

Omnibalancing as Explaining- Outcome Process-Tracing: Refinements to Methodology and Method when Using Omnibalancing

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What is Omnibalancing?

Where a regime in one state uses its external relations with another state to balance (meaning to check or to counter) internal threats to the regime's continued survival (David, 1991, pp. 235–236).

David's (1991) Methodology & Method

- IR approach is Neo/Realist mixed with Constructivism
- Methodology is critical realist
- David's original method uses (pp. 235–243):
 - Alignment that is puzzling for orthodox balance-of-power theory
 - Three enabling conditions
 - Qualitative case-study
- Ideal for studying Third World states

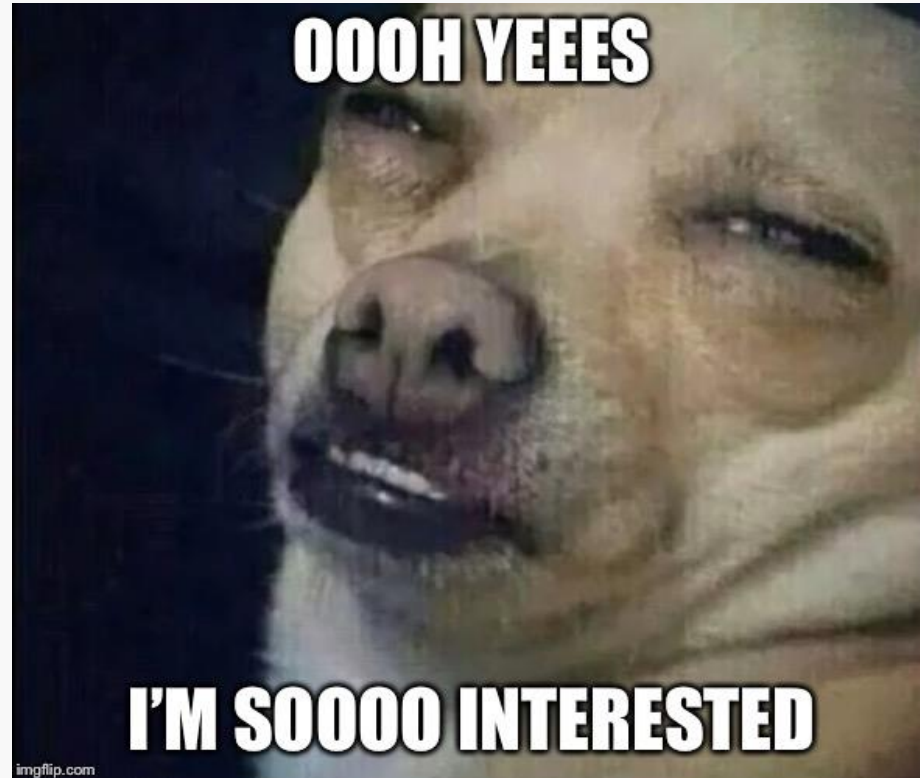
Why is omnibalancing Useful?

- Parsimonious
- Strong explanatory power in certain cases (often autocratic regimes)
- Explains illogical or theoretically troublesome foreign policy decisions

And Why is it WRONG?

- Out-of-date (Cold War intellectual milieu; Third World)
- Conceptually inaccurate (Illegitimate leaders; Weakness)
- Political science has made progress—methodology and method

Who cares?



How Do We Revise Omnibalancing?

1. Identify our starting point
 - Methodology: Analyticism (Jackson 2011)
2. Identify Key Issues
 - Sword of Damocles Problem
 - Quotidian Omnibalancing
 - Weak Evidence and Blanket Arguments
3. Make Revisions
 - Time-bounded crisis window
 - Seven Enabling Conditions
 - Use of Explaining-Outcome Process Tracing

Why Analyticism Suits Omnibalancing

- From Jackson's (2011) *The conduct of inquiry in international relations*
- Combines Ontological realism and epistemological constructivism
- Case-specific, abductive reasoning
- Theories as tools, not mirrors
- Reflexivity and transparency
- Integrates multiple causal mechanisms across different (domestic and external) levels

The 'Sword of Damocles' Problem

- Ever-present threats blur the boundary between 'normal' statecraft and omnibalancing.
- Losing regime's winning coalition (key supporters) can be invoked to justify almost any alignment decision, especially in autocracies.
- Result: explanatory overkill—Popper's "verification everywhere".
- Remedy: confine analysis to anomalous alignments and/or time-bounded crises.
- Test only when the move harms sovereignty, aids a secondary threat, or defies balance-of-power logic.

Examples of the SoD Problem

Chad is located at the “heart of a conflict-ridden region[..] Having benefitted from his assistance, none of the Western states, France in particular, “would have been happy with him quitting the job at a time a so-called ‘Jihadi crisis’ [was] unfolding in the Greater Sahel”

— Welz (2022, pp. 390, 391, and 399)

Düben (2023, p. 471) treats any event after the first colour revolutions until 2023 period as an undifferentiated threat environment. Almost any interaction between Russia and China act can be included as evidence of omnibalancing.

Quotidian Omnibalancing

- Where routine external interactions are re-labelled as survival strategies.
- Typical in post-Soviet (Düben 2023) and Sahel (Welz 2022) cases: decades of cooperation collapsed into a single causal story.
- A crisis delimiter (threat + urgency + uncertainty) disciplines data selection.
- Explaining-outcome process tracing then isolates the actual decision chain.
- Outcome: stops the analyst seeing omnibalancing *everywhere, all the time*.

Weak Evidence & Blanket Arguments

- Over-reliance on communiqués, rhetoric, or low-cost gestures (Düben 2023; Welz 2022; Miller & Toritsyn 2005) creates suggestive arguments.
- Lack of material costs, clear domestic threat, or verified causal mechanism.
- Intelligence-sharing \neq hard security guarantee; silence \neq countering threats.
- Require: (1) material support that mitigates an identified domestic threat; (2) evidence that leaders perceived high personal stakes; (3) process-traced link from external alignment to threat reduction.
- Use seven enabling conditions to grade evidence strength.

Crisis Window & Enabling Conditions

- Only select acute crises (Rosenthal et al. 1989) for the study of omnibalancing:
 - acute threat
 - severe time pressure
 - high uncertainty
- Replace “weak & illegitimate leader” with Seven Enabling Conditions:
 - (1) Significant internal threat(s)
 - (2) High personal stakes
 - (3) Checks degraded/absent
 - (4) Low state capacity
 - (5) Low legitimacy
 - (6) Fragmented elite
 - (7) Vulnerable geopolitical position.

Explaining-Outcome Process Tracing

- Omnibalancing has always been an explaining-Outcome Process Tracing (Beach 2021) exercise—whether the analyst knows this or not
- Use minimalist, explaining-outcome PT to trace Trigger → Action → Outcome inside the crisis window.
- Distinguish access failures (support not obtained) from conversion failures (support obtained but ineffective).
- Generates sequential, falsifiable within-case evidence, mitigating “quotidian” overreach.

Questions & Criticisms

- What is the relevance of success and failure in omnibalancing? Is it still worthy to study attempted but unsuccessful cases of omnibalancing? What cases can you think of that omnibalancing might be applicable to?
- Are there textbook cases of omnibalancing?
- What cases can you think of that omnibalancing might be applicable to?
- Omnibalancing seems so rare, what is the point of it?
- Are the seven enabling conditions a feat of over-engineering?
- Have these revisions destroyed the parsimony of the original theory?