

The Competition of Dominant Powers in the International System and the US-China Encounter in the Horn of Africa (2012-2022)*

Uluslararası Sistemde Hakim Güçlerin Rekabeti ve Afrika Boynuzu'nda
ABD-Çin Karşılaşması (2012-2022)

Kaan

DEVECİOĞLU**

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Abstract

This study examines the power competition between the United States (US) and China in the Horn of Africa within the framework of Power Transition Theory (PTT). Using the concept of dissatisfaction, the study explores three main hypotheses: 1) the US as a satisfied dominant power and China as a dissatisfied rising power; 2) the US as a dissatisfied dominant power and China as a satisfied rising power; and 3) both actors being satisfied with the current international system. The Multiple Hierarchy Model is also applied when arguing these hypotheses. Through theory-testing process tracing, the study analyzes the geopolitical and geoeconomic implications of the competition in the Horn of Africa, focusing on military presence, technological infrastructure, regional disputes, and economic investments. The findings highlight how the strategic location of Djibouti and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait plays a critical role in the US-China rivalry, influencing military strategies, telecommunications projects, and regional stability efforts. The study concludes that both the US and China engage in a mix of competition and cooperation, with significant impacts on the Horn of Africa's political and economic landscape. This nuanced analysis contributes to the literature on PTT by providing empirical insights into the complex dynamics of US-China relations in a strategically vital region.

Keywords: Power Transition Theory, US-China Rivalry, International System, Horn of Africa, Red Sea

Öz

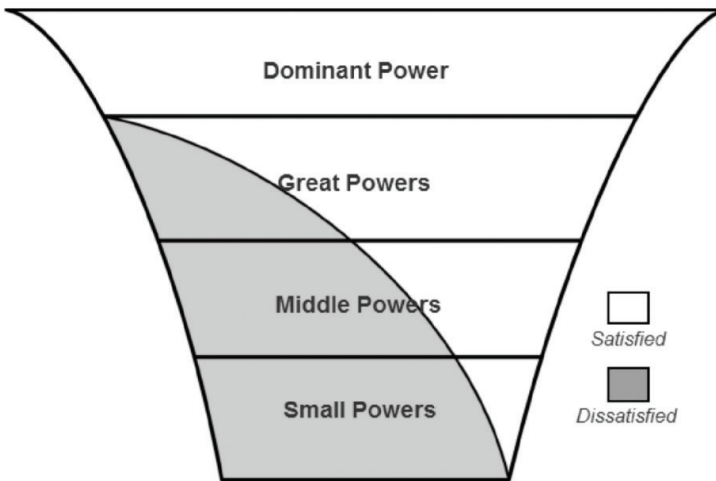
Bu çalışma, Güç Geçişi Teorisi (Power Transition Theory-PTT) çerçevesinde Afrika Boynuzu'nda Amerika Birleşik Devletleri (ABD) ile Çin arasındaki güç rekabetini incelemektedir. Çalışma, memnuniyetsizlik kavramından yararlanarak, üç ana hipotezi araştırmaktadır: 1) mevcut uluslararası sistemden memnun bir hâkim güç olarak ABD ve bundan memnun olmayan yükselen bir güç olarak Çin; 2) mevcut uluslararası sistemden memnun olmayan hakim bir güç olarak ABD ve bundan memnun yükselen bir güç olarak Çin; 3) mevcut uluslararası sistemden memnun olan ABD ve Çin. Bu hipotezler ele alınırken Çoklu Hiyerarşi Modeli'ne başvurulmaktadır. Çalışma teori testi aracılığıyla Afrika Boynuzu'ndaki bu rekabetin jeopolitik ve jeoekonomik etkilerini analiz etmekte ve askerî varlık, teknolojik altyapı, bölgesel anlaşmazlıklar ve ekonomik yatırımlara odaklanmaktadır. Elde edilen bulgular, Cibuti ve Babülmendep Boğazı'nın stratejik konumunun ABD-Çin rekabetinde nasıl kritik bir rol oynadığını ve bu konumun askerî stratejileri, telekomünikasyon projelerini ve bölgesel istikrar çabalarını nasıl etkilediğini ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma hem ABD hem de Çin'in bir rekabet ve iş birliği karşımı içinde olduğu ve bunun da Afrika Boynuzu'nun siyasi ve ekonomik manzarası üzerinde önemli etkiler doğurduğu sonucuna varmaktadır. Bu analiz, stratejik açıdan hayati bir bölgede ABD-Çin ilişkilerinin karmaşık dinamiklerine dair ampirik bilgiler sunarak PTT literatürüne katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Güç Geçişi Teorisi, ABD-Çin Rekabeti, Uluslararası Sistem, Afrika Boynuzu, Kızıldeniz

Introduction

In International Relations (IR), power refers to the control actors exert over events and resources. The power of states in the international system is determined by numerous variables, including their internal political capacities, qualities of territories and demographics, economic and military development, and technological advancements. According to the Power Transition Theory (PTT) proposed by Abramson Kenneth (AFK) Organski in 1958 after the 1956 Suez Crisis, the rise or fall of these capacities brings states' power capabilities closer together. This convergence escalates competition among states over political, economic, military, social, and societal influence in various regions. In this context, dissatisfaction with their current status in the international system leads states to desire a revision of the power hierarchy, triggering negative outcomes such as civil wars and coups in sub-regional systems like the Horn of Africa. This competition in the hierarchy among states can result in the fragmentation of existing countries and the emergence of new states, or, as seen in the case of Djibouti, contribute to the development of these nations.

Figure 1. The Inverted Pyramid of Power, Hierarchy, and Satisfaction¹



In examining the power transition dynamics between the United States (US) and China within the context of their competition in the Horn of Africa, this study explores the varying degrees of satisfaction these actors have with the existing international order, offering a nuanced perspective on their strategic interactions. Traditional PTT posits two primary hypotheses: 1) the US, as the established hegemon, is inherently satisfied with the current system, while China, as the ascendant power, is revisionist and dissatisfied; alternatively, 2) China, benefiting from the existing system, is satisfied, and the US, threatened by China's rise, is revisionist and dissatisfied. This study proposes a third hypothesis, suggesting that both powers exhibit satisfaction with the current system to varying extents, influenced by geopolitical, economic, and strategic factors in the Horn of Africa. The region's strategic importance—marked by its location at the Red Sea-Gulf of Aden nexus, pivotal trade routes, and significant energy transportation corridors—coupled with China's Belt and Road investments and the US's commitment to security and free passage, underscores its role in

¹ Ronald Tammen, "The Organski Legacy: A Fifty-Year Research Program", *International Interactions*, 34, 2008, p. 319.

US-China power dynamics. Additionally, local conflicts, terrorism threats, and recurrent humanitarian crises necessitate robust involvement from both powers, each leveraging aid and development efforts to enhance their influence, thereby rendering the Horn of Africa a critical arena for interpreting US-China relations through the lens of competition, cooperation, and pragmatic indirect cooperation.

In the literature of IR, most studies examine the hypothesis of a dissatisfied China. However, there are limited studies on the hypothesis that the US is dissatisfied with the system it established.² Therefore, this study contributes to the existing literature by examining both propositions and exploring a third alternative hypothesis that both actors are satisfied with the current system.

On the other hand, in this article, with a focus on the Horn of Africa, applying the Multiple Hierarchy Model³ in the analysis of PTT allows us to evaluate the power dynamics in the region more accurately and comprehensively. As mentioned above, while PTT emphasizes the satisfaction of dominant powers with the current international system, the Multiple Hierarchy Model suggests that this satisfaction can vary across different regions and issues. In a strategically significant region like the Horn of Africa, understanding the positions of actors such as the US and China in various hierarchical orders and their satisfaction with these orders enables us to identify their strategic goals and interests in the region more clearly. This model provides a more balanced and detailed power assessment by analyzing the influence of each actor separately in different areas such as security, economy, and diplomacy.

The application of this model helps us reflect the power balances and international relations in the Horn of Africa more accurately. Analyzing the levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction of actors in different issues addresses the shortcomings that may arise from focusing on a single hierarchy. For example, while the US may be satisfied with the regional order in security matters, China may experience dissatisfaction with its economic projects. The integration of the Multiple Hierarchy Model into this article contributes to a better understanding of the complex power dynamics and strategic behaviors of actors in the region, thereby aiding in the development of more effective and sustainable policy recommendations.

