Summary of Peter Braga's Panel Paper

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

The paper restates and revises Steven David's (1991) omnibalancing theory in order to explain why, when, and how contemporary autocratic leaders in the post-Soviet region align externally to neutralise domestic threats to regime survival. On the basis of conceptual and methodological refinements inspired by the author's PhD research, the paper both (1) defends omnibalancing as a regime-type-neutral framework that is nevertheless well-suited for studying autocracies and (2) offers a set of tools that prevent the "Sword of Damocles" or "quotidian omnibalancing" problem: this is where users of omnibalancing theory detect threats to regime survival and support for omnibalancing everywhere.

Main Arguments in Brief

The following is an overview of the main arguments I will make in my presentation.

1. Theory: Regime-Type Neutrality, Autocratic Affinity

Omnibalancing's core insight remains valid: rulers sometimes sacrifice national interests to keep power, using external alignment to balance (meaning to counter) internal (and external) threats to regime survival (David 1991: 235-45).

Formally, the omnibalancing is open to any regime type; however, selectorate logic (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003) shows why the foreign policy of autocracies is structurally geared to regime needs rather than state security. Autocracies possess a narrow winning coalition and weak societal veto players (Braga 2025, pp. 51–60). These characteristics make external alignments (which can damage sovereignty and be unpopular for the general public and other regime outsiders) an instrument for

shoring-up regime pillars (legitimation, elite co-optation, coercion: see Gerschewski 2013; 2023).

Hence omnibalancing is theoretically regime-neutral yet empirically most observable under autocracy – a point already implicit in the contemporary literature, where almost every application concerns authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states (Düben 2023, pp. 467–468).

2. The Sword of Damocles and Quotidian Omnibalancing Problems

The omnibalancing literature now suffers from chronic over-identification of threats. Because non-democracies constantly face some danger, scholars can label almost any alignment as omnibalancing. The result is an over-determinism spiral akin to Popper's critique of Marxism: evidence is seen everywhere and the concept loses discriminatory power.

Recent work on Russia–China (Düben 2023) illustrates this drift: routine economic cooperation is interpreted as permanent omnibalancing although no bounded crisis or demonstrable domestic peril is shown.

I term this risk "quotidian omnibalancing". Unless checked, it turns the concept into a catch-all for any autocratic foreign policy behaviour.

3. A Solution: Method-Based Revisions

To re-establish analytical accuracy, I propose three linked remedies.

(a) Time-bounded crisis window

Only study episodes that meet a three-part crisis definition: acute threat to regime survival, severe time pressure, and high uncertainty (Rosenthal et al. 1989). This confines analysis to exceptional "moments of choice" and guards against routine misclassification.

(b) Seven Enabling Conditions (ECs)

Replace David's vague "weak and illegitimate leader" requirement for omnibalancing with a modular checklist that captures contemporary autocratic realities:

1) Presence of significant internal threat(s)
2) High personal stakes for incumbents
3) Institutional checks degraded/absent
4) Low state capacity (administrative and/or coercive)
5) Low legitimacy
6) Fragmented elite
7) Vulnerable geopolitical position

The more ECs present, the higher the ex-ante probability that omnibalancing will be attempted, but no single condition is deterministic. The set can be operationalised through a simple truth-table to aid cross-case comparison.

(c) The Use of Explaining-Outcome Process Tracing

Use minimalist, explaining-outcome process tracing (Beach & Pedersen 2019; Beach 2021) to reconstruct, within the time-bounded crisis window, how the leadership linked an external alignment to the neutralisation of the domestic threat. This method: (1) forces sequential reconstruction (Trigger → Action → Outcome); (2) distinguishes access failures (support not obtained) from conversion failures (support obtained but not stabilising); (3) produces falsifiable within-case evidence rather than broad correlations.

Intended Contribution to the Study of Autocracies

The first contribution is conceptual. These revisions provide a regime-neutral but autocracy-sensitive reformulation of omnibalancing that travels beyond its Cold-War "Third World" origins.

In terms of method, these revisions offer a transparent framework (crisis delimitation + seven ECs + process tracing) that curbs over-extension and allows cumulative comparison across post-Soviet cases.

I look forward to the chair's and discussant's guidance on additional misclassification examples and on comparative leverage across other post-Soviet autocracies.