12] David Lai, *The United States and China in Power Transition* (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2011), 18.

[13] DiCicco & Levy, 'Power Shifts and Problem Shifts', 687.

[14] Ibid., 686.

[15] Tammen, 'The Organski Legacy', 322.

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# **The United States and the Status Quo: Is Hegemonic Satisfaction Innate?**

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