The Multiple Hierarchy Model offers a useful framework for explaining how the international system operates within different regions and local hierarchies. The Horn of Africa is a significant region that demonstrates the explanatory power of this model. The competition between the US and China in this region is important for understanding both global and local power dynamics. Due to its strategic geographic location at the intersection of maritime trade routes and its natural resources, the Horn of Africa is a significant region for both local and global powers. In the local hierarchy, Ethiopia is the dominant power, while the influence of global powers (the US and China) is also decisive. According to the Multiple Hierarchy Model, the intervention of dominant powers in local hierarchies directly affects the order and power dynamics in the region. The competition between the US and China in the

2 Ronald L. Tammen and Jacek Kugler, "Power Transition and China-US Conflicts", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 1:1, 2006, pp. 35-55; Shaun Breslin, "China's Emerging Global Role: Dissatisfied Responsible Great Power", *Politics*, 30:1, 2010, pp. 52-62; Yves-Heng Lim, "How (dis) Satisfied is China? A Power Transition Theory Perspective", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 24:92, 2015, pp. 280-297; Serafettin Yilmaz and Wang Xiangyu, "Power Transition Theory Revisited: When Rising China Meets Dissatisfied United States", *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, 50:3, 2019, pp. 317-341.

3 Douglas Lemke, *Multiple Hierarchies in World Politics*, Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, 1993; Douglas Lemke, *Regions of War and Peace*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

Horn of Africa should be examined in this context. Both countries pursue different strategies to increase their influence in the region.

The US adopts a security-based approach in the Horn of Africa, while China exhibits an economy-based approach. In this context, there are areas in which these two actors perform cooperation or competition. Counterterrorism, maritime security, and the support of stable governments are among the US' primary goals. This strategy is manifested through the establishment of military bases, military cooperation with local governments, and intelligence sharing. In particular, the US has developed close military relations with Somalia and Kenya. On the other hand, China aims to increase its influence in the region through infrastructure investments, trade agreements, and economic aid. Establishing a large naval base in Djibouti as part of the "Belt and Road" initiative indicates China's strategic interests in the region. Additionally, China expands its economic influence by investing in large infrastructure projects in countries like Ethiopia and Kenya.

The competition between the US and China in the Horn of Africa also affects the dynamics of local hierarchies. The intervention of dominant powers increases the potential for both cooperation and conflict among local powers.⁴ For example, the US military aid and China's economic investments enable the states in the region to maximize their own interests while also fueling regional competition. According to the Multiple Hierarchy Model, local powers' dissatisfaction and parity status determine the likelihood of stability and war in the region.⁵ For instance, if Ethiopia feels unsupported by the US, it might pursue aggressive policies to change the order in the regional hierarchy and establish closer relations with alternative actors, primarily China. In this scenario, the intervention of dominant powers could lead to an increase in local conflicts.

When analyzed within the conceptual framework of the Multiple Hierarchy Model, the US-China competition in the Horn of Africa provides a better understanding of the region's power dynamics. The intervention of dominant powers in local hierarchies increases the potential for both cooperation and conflict. In this context, the strategies of the US and China in the region are shaped by the dissatisfaction and parity statuses of local powers, directly affecting the stability dynamics in the region. The primary aim of this study is to understand the US-China competition, cooperation, competition, or indirect pragmatic cooperation in the Horn of Africa from the perspective of the dissatisfaction concept in PTT, starting from the inception of the "Pivot to Asia" strategy during the Obama administration⁶ and China's "Marching Westwards" strategy⁷ until 2021. In this context, US dissatisfaction is typically shaped by a series of internal and external factors legitimized by referring to China as a challenging actor. The US utilizes and benefits from various international organizations (such as the United Nations [UN], North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], and World Trade Organization [WTO]) that it dominates within its interests.

Research Problems

This study addresses two primary problems. The first is to scrutinize the hypotheses in the context of the dissatisfaction concept in PTT: the US is satisfied, and China is dissatisfied; the US is dissatisfied, and China is satisfied; and both actors are satisfied. The second problem

4 Lemke, *Regions of War and Peace*, p. 52.

5 Ibid, pp. 67-69.

6 Chi Wang, *Obama's Challenge to China: The Pivot to Asia*, Routledge, New York, 2016.

7 Cheng Yi Lin, "Xi Jinping, the US, and New Model of Major Country Relations", *Prospect Journal*, 34:1, 2015, pp.12-19.

is to explain the US-China encounter in the Horn of Africa in terms of the dissatisfaction concept of PTT, given the strategic importance of the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, which borders the Horn of Africa and serves as a competition arena for major powers regarding control over international economics and politics. Therefore, the main research problem of this study is to understand the reasons for the reflections of the US-China competition in the Horn of Africa and explain these actors' levels of satisfaction with the order in this geography within the context of PTT.

Methodology

The literature on process tracing methodology has four variants: theory testing, theory building, theory revision, and explaining case outcomes. Considering the content of this study, the theory-testing process tracing method is used. The primary aim of this method is to determine whether the selected theory works on the case study and whether the theory needs revision.⁸ In this context, the “theory-testing process tracing” method is chosen in this study to test the hypotheses established within the framework of PTT regarding the US-China competition in the Horn of Africa.

The theory-testing process tracing method is used to explain whether a theory with defined causes and effects works on a selected case.⁹ In the literature, this method has two dimensions: minimalist and in-depth research. Minimalist theory-testing analysis is used when there is little knowledge about the theory and the case. In this sense, in their study “Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool”, Andrew Bennet and Jeffrey Checkel question whether the minimalist theory testing analysis is “diagnostic evidence”.¹⁰ Therefore, the minimalist dimension is used when there is little information about the theory and the case, and in this sense, the cause-and-effect relationships between the selected cases in the context of the theory should be analyzed.¹¹

For example, in the context of this study, during the US-China competition in the Horn of Africa, while the US decided to develop its military base in Djibouti in 2015, China made an agreement to establish a military facility in Djibouti the same year and opened its base in 2017. On the other hand, while their interests conflicted in the Tigray crisis in Ethiopia, the US and China continued their indirect pragmatic cooperation in combating terrorism in Somalia and ensuring trade security against piracy in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.

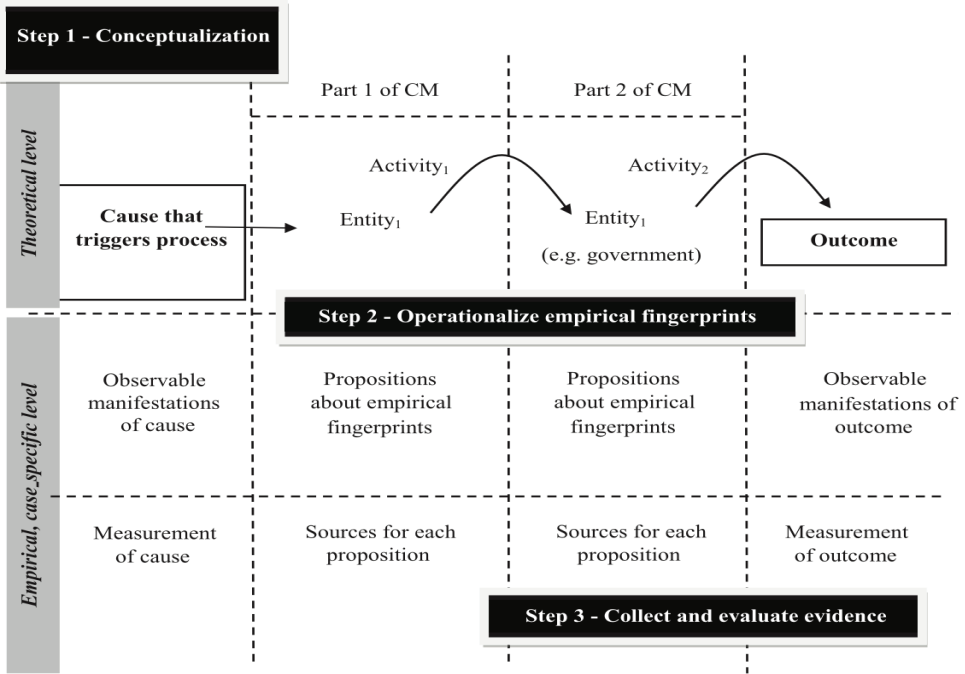
8 Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process-tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines*, University of Michigan Press, Michigan, 2019, p. 1-12.

