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Global China and the Quest for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Key Findings and Recommendations

In the past decade China has had a significant footprint in BiH. Even if it has not dramatically reshaped lived realities, China has changed the agenda and debate on BiH's future and is now an unavoidable topic. Yet, while the complex and uneasy peacebuilding process in BiH, and China's growing presence and impacts in the country and the broader region, have been individually studied at length, their intersection is rarely discussed. While neither BiH or Chinese representatives frame Sino-BiH relations against the backdrop of peacebuilding, nor use peacebuilding vocabulary (unlike in relations between BiH and the West, where this is a central trope), for China, the pursuit and maintenance of peace remains a long-term goal in its relations with BiH their outset. China's vision and methods, however, differ significantly from those of Western liberal actors. Thus, this paper assesses how China's nominally peace-oriented developmentalist and pragmatic approach is reshaping BiH's peacebuilding landscape, and what this intersection reveals about the evolving dynamics of global peace paradigms beyond the country and its region itself. Its key findings are:

- ▶ China has become an increasingly visible, pro-active, and impactful external actor in BiH in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis, affecting its socio-political and economic trajectories and its quest for lasting peace.
- ▶ China's approach is broadly based on sovereignty and non-interference, which, in itself, can have emancipatory effects. However, when coupled with an insufficiently nuanced approach towards contextual sensitivities, it manifests with unintended consequences. Notable is China's objection towards extending the mandate of the OHR, contradicting the Western peacebuilding agenda and touching upon internal divisions and uncertainties in BiH.
- ▶ Despite its commitments to a balanced approach, China has increasingly asymmetric reception in BiH. China has become a recurrent topic in the controversial political agenda of the Republika Srpska (RS)'s president, Milorad Dodik. Reactions to China's Xinjiang policies have led to divisions within the BiH Muslim community. Even if Beijing tries to avoid politics, China's presence is becoming a polarising political issue in BiH.

- ▶ On the ground, China engages BiH through economic means, predominantly through development finance and by investing in infrastructure that can have significant impacts on economic performance, both positive and negative. Sino-BiH cooperation has nonetheless raised concerns regarding governance and fiscal prudence. It has had mixed impact on sustainability, with recent trends in energy cooperation indicating a potential positive shift towards renewables.
- ▶ Bottom-up instances of Sino-BiH cooperation can potentially contribute to peace by displaying localised cooperation that provides ownership for the communities rather than elites. However, such instances are exceptions to the predominantly centralised relationship between the two sides.

Policy recommendations

For the West:

- ▶ Develop a granular understanding of China's presence in BiH, appraising the different impacts Chinese actors have, evaluating them, and balancing them with both BiH domestic and Western interests.
- ▶ Compete with China where necessary, however, where possibilities exist, pursue synergies with China to maximise benefits for the BiH population (primarily in the domain of economics).
- ▶ Engage with China on the OHR issue and the broader UN agenda for peace in BiH, while ensuring that BiH actors are given a voice in the debate.
- ▶ Ensure stronger governance compliance and oversight, lead by example, and support BiH authorities in developing accountability of external actors, including Chinese ones.
- ▶ Support local-level, civil society initiatives that provide critical oversight, and pursue principled engagement with China.

For the UK:

- ▶ Pro-actively lead diplomatic engagement with China on BiH, by coordinating with other international stakeholders and prioritising local interests. This will avoid reducing BiH to a venue for external actors' competition.
- ▶ Strengthen bilateral relations with BiH. Provide support where it is most needed to address the challenges stemming from the lack of capacity to deal with emergent China, while accounting for the complex and diversified nature of China's impacts (both positive and negative).
- ▶ Invest in local-level capacity building and knowledge dissemination on global affairs, and promote unofficial tripartite UK-Sino-BiH dialogue formats.

