

Title

Omnibalancing and Autocratic Regimes: Explaining Alignment Decisions in Relation to Domestic Regime Survival and Elite Coalitions by Comparing Belarus's and Kazakhstan's Participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Abstract (V1)

Traditional alignment theories, such as balance-of-power and balance-of-threat theories, suggest states can be motivated to bandwagon with a strong or emerging power for potential gain. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) appears a unique opportunity for such enterprising states. The BRI is an elite-driven, infrastructure modernisation mega-project. It offers participant countries infrastructure modernisation, with the promise of future economic development. The BRI appears as a unique opportunity for countries to bandwagon with China's rise and benefit economically at the same time. For states with autocratic regimes, however, the motivation to align with China and participate in the BRI is more nuanced than this initial picture suggests. In some cases, doing so risks state stability or degrades the general welfare of a state's inhabitants. This runs counter to motivations that drive traditional alignment theories. A revision of Steven David's omnibalancing theory provides a better lens through which to understand the alignment behaviour of autocratic regimes. Using case studies of Belarus and Kazakhstan, the author argues autocratic regimes' alignment decisions are driven more by internal threats to regime survival than by calculations of external threat or gain for the state. Internal threats can include coups, civil unrest, opposition leaders, political factions, and other forces perceived to be a challenge to a regime's survival. Democratic decline has intensified over recent years, and many of the BRI's key participants are nondemocratic. The nuances offered with this revision of omnibalancing theory provides a more robust explanation of the alignment behaviour of autocratic regimes.