9 Ingo Rohlfling, “Comparative Hypothesis Testing via Process Tracing”, *Sociological Methods and Research*, 43:4, 2014, p. 613.

10 Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey Checkel, *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014, p. 7.

11 Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods...*, pp. 245-246.

Figure 2. The Three Steps of In-depth Theory-Testing Process Tracing Method¹²



The in-depth theory-testing dimension is employed by establishing cause-and-effect relationships through empirical data pertaining to a theory with a justified belief. This dimension aims to yield stronger inferences. In-depth theory-testing process tracing enables the establishment of inferences about how a process will conclude by presenting empirical data for each part of the activities within a causal mechanism.¹³ Thus, while the minimalist dimension in theory-testing process tracing allows for macro-level evaluation of studies, the in-depth dimension contributes to the analysis of micro-level processes.

Figure 2 illustrates the three steps involved in the in-depth theory-testing process tracing method. According to this method, the first step involves using two actions presumed to be linked by cause and effect in the context of the empirical findings of the hypothesis established in the study. Therefore, this step employs the existing theoretical and empirical literature, which helps articulate the intervening variables (causal links) between cause and effect. In his 1996 study “Causal Explanation in the Social Sciences”, Daniel Little describes this step as the “capacity to produce a particular kind of result under the right antecedent conditions”.¹⁴ The second step involves operationalizing the intervening variables within the cause-and-effect relationship in the context of the theory. Hence, empirical findings are positioned within the hypotheses established in the theoretical context. The third step involves developing and analyzing the collected evidence.

¹² Ibid, p. 246.

¹³ Phyllis McKay Illari and Federica Russo, *Causality: Philosophical Theory Meets Scientific Practice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, p. 207.

¹⁴ Daniel Little, “Causal Explanation in the Social Sciences”, *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 34:S1, 1996, p. 31-56.

Therefore, in the first step context, this article addresses the arguments of three fundamental hypotheses regarding the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the US and China with the order in the international system. In the second step, these arguments are reinforced through empirical findings. In the third step, the article analyzes the empirical findings obtained concerning the cause-and-effect relationships of the hypotheses.

In the practical application of the methodology, both primary and secondary sources have been utilized. For primary sources, the study has examined official documents from the US and China, as well as statements from leaders and foreign policy-makers. It also has scanned newspaper reports and conducted interviews with academics, diplomats, researchers, and journalists during various academic meetings. As for secondary sources, the articles, theses, books, and current journal reports of academic value have been utilized through a review of academic databases.

Based on this, the study first conceptualizes of the dominant power competition between the US and China and the concept of dissatisfaction in PTT. This section scrutinizes the theoretical approach of the study and the competition between the US and China within the context of the international system. The second part of the study analyzes how the levels of satisfaction of actors with the international system, based on the international competition between the US and China, reflect in the sub-regional system of the Horn of Africa. Within this scope, topics such as military bases, undersea fiber optic networks, the Eritrea-Ethiopia dispute, the Tigray civil war, and China's debt-trap diplomacy are examined through the lenses of competition and cooperation.

1. Dominant Power Competition Between the US and China: Dissatisfaction in the International System and Conceptual Framework

In this study, the term “dominant power” is used instead of the more commonly used term “hegemony” in the IR literature to describe the competition between the US and China. The primary reason for this choice is the events following September 11, 2001, in which allied states did not support the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and the subsequent withdrawal from these countries, indicating that the US is not a “hegemon” anymore in the international system. Despite maintaining its economic power during this period, the US suffered an image loss in terms of its political, security, and socio-cultural power capacities.¹⁵ In the model of international system hierarchy within PTT, actors satisfied with the order are defined as dominant powers.

In PTT, the concept of dissatisfaction fundamentally implies that a rising power tends to be dissatisfied with the existing order in the international system and seeks to reform or change it, while the dominant power is naturally satisfied with the structure of the current system and inclined to maintain the order.¹⁶ Studies in the IR literature examining global power competition between the US and China within the context of PTT's concept of dissatisfaction primarily discuss two hypotheses as inverse correlation.

Organski formulated PTT with two fundamental domestic variables: industrialization and political capacity.¹⁷ This approach is similar to Robert Gilpin's concept of differential growth rates, which he defined as a destabilizing factor in the international system in

15 Christopher Layne, “The Waning of U.S. Hegemony—Myth or Reality? A Review Essay”, *International Security*, 34:1, 2009, pp. 147-172.

16 Serafettin Yilmaz and Wang Xiangyu, “Power Transition Theory Revisited When Rising China Meets Dissatisfied United States”, *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, 5:3, 2019, pp. 317-341.

17 A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1968, p. 42.

his hegemonic stability theory. However, it can be said that Gilpin's approach expanded Organski's view and gained more prominent acceptance. In this context, Gilpin emphasizes that the changing power distributions among domestic political elites and local rival coalitions influence the states' foreign policy and can be linked to the political capacity of leaders to achieve their foreign policy goals.¹⁸ Additionally, in the PTT literature on the concept of dissatisfaction, the analysis level of the international system is assumed to be a theory, and the causes of the results are explained through a series of formulations such as globalization, industrialization, economic growth, technological development, and military modernization.¹⁹

On the other hand, Douglas Lemke's Multiple Hierarchy Model is helpful for explaining these hypotheses in the context of the international system in general and sub-regional systems in particular. In this context, Douglas Lemke argues that the international system has a multi-layered structure and that major powers can establish their own hegemonic hierarchies in different regions.²⁰ This model helps us understand the effects of global powers like the USA and China not only on a global level but also on a regional level. For example, China tries to establish a strong hierarchy in East Asia and Southeast Asia, consolidating its power in these regions through its claims of sovereignty over the South China Sea and its economic influence over the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. The USA, on the other hand, tries to balance China's influence in East Asia with allies like Japan and South Korea and in Southeast Asia with countries like the Philippines and Vietnam. The overlapping hierarchical structures in these regions increase the potential for conflict at both regional and global levels.²¹

In Africa, China's efforts to increase its influence through extensive investments and infrastructure projects are countered by the USA's attempts to balance this influence through diplomatic and economic means. According to Lemke's model, the hierarchical structures in these sub-regional systems become the stage for competition between major powers. This competition has the potential to lead to direct military conflict in regions like the East China Sea or the South China Sea, as well as causing instabilities through economic and diplomatic tensions in Africa.²² The Multiple Hierarchy Model provides an essential theoretical framework to understand the effects of the US-China rivalry on the international system and its reflections in sub-regional systems.

Based on this background, the following sections of the study will examine the power competition between the US and China in the international system within the framework of these three hypotheses:

1. The dissatisfaction of rising power China with the order in the international system dominated by the US.
2. The dissatisfaction of the US with the order due to the challenge posed by rising power China to Washington's influence in international politics.
3. The satisfaction of both actors with the order in the international system.

18 Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, pp. 96-104.

19 Richard Lebow, Ned Richard Ned and Benjamin Valentino, "Lost in Transition: A Critical Analysis of Power Transition Theory", *International Relations*, 23:3, 2009, p. 390.

20 Lemke, *Regions of War and Peace*, pp. 48-66

21 Tammen, Ronald L., et al., *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century*, Chatham House Publishers, London, UK, 2000.

22 Lemke, *Regions of War and Peace*, pp. 161-181.

1.1. Hypothesis of China as a Revisionist Actor

The IR literature discusses that the rise of China as a growing power challenging the interests of the dominant power, the US, has led to tensions in the international system. In this context, the concept of dissatisfaction within PTT, examined in this study, is enriched by contributions from both liberal and realist schools of thought in IR. Both liberal and realist schools agree that states at the lower levels of the international system hierarchy (see Figure 1) can be satisfied through consent or coercion, thereby maintaining peace and stability.