For BiH:

- ▶ Pursue a pragmatic but principled foreign policy that does not only balance deeper Chinese engagement with adhering to strategic interests and partnerships, but pro-actively synergises Sino-BiH relations with the country's strategic orientation.
- ▶ Enhance institutional and regulatory capacities to ensure that cooperation with China, while beneficial economically, also complies with national and international rules, norms and values, does not lead to dependencies, and is sustainable.
- ▶ Encourage and support bottom-up cooperation that benefits local communities and ensures that ownership of Sino-BiH cooperation is shared among different stakeholders within BiH society, offsetting China's preferred elite-centric approach.

Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) offers a unique vantage point for the observation of China's emergence as a global actor (Hasić, 2022) with an increased importance in the peacebuilding domain. BiH is a struggling, capital-dependent economy which has never managed to recover from the devastating effects of the war in the 1990s, and where traditional stakeholders (i.e. coming from Western Europe and the US) could not satiate the thirst for investment, opening space for new actors such as China, Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf monarchies (Huskić, 2020). Internal dynamics in BiH politics are marred by instabilities that are feared for their potential to fuel ethnic tensions. The political development of BiH is one of a 'controlled democracy' closely supervised by external actors, embodied in the institution of the High Representative (usually, a European, with an American deputy) that oversees the implementation of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA). The DPA includes veto and other law-binding powers (Dijkstra and Raadschelders, 2022), which China, and increasingly, Russia, consider interference in BiH's internal affairs. The once strong domestic belief in the Western reform agenda has been replaced with scepticism, and the EU and US have been increasingly met with cynicism by locals. A complex reality of uneasy inter-ethnic relations, seen as an illustration of the failures of a liberal model of peacebuilding in the country, has led to crisis of legitimacy and perpetual uncertainty; high-level corruption and the rise of populist leaders add a further layer of complexity. Against this backdrop China emerges as a potentially impactful actor in BiH (as in the broader region), often soliciting extreme reactions among those who perceive it as harbinger of new opportunities, and those that view it as a threat, positions that may be spoken out loud or kept pragmatically under the radar (Vangeli, 2021).

BiH and the broader Balkan region are a small part of China's global agenda. In the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis, China embarked on a proactive global endeavour to build and deepen links internationally, including post-socialist Europe through China's 14+1 platform,¹ which is a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Vangeli, 2017). While in China's taxonomy, the Balkans is considered part of the extended Global South; in reality, the region has effectively been a 'Western backyard' in which the US and the EU have played the role of primary security guarantors. In the past decade China has had a significant footprint in BiH, where, even if it has not dramatically reshaped lived realities, it has changed the agenda and debate on BiH's future, and China is now an unavoidable topic. Yet, while the complex and uneasy peacebuilding process in BiH, and China's growing presence and impact in the country and the broader region, have been individually studied at length, their intersection is rarely discussed.

Partial insights can be gained from the growing body of literature produced by think tanks on “China’s influence” (often preconceived as “malign”), however, this literature is primarily driven by strategic considerations in Western countries and less by actual concerns of people on the ground.

China's Developmental Peace

China's expanding global reach against the backdrop of major geopolitical disruptions renders its role in post-conflict societies more relevant. China has an unprecedented economic prowess which allows it to pursue a global vision which can transform local realities. China creates new interdependences, not least manifested through its BRI, which subsumes various forms of policy coordination, development cooperation, investment, trade and people-to-people relations ([NDRC, 2015](#)). One of the professed goals of the BRI is to address the global deficits in peace and development; in the 2020s, it has been complemented by three other significant initiatives: the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) ([Schuman, Fulton and Gering, 2023](#)). China has the resources to pursue a pro-active global agenda in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis (2008–09), often filling the void left by Western actors that have had to scale back their external activities in light of the material and normative disruption the Crisis has caused. However, China's 'win-win' approach, quite openly, entails China's economic benefit from its peace and development-oriented interactions abroad.