The liberals' "hegemonic stability theory" asserts that peace and stability are ensured in the international system, provided that there is a hegemonic power. The dominant power can achieve this through consent-based acceptance or by compelling other states to accept its hegemonic position through colonialism and hard power.²³ Neorealists' "balance of power" theory, on the other hand, assumes that rising powers are keen to join and be satisfied with the global regime established by the dominant state due to an asymmetrical power alignment between themselves and the "hegemon state".²⁴

The PTT literature on the concept of dissatisfaction aims to identify the factors that lead to satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the international system. Thus, satisfaction denotes cooperation between the dominant power and the rising power, while dissatisfaction signifies competition and challenge to the dominant power. Organski also posits that a state dominating the international system is naturally more satisfied with the international order it mainly created and controls.²⁵ Hence, in the context of this study, China, as a rising power, is identified as the primary agent of dissatisfaction with the international system.

As China rises in the international system, there has been a parallel increase in academic studies focusing on Beijing's stance towards the current global order and the dominant power, the US. The hypothesis depicting China as a dissatisfied rising power in an international system dominated by the US is analyzed in the study through fundamental concepts like economic growth agreements fostering mutual dependency (free trade and regional trade agreements), military alliances (such as NATO and partnerships in the Asia-Pacific), security arrangements (such as nuclear arms control), global governance mechanisms (such as climate change), and categorizations of foreign policy preferences (revisionist, reformist, conformist, or indifferent). This approach is taken because the PTT literature on dissatisfaction developed during a period of unipolarity in the international system after the Cold War, where the US was considered the unrivaled dominant power, even by its Western allies.²⁶

In the 1990s, while it was on the verge of rapid growth,²⁷ China presented a profile of a weak state in terms of economic and technological development. During this period, the US portrayed a profile of a satisfied actor with the international order, while China emerged as a rising yet dissatisfied challenger in economic, political, cultural, and military terms in both East Asia and other regions of the world.²⁸ For instance, during the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, China's response to the US's security aid to Taiwan by placing missiles on its

23 Michael C. Webb and Stephen D. Krasner, "Hegemonic Stability Theory: An Empirical Assessment", *Review of International Studies*, 15:2, 1989, pp. 184-186.

24 John Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism", Tim Dunne, Kurki Milja & Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, pp. 71-88.

25 Organski, "World Politics", p. 366.

26 Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment" *Foreign Affairs*, 70:1, 1991, p. 23.

27 Kadir Temiz, "Çin'in Ortadoğu Bölgesini Etkileyen Bölgesel ve Küresel Rekabet Unsurları", *İstanbul Medeniyet Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Dergisi*, 3:2, 2018, p. 33.

28 Jonathan M. DiCicco and Jack S. Levy, "Power Shifts and Problems Shifts: The Evolution of the Power Transition Research Program" *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 43:6, 1999, pp. 675-704.

own shore led to a series of geopolitical challenges.²⁹ Similarly, the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by NATO forces led by the US in 1999³⁰ and the collision of a US Navy reconnaissance plane with a Chinese fighter jet near Hainan Island in 2001 (known as the spy plane crisis) are historical developments indicating Beijing's dissatisfaction with the order.³¹

There are three main approaches in the PTT literature critiquing China's dissatisfaction with the current configuration of the international system. The first approach is Alastair Iain Johnston's (2003) five indicators, categorizing state behavior into two groups. The first three indicators identify China's willingness to change the international system: insufficient participation, temporary participation, and participation without accepting institutional rules. The second group consists of two indicators: the internationalization of a radical redistribution of power in the international system and, if necessary, the redistribution of power through military means.³² Johnston concludes that China's revisionism in the international system has become more compatible and participatory within international institutional arrangements.³³

The second approach is Ronald Tammen and Jacek Kugler's five fundamental indicators to measure China's satisfaction with the US-led international system. These indicators include territorial disputes between actors (such as China's Taiwan issue), security matters (like the US's arms exports to regional states in the Taiwan issue and China's missile deployment against this move), participation in international and regional organizations (like the US in NATO and China in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization), ideological differences between actors, and economic interdependence as competitive areas. Based on these indicators, Tammen and Kugler conclude that there is no balance of power in the competition between the US and China, and their relations progress on a stable ground.³⁴

The third approach assumes that China's revisionist demands in the international system are limited to the demands for economic prosperity and regional security (such as the Taiwan issue) within its domestic politics.³⁵ Therefore, the Beijing administration will only make revisionist demands limited to economic issues if Chinese society is dissatisfied with the economic situation and environmental security. According to authors supporting the third approach, such as Breslin, China depends on the US for its economic development due to the need for institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) established by the Bretton Woods Agreement.³⁶ Therefore, if China becomes a power equal to the US in political, economic, and military terms, it may demand changes in the structure of these institutions in its favor.

In conclusion, as noted in the studies by academics questioning the orientation of the international system over the last twenty years from mainstream theories of IR such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism, China is dissatisfied with the order where the US is

29 Robert S. Ross, "The 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force", *International Security*, 25:2, 2000, p. 87-123.

30 Kerry Dumbaugh, "Chinese Embassy Bombing in Belgrade: Compensation Issues", *Congressional Research Service*, Washington D.C., 2000.

31 Patrick Martin, "Spy Plane Standoff Heightens US-China Tensions", *World Socialist Web Site*, 03.04.2001. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2001/04/spy-a03.pdf>, accessed 30.05.2024.

32 Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?" *International Security*, 27:4, 2003, p. 11.

33 Ibid. p.49.

34 Ronald L. Tammen and Jacek Kugler, "Power Transition and China-US Conflicts", *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 1:1, 2006, pp. 46-50.

35 Avery Goldstein, "Power Transitions, Institutions, and China's Rise in East Asia: Theoretical Expectations and Evidence", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 30:5, 2007, pp. 643-644.

36 Shaun Breslin, "China's Emerging Global Role: Dissatisfied Responsible Great Power", *Politics*, 30:1, p. 55.

the dominant power. In this sense, China follows revisionist political strategies regarding the current order of the international system. However, China's revisionist stance has been pragmatic rather than ideological, as seen during the Cold War. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced by China in 2013, was interpreted as ideological alignment with the US's interests.³⁷ However, this initiative by Beijing has led to the emergence of harsh views against China in the mainstream circles of US politics due to its challenge to the fundamental areas of economic and geopolitical interests of the US in international politics.³⁸ Consequently, former US President Donald Trump's "trade war" initiated against China's rise in the international system is based on policies following the announcement of the BRI, as well as the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In this context, the SCO and AIIB can be interpreted as a reinterpretation of the US's Marshall Aid policies after World War II. Therefore, these criticisms give rise to the hypothesis that the US is dissatisfied with the international system, which will be examined in the next section.

1.2. Hypothesis of the US as a Revisionist Actor

The second hypothesis discussed in the literature on the concept of dissatisfaction within PTT is that China, as a rising power, is satisfied with the order and challenges the US, the dominant power that dominates the international system and that is dissatisfied. This section aims to examine this hypothesis. This hypothesis gained prominence in the IR literature, particularly following the trade war initiated by the Trump administration against China after Donald Trump took office in 2017. Therefore, it examines events indicating the US's dissatisfaction with the international system, starting from the trade war by the Trump administration following Obama's 2011 Pivot to Asia policy. The primary research problem in this context is to understand the reasons for the US's dissatisfaction with the international order and the implications of this dissatisfaction for the international system.

Examined in the previous section, the hypothesis of China as a dissatisfied rising power in the international system dominated by the US has revealed a vast body of literature on this topic. However, the literature on China being satisfied with the order and the US being dissatisfied is less extensively explored. The literature in this area primarily focuses on the economic, technological, ideological, security, regional, and global dynamics of the US policies following Trump's victory in the 2017 election. For instance, during the Trump era, the US administration enacted several significant international regulations in political, economic, and technological fields, demonstrating its dissatisfaction with the order in the international system.³⁹ Through this method, the US developed policies to weaken the Chinese administration.

The US's dissatisfaction with the international system can be explained by four main reasons. First, during the Trump era, the US withdrew from global governance mechanisms such as the Paris Agreement on climate change, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).⁴⁰ Second, in the context of security interests, the US withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF)

37 Joel Gehrke, "State Department Preparing for Clash of Civilizations with China", *Washington Examiner*, 30.04.2019. <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/state-department-preparing-for-clash-of-civilizations-with-china>, accessed 30.05.2024.

38 Ibid.

39 Serafettin Yilmaz ve Wang Xiangyu, "Power Transition Theory Revisited When Rising China Meets Dissatisfied United States", *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, 5:3, 2019, pp. 317-341.

40 Matt McGrath, "US rejoins Paris accord: Biden's first act sets tone for ambitious approach", *BBC News*, 19.02.2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-55732386>, accessed 30.05.2024.

and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran (P5+1: US, China, UK, France, Russia, and Germany). Third, the US withdrew from UN-affiliated organizations such as the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Human Rights Council. Fourth, the US decided to reduce the number of troops involved in peacekeeping and peace-sustaining activities in various parts of the world and invited other regional powers to share responsibilities. Additionally, alongside these withdrawals, the US also pulled its financial and administrative support from many international institutions,⁴¹ indicating its dissatisfaction with its position in the international system due to geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges.

The US's dissatisfaction with the international system due to China's rise can be examined through three primary approaches. The first approach is the development of the "America First" rhetoric of the Trump era.⁴² As explained above, the Trump administration adopted unilateral rhetoric in diplomacy by withdrawing from international organizations and agreements and presenting an anti-globalization profile. In contrast, China has positioned itself as a global actor that adapts to new conditions. For instance, during the Trump era, China's constructive political stance on many global crises (such as the peace process on the Korean Peninsula, the Iran nuclear deal, and disputes in the South and East China Seas) demonstrated that it is a rising power satisfied with the international system. Conversely, the US's unilateral policies, such as the "trade war" and withdrawal from international organizations under the Trump administration, indicated that the US was a dissatisfied dominant power in the international system.⁴³ While the US localized itself with the "America First" rhetoric, it also pressured China in its region over issues like human rights violations in East Turkestan and Myanmar.

The second primary approach to explaining the US's dissatisfaction with the international system due to China's rise is economy-based. Beijing's BRI and AIIB initiatives have caused concern for Washington⁴⁴ However, with these initiatives, China has both complemented the international institutions dominated by the US in the global system and aligned its interests with the existing arrangements. The Beijing administration has been cautious about trading in yuan and continues to use the dollar as a reserve currency, financially strengthening China against the US. Therefore, China's rise in the global order, adhering to the rules set by the US without openly challenging them, has affected Washington's areas of interest.⁴⁵ For example, China's position as the world's second-largest economy after the US and its geopolitical and geoeconomic identity through the BRI by sourcing raw materials from the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America and branding its products in these markets have worried the Trump administration.

The third approach indicating the US's dissatisfaction with the international system due to China's rise focuses on "security" in regional and global geopolitical competition and

41 Mark Hensch, "Trump Order to Target UN, Other Global Organizations: Report", *The Hill*, 25.01.2017. <https://thehill.com/policy/international/un-treaties/316148-trump-order-to-target-un-other-global-orgs-report>, accessed 30.05.2024.

42 Silvia Amaro and Hadley Gamble, "US Government Is 'Exceptionally Vulnerable' to Cyberattacks, Security Expert Says", *CNBC*, 17.02.2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/17/us-government-is-exceptionally-vulnerable-to-cyber-attacks-security-expert-says>, accessed 30.05.2024.

43 "U.S. Foreign Policy: Multilateralism or Unilateralism?", *Model Diplomacy*, 2020. <https://modeldiplomacy.cfr.org/pop-up-cases/us-foreign-policy-multilateralism-or-unilateralism> accessed 30.05.2024.

44 William H. Overholt, "Is the China Model a Threat?", *East Asia Forum*, 07.07.2019. <https://www.easiaforum.org/2019/07/07/is-the-china-model-a-threat/>, accessed 30.05.2024.

45 Serafettin Yilmaz ve Wang Xiangyu, "Power Transition Theory Revisited When Rising China Meets Dissatisfied United States", *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, 5:3, 2019, pp. 334-337.

“economy” in technological developments. In regional terms, geopolitical security competition between actors includes the Taiwan issue, Korea, Vietnam, and the South China Sea, while issues such as climate change, China’s human rights violations (repression and persecution against Uyghurs), and withdrawal from international agreements can be mentioned at the global level. Regarding economic competition in technological developments, the trade war initiated by the US against China has two dimensions. The first is the US’s bilateral trade imbalance with China, where imports exceed exports. The second is the sanctions imposed by the US against Chinese high-tech companies within the framework of the trade war. Thus, the two phenomena shaped at different levels —security and economy— indicate the US’s dissatisfaction with the order in the international system due to China’s rising power.

In conclusion, the competition between the US and China has been examined in the context of the hypothesis that the dominant power, the US, is dissatisfied with the international system, while the rising power, China, is satisfied. This hypothesis is consistent, especially since the policies implemented by the US during the Trump administration are considered. However, the continued rhetoric of confrontation following the COVID-19 pandemic and the Biden administration’s tendency to return to international agreements (such as the Paris Climate Agreement) indicate a softening of the US’s response to its dissatisfaction with China. This leads us to examine the hypothesis that both actors are satisfied with the international system in the following section.

1.3. Hypothesis of Satisfaction with the Order by Both the US and China

After the Trump administration eased the supply ban on Huawei following the meeting with Xi Jinping in Osaka in June 2019⁴⁶ and the global conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic, tensions between the two countries softened. Additionally, China’s participation in and satisfaction with the international system dominated by the US through its influence in international organizations like the UN, and the World Bank, along with initiatives such as BRI extending from Latin America to Africa, show China’s engagement with the liberal economic order. This section examines the hypothesis that both the US and China are satisfied with the order in the international system.

The literature has extensively discussed hypotheses based on the dissatisfaction of either China or the US with the international system, providing substantial arguments and explanations that have enriched the existing literature. However, the hypothesis that both actors are satisfied with the order has yet to be adequately explored, indicating a significant gap. Therefore, this section discusses this hypothesis within the framework of the study’s time frame (2011-2021) and methodology (theory-testing process tracing) based on two main claims.

The first claim is that neither actor desires the emergence of a third power. This claim can be explained from two perspectives. For instance, the US is an actor in a bipolar rather than a unipolar world order. During the Cold War, the US consolidated its power in the international system in the presence of two major powers, the US and the Soviet Union. This situation does not strategically concern the US about the existence of China. Similarly, this applies to China, which aligns with the US-dominated system as it rises economically. Therefore, both countries are satisfied with the order and would be disturbed by the emergence of a third power.

46 Jenny Leonard and Ian King, “Why Trump Eased Huawei Tech Ban. U.S. Chipmakers Said It Could Hurt Economy and National Security”, *Los Angeles Times*, 19.07.2019. <https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-chipmakers-pressed-trump-huawei-ban-20190702-story.html>, accessed 30.05.2024.

The second claim is that China has become globalized for the first time in its history, which does not challenge the international order established and dominated by the US despite affecting Washington's areas of interest. For example, China's global initiatives, such as AIIB and BRI, operate harmoniously within the international order rather than challenge it. Consequently, China's rise through globalization and alignment with the international order does not alarm the US as the dominant power in the international system.

China's globalization and its policies in international politics, while negatively impacting the US's areas of interest, do not disrupt the international order through the competition between the two countries. This argument can be interpreted from two perspectives. The first is China's direct consolidation of its economic and political power through policies implemented by AIIB in its near and far geography. For example, the participation of US allies, such as the UK, Australia, South Korea, and Vietnam, in AIIB is of concern to the Washington administration.⁴⁷ The US's proposal of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2015 to challenge China in its nearby geography also exemplifies this. However, while the competition between China and the US poses risks such as regional bloc formation and global trade crisis, both actors can act harmoniously by establishing stronger institutions and deepening integration, especially in the Asia-Pacific.

China's assumption of global responsibilities in international politics does not negatively affect the US's areas of interest. The participation of US allies in AIIB, with their adherence to existing governance and standards of the global economy, suggests that AIIB is a complementary institution rather than a challenge to the Washington-led system. Additionally, the US's allies in Asia and Europe who joined AIIB wish to avoid being forced to choose between Washington and Beijing, perceiving no rational reason to do so.⁴⁸ These countries apply rational political strategies that benefit from both AIIB and TPP. For example, Vietnam's engagement with TPP provides an opportunity for integration with the US economy, while the country also benefits from the infrastructure development loans by AIIB within the BRI framework⁴⁹.