China's geoeconomic endeavours rest on a normative political blueprint that is distinct from the Western liberal paradigm, and often challenges it ([Peter and Rice, 2022](#); [Mariani, 2022](#)). China adopts a non-interventionist posture that prioritises political stability in partner countries and harshly opposes interference by outsiders, which is intertwined with an anti-universalistic ontology and a sovereigntist stance that countries should be able to choose their own political models ([Mariani, 2022](#)). As such, China is a major driver of an agenda of multipolarity in global politics, not least through the construction of new partnerships such as BRICS+ and new institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organizations (SCO) and advancing its agenda through existing ones. This includes the United Nations but also the Bretton Woods institutions, where it has increasing leverage and shapes the agenda on global issues such as climate change. China is gaining confidence as an actor in global conflicts, having contributed to the resolution of the Saudi-Iran dispute, and proposing a peace plan for Ukraine ([Mariani, 2024](#)). The rise of China, however, is met with antagonism in the U.S. and deep scepticism in the EU, contributing to contentious global political dynamics, with local ramifications at various intersections where American, European and Chinese agendas collide. This follows a dramatic increase in China's involvement in peacekeeping operations worldwide.

China's approach to peace combines its declared values with its security considerations but is also fundamental to its geoeconomic goals regarding building multi-faceted and long-term relationships with partners worldwide, including in post-conflict countries, such as BiH. The main difference between Chinese and Western approaches to peacebuilding lies in the question of what development should take place in the post-conflict context and how ([Peter and Rice, 2022](#)). China promotes global brick and mortar development with a focus on trans-regional and trans-continental economic integration. China prioritises robust governance and central government ownership in peacebuilding, while downplaying civil society's role. When navigating multi-ethnic landscapes, China prioritises stability and economic development over governance standards and human rights when dealing with post-conflict situations abroad, all while externalising its domestic principle of the healing properties of economic development in a context of ethnic divisions.

The Context of Bosnia and Herzegovina

BiH is a multi-ethnic post-conflict state that underwent civil war in the early 1990s, in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). The war in BiH ended after deep involvement of the international community, including the United Nations, the U.S., and Western European countries. In 1995, the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) was signed, charting a framework for post-conflict development, which is still in effect. As part of the ensuing peacebuilding process, post-war BiH was redesigned as a sovereign but complex state that ensured power sharing mechanisms and sufficient autonomy for the three ethnic communities: Bosniaks, Bosnian Serbs, and Bosnian Croats. Today, BiH is comprised of two entities, Republika Srpska (RS) with a majority ethnic Serb population, and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) with a majority ethnic Bosniak population; in 2009 the District of Brčko was granted autonomy. An important part of the political system in BiH is the Office of the High Representative (OHR), which was established with DPA and granted the so called 'Bonn powers' that make it a consequential actor on matters of significance for BiH's development ([Dijkstra and Raadschelders, 2022](#)). The Bonn powers are extensive and protruding, as they grant OHR the ability to adopt legally-binding decisions, intervene in the process of legislation amendment, and remove public officials, with the goal of ensuring an unobstructed implementation of DPA.

While this complex political arrangement in BiH has paved the way for a transition to more peaceful era, its inherent contradictions and limitations have led to critical opinions among scholars and experts, policymakers, and the general public. The post-Dayton political system of BiH is one of the most complex political systems internationally ([Kapidžić, 2020](#)), often criticised as a maze that is too difficult to navigate, and as a process of "institutionalization before liberalization" ([Gromes, 2009](#)). There have been plenty of discussions and initiatives regarding next steps and devising a more sustainable and inclusive political system.² Notable is the Prud and Butimir negotiations of 2009, where internal divisions and echoes of the war not only prevented a reform, but precipitated series of political crises which have continued to take place in a cyclical fashion ([Kasapović and Kočan, 2022](#)). The latest crisis cycle has concerned electoral reform and the role of OHR (Latal, 2023). Illiberal tendencies have been entrenched in the political culture of BiH, albeit more so in RS than in FBiH. Nationalist populism, and in particular, secessionist rhetoric in RS has been a perpetual source of anxiety.