The second perspective is that the BRI, a complement to AIIB, also aligns with and contributes to the global order dominated by the US. Initially aimed at connecting Asian countries, BRI now focuses on commercial activities across a maritime route extending from Asia to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. BRI encourages investment in developing and selling 5G technology, establishing high-speed railways (for logistics purposes), producing solar and wind energy, expanding electronic payment platforms, and developing ultra-high voltage transmission systems in these regions through funds provided by AIIB.⁵⁰ Therefore, BRI aims to fill gaps in the global economy without contradicting the functioning of the liberal economic order dominated by the US.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started in 2019 and negatively impacted the international order, forced the countries that received loans for infrastructure enhancement projects within BRI to halt or cancel payments due to their inability to repay their debts to

47 David Dollar, "China's Rise as a Regional and Global Power: The AIIB and the 'One Belt, One Road'", *Horizons*, CIRSD, Summer 2015, p. 162.

48 *Ibid.*, pp.171-172.

49 Tomoya Onishi, "AIIB makes first loan to Vietnam bank amid South China Sea tensions", *Nikkei Asia*, 24.07.2020. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/AIIB-makes-first-loan-to-Vietnam-bank-amid-South-China-Sea-tensions>, accessed 30.05.2024.

50 Jennifer Hillman and David Sacks, "How Should the United States Compete With China's Belt and Road Initiative?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, 23.04.2021. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/how-should-united-states-compete-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative>, accessed 30.05.2024.

China. The global economic contraction raised questions about BRI's sustainability, putting countries in a dilemma between paying infrastructure project debts and providing healthcare and other social services to their populations. However, recognizing these countries' inability to repay, the Beijing administration prepared a low-cost and technology-focused program for the weaker BRI partners.⁵¹ Therefore, the new context created by the COVID-19 pandemic has broadened BRI's perspective rather than narrowing it, creating new geopolitical and economic opportunities.

In conclusion, the competition between the US and China carries the risk of leading to economic blocs. However, the ultimate outcome could be achieved through indirect pragmatic cooperation. In the future, China could join TPP, and the US could join AIIB, which would provide significant benefits to both actors' areas of interest. Hence, it is possible to see cooperation based on mutual interests in US-China relations in the near future.

2. US-China Competition and Cooperation in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa holds strategic importance in the international system and regional politics. It attracts significant attention due to its economic potential and geostrategic location, particularly in the context of the US-China competition. The US adopts a distinct approach to protect its strategic interests in the Horn of Africa, maintaining a military presence and collaborating with local governments to ensure security and stability. However, the US strategy in the region often appears inconsistent and insufficient, particularly in the face of China's rapid and extensive investments. This has limited US influence in the area.⁵²

On the other hand, China increases its influence in the Horn of Africa through economic, political, and military means. Countries such as Ethiopia and Djibouti are China's most important African allies. China has invested in significant infrastructure projects in Ethiopia and established a military base in Djibouti. These investments aim to enhance China's influence in the region under the BRI. China consolidates its economic and political power in the region through these means.⁵³

The Horn of Africa is not only a battleground for US-China competition, but it also attracts the attention of Middle Eastern countries and other global powers. The region is a stage for strategic calculations by countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran, which seek to increase their influence through various economic and military initiatives.⁵⁴ Thus, the Horn of Africa stands out as a convergence point for the strategic goals of both global and regional actors. The US-China competition affects the economic and political balance in the region, with local actors attempting to benefit from this power struggle. This situation makes the Horn of Africa's role in the international system and regional politics even more critical.

There are three main points of discussion regarding the global competition between the US and China in the context of the Horn of Africa, which are to be examined in the following sub-sections. First, both countries have established their military presence in

51 Frank Mouritz, "Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on China's Belt and Road Initiative", *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, 19:2, 2020, pp. 115-117.

52 Guido Lanfranchi, "Geopolitics Meets Local Politics in the Horn of Africa", *Clingendael*, 01.12.2021, <https://spectator.clingendael.org/en/publication/geopolitics-meets-local-politics-horn-africa>, accessed 30.05.2024.

53 Rebuma Dejene, "The New Geo-politics in the Horn of Africa and its Implications for Ethiopia's Foreign Policy", *Master Thesis*, Addis Ababa University Department of Political Science and International Relations, June 2020, pp. 85-94.

54 Ibid. pp. 43-80.

Djibouti. Second, technological competition stems from China's Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to create an alternative to the fiber optic network linking Europe and Asia, established initially by the US and the UK in 1945. Third, regional issues have arisen within the Horn of Africa between 2011 and 2021, such as the Ethiopia-Eritrea dispute and the Tigray crisis in Ethiopia that began in November 2020.

2.1. Indirect Pragmatic Cooperation in Combating Terrorism and Piracy at Military Bases in Djibouti

Djibouti's strategic location at the northwest of the Indian Ocean and the entrance of the Red Sea provides both the US and China with access and control over the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal. Due to global trade and the Yemen crisis, Djibouti's importance has increased among global actors. The country hosts more foreign military bases than any other in the world, accommodating bases from France, Italy, Japan, the US, and China, earning approximately \$300 million annually from this policy and thus the label of a "rentier state".⁵⁵ However, the proximity of these military bases to each other also leads to tensions. For instance, the US and Chinese bases are about 10 kilometers apart, and Washington officials have accused their Beijing counterparts of targeting US pilots with lasers that impair their vision, a claim Chinese officials deny.⁵⁶

The US military presence in Djibouti, which was established post-9/11 and expanded through the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, focuses on three main objectives: combating Al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist elements in the Arabian Peninsula, fighting terrorist organizations from the Sahel to North Africa, especially Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and securing economic relations with regional countries through support.⁵⁷ Similarly, China's objectives in the region include contributing to peacekeeping operations, resolving interstate border disputes, and achieving geoeconomic goals, although it officially describes its Djibouti base as a logistical facility. China has criticized AFRICOM, claiming that the US military presence in Djibouti increases regional instability and undermines counterterrorism operations.⁵⁸

The primary concern of the US regarding China's base in Djibouti is Beijing's attempt to consolidate its growing economic influence in the Middle East and Africa with a military presence, extending the geopolitical and geoeconomic competition from Asia to distant geographies. Considering that about 50% of China's energy imports pass through the Gulf of Aden,⁵⁹ Djibouti's significance to Beijing is apparent. Furthermore, besides establishing a military base, China has also provided grants and loans for development projects in Djibouti, whose government views them as mutually beneficial, despite criticism from the US and other Western actors. Thus, the US perceives China's military presence in Djibouti as a threat,⁶⁰ even though US-Djibouti relations remain strong.

55 Jessica Borowicz, "Strategic Location and Neopatrimonialism in Djibouti", *University of Kansas*, Lawrence, 2017, p.77.

56 "US warns airmen to beware of laser attacks near China's military base in Djibouti", *SCMP*, 02.05.2019. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2144387/us-warns-airmen-beware-laser-attacks-near-chinas>, accessed 30.05.2024.

57 Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Obama's Africa Policy: The Limits of Symbolic Power", *Africa Studies Review*, 56:2, 2013, p. 658.

58 Nathaniel Allen, "Assessing a Decade of U.S. Military Strategy in Africa", *Orbis*, 62:4, 2018, pp. 655-669.

59 Jeremy Page, "China Builds First Overseas Military Outpost", *Wall Street Journal*, 19.08.2016. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-builds-first-overseas-military-outpost-1471622690>, accessed 30.05.2024.

60 Carla Babb, "Djibouti: Pentagon Chief Visits Djibouti, Sole US Base in Africa", *South Africa Today*, 24.04.2017. <https://southafricatoday.net/africa-news/east-africa/djibouti/djibouti-pentagon-chief-visits-djibouti-sole-us-base-in-africa/>, accessed 30.05.2024.

China's cooperation with the international community has increased through partnerships developed under the BRI, which is reflected in its relationships with the UN and the EU. For example, in October 2018, China hosted the EU's Operation Atalanta, monitoring the Somali coastline, and conducted joint naval exercises with the EU. China's participation in this operation, alongside India and Japan, included protecting World Food Program ships, thus contributing to the initiative.⁶¹ China's cooperation in this context balances its presence in the South China Sea with that of Japan and EU countries.

China is an active member of several international organizations, such as the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee (UNCTC), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), ASEAN, and SCO. These memberships provide platforms for China to engage with the international community. Additionally, China's cooperation in counterterrorism across Africa, including the Horn of Africa, complements US counterterrorism policies. This cooperation allows the US to pressure China's policy implementations if American interests feel threatened.⁶² This situation also points to indirect pragmatic cooperation between the US and China in the Horn of Africa sub-regional system.

Despite ideological differences, maintaining relative stability in sub-regional systems like the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and the Horn of Africa, which are critical for international trade security, is in the common interest of the US and China. Establishing of the US-China Counterterrorism Working Group has enabled both states to progress in counterterrorism by negotiating, conducting research, and discussing solution scenarios. This cooperation developed post-9/11, with China approving the assignment of an FBI legal attaché in Beijing in 2004 and the establishment of a US Coast Guard Liaison Office in 2006. In addition, the 2006 Memorandum of Understanding allowed for mutual visits of law enforcement officers and establishment of a financial intelligence unit in China that worked with US officials, leading to anti-money laundering and counterterrorism financing legislation in China. These agreements formed the basis for cooperation in counterterrorism between the two actors from 2011 to 2021. According to a Washington-based US-China Economic and Security Review Commission report, China is open to counterterrorism and anti-money laundering communication at its Djibouti military base.⁶³

In conclusion, while the US increased its military presence in Djibouti and the Horn of Africa in the 2000s, China has consolidated its economic power. However, China revealed its ambition to be a significant player in regional and global politics by opening a military base in Djibouti in 2017. Both actors face a security dilemma, increasing their capacities to minimize perceived threats. However, in the context of the fight against terrorism and piracy in the Horn of Africa, there is an area of cooperation in which both actors have common interests. This suggests that both parties are content with the Horn of Africa sub-region.

2.2. Submarine Fiber Optic Networks as a Competitive Element

Submarine fiber optic networks, which use seabed-laid cables to transmit large amounts of data at high speeds with low latency and fewer weather-related disruptions than satellite and microwave communications, are vital for global communication, trade, and finance

61 "Welcoming Returning Support from French Multi-role Frigate 'La FS Surcouf', *EU NAVFOR*, 03.06.2019. <https://eunavfor.eu/news/welcoming-returning-support-french-multi-role-frigate-la-fs-surcouf>, accessed 30.05.2024.

62 Murray Scot Tanner and James Bellacqua, *China's Response to Terrorism*, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington D.C., 2016.

63 Tanner and Bellacqua, *China's Response to Terrorism*.

due to their security and reliability.⁶⁴ Besides their economic importance, submarine fiber optic networks are critical for military and strategic purposes, as they enable governments to monitor global shipping and trade, gather intelligence, and communicate with military bases and personnel worldwide, making them strategic assets in geopolitical competition among global actors like the US, China, and Russia. These networks also carry over 95% of international voice and data traffic despite inadequate protection by international law.⁶⁵

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected and digital, the importance of submarine fiber optic networks in international politics will continue to grow. Governments and companies will continue to invest in these networks in order to expand their economic and strategic reach, making control and access to these networks a critical factor in global politics. In this context, one of the ways in which China tries to expand its influence in the Bab-el-Mandeb region is to develop submarine fiber optic networks. For example, in 2018, Chinese telecommunications company Huawei Marine Networks completed a project connecting Pakistan with East Africa through a submarine cable system passing through the Red Sea, which the US opposed.⁶⁶ Known as the Pakistan-East Africa Cable Express (PEACE), this system is a strategic move by China to expand its digital connectivity and influence in the region. The PEACE project, announced as a geoeconomic initiative by China's BRI, links Pakistan's Gwadar port to the Maritime Silk Road, standing as an alternative to the existing fiber optic network connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe through the US and UK partnership.⁶⁷

In response to China's PEACE project, the US aims to control internet networks connecting Asia and Europe through the "Southeast Asia-Middle East-Western Europe 6" (SEA-ME-WE 6) project. This project, undertaken by US telecommunications company SubCom with an estimated \$600 million investment, will connect Southeast Asia to Europe via Singapore, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean, terminating in France. The 19,200-kilometer-long submarine cable network is expected to be completed by 2025 and will cover countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Maldives, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and France.⁶⁸

China has also emerged as a prominent actor in the region over the past decade, with its Belt and Road Initiative and its military base in Djibouti. Since 2012, Xi Jinping's administration has outlined plans for expanding economic cooperation through the Belt and Road Initiative, which includes building factories, roads, bridges, ports, airports, gas and oil pipelines, electric grids, and telecommunications networks. Over 60 countries, representing two-thirds of the world's population, have signed on to Belt and Road Initiative projects.⁶⁹ Djibouti is a critical point in these initiatives, intersecting with the PEACE project and the

64 Scott Coffen-Smout and Herbert Glen, "Submarine Cables: A Challenge for Ocean Management", *Marine Policy*, 24:6, 2000, pp. 441-448.

65 Paul Cochrane, "Red Sea cables: How UK and US spy agencies listen to the Middle East", *Middle East Eye*, 04.03.2021. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/red-sea-cables-how-us-uk-spy-agencies-listen-middle-east>, accessed 30.05.2024.

66 Lauren P. Blanchard and Sarah R. Collins, *Report: China's Engagement in Djibouti*, Library of Congress, Washington DC, 2019.

67 Emre Aytakin, "Kıtalarası Fiber Optik İnternet Ağları ABD-Çin Rekabetinde Yeni Cephe Açıyor", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 17.08.2022. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/kitalararasi-fiber-optik-internet-aglari-abd-cin-rekabetinde-yeni-cephe-aciyor/2662882>, accessed 30.05.2024.

68 Ibid.

69 Chao Wang, Ming K. Lim, Xinyi Zhang, Longfeng Zhao, Paul Tae-Woo Lee, "Railway and Road Infrastructure in the Belt and Road Initiative Countries: Estimating the Impact of Transport Infrastructure on Economic Growth", *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, 134, 2020, pp. 288-307.

existing SEA-ME-WE 6 network and emphasizing its significance in the geopolitics of fiber optic networks, given the presence of both US and Chinese military bases in the country.⁷⁰ For both the US and China, having control or influence on another state's critical infrastructure provides not only economic benefits but also significant geopolitical advantages.

In conclusion, the development of submarine fiber optic networks has significantly impacted international politics, especially in the context of dominant power competition. The competition between the US and China in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait through these networks is one of the tools by which they seek to maintain and enhance their technological influence in the region and control the geopolitical outcomes. Therefore, submarine fiber optic networks are fundamental for US-China competition in the international politics of dominant power rivalry. As a result, this issue also clearly illustrates the US-China competition in the Horn of Africa.

2.3. Geopolitical Competition: Eritrea-Ethiopia Dispute and Tigray Civil War

The reflections of US-China competition in international politics on crisis zones in the Horn of Africa between 2011 and 2021 can be seen in the Eritrea-Ethiopia dispute and the Tigray crisis that erupted in November 2020 in Ethiopia. As previously discussed, the influence of the US and China in Djibouti is directly or indirectly experienced in these interactions among the Horn of Africa countries. Before analyzing the competition between the US and China concerning the Tigray crisis, it is essential to examine the background of the crisis itself.