These crises have eroded domestic legitimacy and have served as justification for the extension of the international peacekeeping institutions. The fact that there have been divergences between external actors, on how to manage BiH administration and governance issues only adds on to these complexities (Peter, 2015).

For BiH citizens across different ethnic groups and geographies, however, the key problems are the poor economic performance and the lack of economic opportunities in the country (CISR, 2022). BiH remains one of the poorest economies in Europe, with high unemployment, drastic outflow of highly skilled young people, endemic corruption, and a lack of competition due to an infrastructure gap and energy insecurity. Strategically committed to EU accession and pledging to undertake necessary reforms, BiH is stagnating on the way to EU membership, with an unclear future trajectory. These factors make it harder to sustain peace, but also to maintain stable pro-Western orientation. This implicates a deep-seated contradiction surrounding the liberal peacebuilding approach: while helping develop "internationally supported institutions" the state building endeavour seems to have several limitations, even failures, when it comes to meeting local needs (Belloni, Kappler, and Ramović, 2020). Against this backdrop, a deeply cynical political culture has emerged, seeing traditional Western stakeholders with a sense of fatigue and frustration. These developments created an opening for other external actors, including China, to advance their agendas in BiH.

China-BiH Relations

The Balkan region, of which BiH is part of, has a growing importance for China's external relations. Historically, SFRY was already a significant reference point in China's domestic and external debates. Its dissolution and descent into war was a major external shock that has significantly shaped China's understanding of the world and its own global mission, while also offering lessons for China's own governance challenges of dealing with ethnic tensions ([Brusadelli, 2023](#)).

In spite of its principled opposition to secession due to its own core issues, such as Taiwan, China recognised the sovereignty and independence of all post-Yugoslav states, including BiH that were established in the 1990s. However, the international community's response was concerning for China. The UNPKO in former Yugoslavia authorised the use of force beyond self-defence, which China saw as a huge blow to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs and the respect of sovereignty. In 1992–93, China therefore abstained eight times during UNSC voting on resolutions that would have expanded and strengthened the UNPKO mandate in former Yugoslavia, while voicing concerns that the operation was departing from the UN peacekeeping guidelines and regulations ([Fravel, 1996](#)). China embraced the 'low profile' international approach in the first half of the 1990s, due to the unfavourable international landscape after 1989 and the desire to avoid heads-on confrontation with the US, which was enjoying its 'unilateral moment'. Despite this, Beijing was largely cooperative and supportive of Western-led peacebuilding efforts in BiH. Moreover, China recognised the sovereignty of the Yugoslav successor states (including BiH's in March 1995) and supported the DPA.

In the 1990s China had a constructive relationship with BiH. Some Chinese migrants and businesses were present in the country, but this was not a significant development. The situation changed dramatically after the 2008–09 Global Financial Crisis, and China embarked on a global charm offensive. BiH has been included in the special Chinese initiative for cooperation with the countries of Central-East and Southeast Europe (CESEE, which Chinese call "Central-European Countries" or CEEC).³ This initiative was later subsumed under the BRI. In this new era of relations, BiH emerged as a destination for Chinese capital including transport infrastructure development finance and FDI in the energy sector, while trade expanded, and 'people to people' relations and cultural cooperation were strengthened. Notable examples of the latter include two Confucius Institutes, one in Sarajevo (FBiH) and another one in Banja Luka (RS) ([Hasić, 2022](#)).

BiH followed Serbia in adopting a visa-free travel regime, boosting cooperation in tourism. These endeavours have not been explicitly described as peacebuilding, but have been framed as contributing to development and lasting peace.