According to the Addis Ababa administration, the Tigray crisis began in November 2020 when the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) fired on the Ethiopian federal army.⁷¹ The TPLF had ruled Ethiopia for 30 years and represented the Tigray ethnic group, which makes up 7% of Ethiopia's approximately 100 million population. Due to its long rule, the TPLF has strong local and international influence through its well-trained military structure and civil bureaucracy. The conflict between the Addis Ababa government and the TPLF escalated after Abiy Ahmed was elected in 2018. He consolidated his power nationally and internationally by resolving the border dispute with Eritrea, earning the Nobel Peace Prize, and removing Tigrayans from security and civil bureaucracies. This led to tensions between the TPLF, which had lost its influence, and Abiy Ahmed.⁷² The TPLF held elections independently in Tigray in September 2020, questioning the legitimacy of the Addis Ababa government, which had previously postponed general elections due to the COVID-19 crisis.⁷³ The official start of the conflict was November 4, 2020, when Abiy Ahmed announced that the Ethiopian army had blockaded Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, following an attack by the TPLF on the Northern Command on the night of November 3, 2020.⁷⁴

Despite the removal of TPLF officials from the federal government in 2018, the US maintained good relations with the Addis Ababa government due to the peace process

70 Thomas Blaubauch, "Connecting Beijing's Global Infrastructure: The PEACE Cable in the Middle East and North Africa", *Middle East Institute*, 07.03.2022. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/connecting-beijings-global-infrastructure-peace-cable-middle-east-and-north-africa>, accessed 30.05.2024.

71 "Ethiopian PM Abiy accuses TPLF of camp 'attack', vows response", *Al Jazeera*, 02.10.2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/4/pm-ahmed-vows-response-after-deadly-attack-in-northern-ethiopia>, accessed 30.05.2024.

72 Kaan Devecioglu, "Ethiopia's Tigray conflict evolves in favor of the TPLF", *Mena Affairs*, 02.11.2021. <https://menaaffairs.com/ethiopia-tigray-conflict-evolves-in-favor-of-the-tplf/>, accessed 30 May 2024.

73 "Ethiopia Says Forced into 'Aimless War' as Bombings Alleged" *AP News*. <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-abiy-ahmed-africa-ethiopia-kenya-268321050c766661de9fcf843dde3d94>, accessed 30.05.2024.

74 "Ethiopia army threatens 'no mercy' in assault on regional capital", *The New Arab*, 25.11.2020. <https://www.newarab.com/news/ethiopia-army-threatens-no-mercy-assault-mekele>, accessed 30.05.2024.

between Ethiopia and Eritrea. However, as Eritrean troops fought in Tigray alongside Ethiopian forces, the US condemned both countries and called on the Asmara administration to withdraw its soldiers.⁷⁵ The US also proposed sanctions on Ethiopian and Eritrean forces at the UN Security Council, which were vetoed by Russia and China.⁷⁶ In a November 2021 interview with BBC Africa, AFRICOM Commander Major General William Zana stated that the US forces at the Djibouti military camp were “ready to respond to crises”.⁷⁷ This statement indicates that the US’s primary priorities in the Horn of Africa are to prevent the spread of Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Shabaab in Somalia and to leverage the crisis to counter China’s rising influence in the region. These concerns became central to the Biden administration’s regional policies by the end of 2021.

While the governments of Addis Ababa and Asmara faced increasing pressure from Western governments over the Tigray war, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Ethiopia and Eritrea. During his visit, Wang Yi emphasized that China did not interfere in Ethiopia’s internal affairs and opposed such interventions.⁷⁸ This statement directly targeted the US and its allies, as Beijing defined the pressure from the US and its allies on Addis Ababa as “interference in internal affairs”. However, Beijing remained silent on Eritrea’s involvement in Ethiopia’s internal affairs. As previously discussed, China’s and the US’s engagement with Ethiopia and other countries in the Horn of Africa in political, military, and socio-cultural areas aims to consolidate their economic interests. Therefore, both actors will likely continue their regional competition regarding the Tigray crisis in the coming years.

Conclusion

This study, within the Power Transition Theory (PTT) framework and specifically utilizing the concept of dissatisfaction, has investigated the complex dynamics of US-China competition in the Horn of Africa from 2012 to 2022. By applying the Multiple Hierarchy Model, the research aimed to explain the different levels of satisfaction both powers exhibited towards the existing international system based on their positions in the Horn of Africa sub-region hierarchy. The primary findings and causal results provide a detailed understanding of how this dominant power competition has shaped the geopolitical landscape of the Horn of Africa.

According to the first hypothesis analyzed in the study, which posits the US as a satisfied dominant power and China as a dissatisfied rising power, it is understood that the US, as an established hegemon, is naturally satisfied with the existing international system, while China, as a rising power, seeks to revise the order to suit its growing influence better. The study found that China’s actions in the Horn of Africa, such as its military base in Djibouti and extensive infrastructure investments, reflect its dissatisfaction with the status quo and its desire to establish its influence in the region. According to the Multiple Hierarchy Model in the Horn of Africa, this situation indicates two key findings. First, despite Ethiopia being the dominant power in the local hierarchy, Djibouti is also a rising power with the support of both China and the US. Second, similar to its position in the international system,

75 “United States Action to Press for the Resolution of the Crisis in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia” *US Department of State*, 23.05.2021. <https://www.state.gov/united-states-actions-to-press-for-the-resolution-of-the-crisis-in-the-tigray-region-of-ethiopia/>, accessed 30.05.2024.

76 Michelle Nichols and Daphne Psaledakis, “US Pushes U.N. Security Council to publicly address Ethiopia’s Tigray”, *Reuters*, 10.06.2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-pushes-un-security-council-publicly-address-ethiopias-tigray-2021-06-10/>, accessed 30.05.2024.

77 William Zana, “US force ‘Ready to respond’ to Ethiopia crisis”, *BBC Africa*, 12.11.2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-africa-59265578>, accessed 30.05.2024.

78 Fasika Tadesse, “China’s FM visit to Ethiopia”, *Bloomberg*, 12.01.2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-01/chinese-foreign-minister-visits-ethiopia-in-support-of-pm-abi>, accessed 30.05.2024.

China is also a dissatisfied actor in the Horn of Africa sub-region, as evidenced by its military base in Djibouti and its competition with the US in the Tigray crisis in Ethiopia. In this context, the emphasis the US places on human rights and security contrasts with China's policy of non-interference, highlighting their different approaches to regional stability and governance. Additionally, the competition between the two countries extends to technological developments. In this context, China aims to establish alternative communication networks such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the PEACE cable system, directly challenging the existing networks dominated by Western powers and emphasizing the technological dimension of the competition.

The second hypothesis discussed in the study positions the US as a dissatisfied dominant power and China as a satisfied rising power, contrary to traditional views. This hypothesis explores the idea that the US may not be satisfied with the current system due to the perceived threat from China's rise, while China sees the benefits of the existing order and is satisfied with it. The research indicates that the strategic responses of the US, such as increased military presence and trade wars, demonstrate Washington's dissatisfaction and efforts against China's growing power. Similarly, this situation suggests that the US is a dissatisfied actor against China's growing economic, diplomatic, and military presence in the Horn of Africa sub-region.

Finally, the third hypothesis posits that both the US and China can find elements of satisfaction by cooperating where mutual interests overlap within the existing system. In the Horn of Africa context, pragmatic examples of cooperation, particularly in combating terrorism and ensuring maritime security, were observed, highlighting areas where both powers benefited from the status quo despite underlying tensions. Additionally, Djibouti's strategic location has made it a focal point for the military presence of these two powers. The proximity of their bases to each other underscores intense competition but also necessitates some pragmatic cooperation in areas such as anti-piracy operations and counterterrorism efforts. Within the framework of this hypothesis, the Multiple Hierarchy Model, which assumes that global powers can establish hierarchies in different regions, provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the US-China dynamics in the Horn of Africa. This model illuminated how both powers have managed their regional influences and balanced between competition and cooperation in the Horn of Africa.

The study concludes that the US-China competition in the Horn of Africa is characterized by a complex interplay of dissatisfaction and strategic interests shaped by both geopolitical and geoeconomic factors. The findings reveal that, while both powers are fundamentally competitive, there are critical areas where their interests align, leading to instances of cooperation. This nuanced relationship, examined through the lenses of PTT and the Multiple Hierarchy Model, underscores the importance of strategic flexibility and pragmatic engagement in understanding and navigating the contemporary international order.

In summary, the US-China rivalry in the Horn of Africa is a microcosm of their broader global competition, reflecting both the challenges and opportunities inherent in a multipolar world. This study contributes to the literature on power transition by providing empirical insights into how dominant powers interact in strategically vital regions, offering valuable perspectives for policymakers and scholars alike.

Conflict of Interest Statement:

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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