While China has been the initiator and the driving force of this new relationship, there has certainly been a demand for cooperation with China in BiH. BiH elites from both entities have attempted to use China-led initiatives as testing grounds to devise pragmatic agency on the global stage, motivated by the perceived "absence of opportunities for intensified relations with the West" (Ghincea, Volintiru, and Nikolovski, 2021). BiH has, in some ways, tried to follow the example of Serbia, an 'all-weather' friend in crafting close relations with China; while RS has been more decisive, FBiH has also pursued close relations with China, although there is an emergent trend of divergence between the two entities on the question of China. These considerations notwithstanding, there are structural constraints for BiH that limit how far relations with China can be advanced, for example, its market size, and challenges relating to the regulatory maze and rampant corruption. Moreover, the US and EU, traditional stakeholders in BiH, are apprehensive of China's arrival in the region and have played a gatekeeping role, working towards limiting the scope and depth of BiH-Chinese cooperation.

Unpacking Sino-Bosnian Interactions and Impacts

While considered to be less consequential for the region compared to Western actors, in the past decade China has left a significant footprint in BiH, both in ideational and material terms. China's geoeconomic approach changes the context in which the country develops internally and externally (Vangeli, [2020a](#); 2020b). Beijing has provided a novel type of socialisation under the 16+1 and BRI frameworks, i.e., one that is nominally on equal footing and based on non-interference. This is contrary to the instructional interventionism of the West, which is a disruptive discourse in the BiH debate. China's approach, moreover, provides a new regional and global vision for integration (through the narratives of New Silk Roads) and most importantly, a paradigm of development that is heavily focused on bricks and mortar development instead of an approach centred on institutional redesign, soft infrastructure, and transformation of the political culture. The latter has been promoted by Western actors in BiH for almost three decades, and is coupled with economic (neo)liberalisation and austerity. Nascent people-to-people links and interactions have also played a role in the process. Aside from desiring willing, engaging counterparts, China has had no specific normative criteria when selecting its BiH partners aside from political willingness to cooperate; contrary to the approach of Westerners who vet interlocutors based on a criteria of political values.

Politics. China's awareness of BiH's unique trajectory as a post-conflict state is reflected in how China approaches bilateral affairs with BiH under its non-interference diplomacy. This is visible on the levels of official rhetoric, protocol, and ceremony. At any official Chinese event in BiH, even in areas with relatively homogeneous populations, Chinese hosts reserve seats for all three ethnic communities. Chinese actors have attempted to establish links and pursue projects across BiH, appearing to be more concerned with performing the role of perfectly balanced actor, rather than with how they feed into the local dynamics, where excessive balancing is usually not considered a positive trait.⁴ However, despite attempts to engage everyone equally, there is an uneven response from the different entities. In recent years China has been increasingly welcome in RS and viewed with scepticism in FBiH. A 2022 public opinion poll demonstrates that BiH citizens see China predominantly favourably (52%) – but the numbers vary across ethnicity — Serbs are far most positive (79%), while Bosniaks (40%) and Croats (42%) are less so ([CISR, 2022](#)).

China's approach is more compatible with centralised counterparts with a strong political core, rather than with parties where there is a complex political dynamic or uncertainties related to even distribution of power, a feature that is rooted in practical rather than ideological considerations (Vangeli, 2022). Unlike FBiH, RS is highly centralised. The continuity of the rule of one party (the SNSD) with one paramount leader is better fitted for negotiating with China, compared to the more dynamic and complex landscape of FBiH (Kapidžić, 2020).

An additional reason for China's favour with RS is the positions of local elites, and in particular, that of RS's leader, Milorad Dodik. Once considered a progressive voice, since 2008–09, Dodik has entrenched his rule, running on an illiberal, populist, ethno-nationalist platform. He has not only pursued closer relations with Serbia under Aleksandar Vučić's presidency, but also tried to emulate Vučić's style of performative politics, including in foreign affairs. Yet, unlike Vučić, who has tried to develop a multi-vectoral foreign policy and pragmatically engage with all global powers simultaneously, Dodik has increasingly assumed an anti-Western position and citing Russia and China as his key partners. China, however, has not reciprocated this polarising rhetoric, and has instead stuck to its official discourse of neutrality, considering its involvement in RS as predominantly business oriented. While warm towards RS and Dodik, China has never hosted Dodik on an official visit. The most notable snub was when despite his public announcements, he was not invited to Beijing for the Third BRI Forum in 2023. However, China's willingness – even if primarily economic – to direct capital into RS through investment and development finance, has encouraged Dodik's agenda and left China vulnerable to criticism.

In contrast to RS's growing enthusiasm, China has been increasingly seen with scepticism in FBiH. Both the RS and FBiH positions are attributable to changing regional and global geopolitics (Hasić, 2022). As the US and the EU sharpen their rhetoric on China, they have attempted to enlist their partners, including in the Balkans, to join them in a global geopolitical struggle. Pro-Western actors in BiH are much more concentrated within FBiH and therefore take a more cautious approach towards China. China's crackdown on extremism in Xinjiang, a Chinese autonomous region with a majority ethnic Uyghur, Muslim population, adds an emotional layer for part of the ethnic Bosniak, Muslim population of FBiH.

Whilst Chinese officials frame their actions as taking place through “vocational schools” Western discourse claims these measures are undertaken in “concentration camps”, and that a “genocide” has taken place. The Xinjiang question has become important to bilateral BiH-China relations, particularly when BiH officials started to support UN resolutions condemning China, despite Dodik’s protestations that this overrides the principles of the federal constitution, as RS does not share this position.

The final, interlinked, factor is China’s evolving attitude on the mandate of the OHR. While China initially supported the OHR, China has recently aligned its position with Russia, arguing that after the completion 2022 term, the OHR should have been discontinued. The impact of these developments is multifaceted. In ideational terms, the criticism of OHR reflects China’s stance on Western intervention-based peacebuilding designs, and China’s emphasis on sovereignty as a key principle, including in post-conflict situations. It restores the historic argument that the Western-led peace efforts in BiH have overridden local agency and perspective. Such a position is not exclusive to Russia and China; a significant part of BiH’s population and elites have grown weary of Western involvement in the political and administrative affairs of the country. Discourse surrounding the OHR’s role, however, cannot be analysed without acknowledging the geopolitical context in which it was developed. Internally, the loudest critics of the OHR have been Dodik and SNSD. Local support for the OHR, however, has been offered both on the grounds of the merit of the institution, but also as a testament for the pro-Western orientation. China’s position, therefore, touches upon the sensitivities of navigating an uncertain geopolitical landscape. Finally, some individuals in BiH have voiced suspicions regarding the true motivations of the shift in attitude by China, arguing that China may be toughening its rhetoric as a result of the criticism on Xinjiang.

Economy. Politics and administrative issues, regardless of their intricacy, are of secondary importance to the Chinese agenda in BiH. While the impact of Chinese engagement on the politics of BiH is of primary concern to Western actors, for China, politics is a matter to be avoided altogether as it stands in the way of business; or rather, politics is only to be used to create a climate conducive to business. China has emerged primarily as a geoeconomic actor in the Balkans, pursuing a pro-active agenda centred on development finance, investment, and trade, with the goal to engage BiH and the other countries in the region in the nascent global economic network under the BRI framework. It has portrayed BiH, along with other Balkan countries – despite their combined minuscule size and complexities – as places with untapped economic potential, where there is a common interest between local actors and their Chinese counterparts to unlock new economic opportunities. This cooperation, according to Chinese officials and experts, is the first towards ensuring peace, not least in BiH.

Year	Exports (BiH → PRC)	Imports (PRC → BiH)
2021	21942.55	1026452.99
2020	15235.46	792528.4
2019	17149.36	829555.25
2018	22355.84	808083.99
2017	22051.34	683181.9
2016	14715.15	617691.3
2015	16033.19	619386.47
2014	9194.54	922474.25
2013	7078.48	620346.82
2012	5591.84	536225.09
2011	5803.6	551524.09

Table 1: Bilateral BiH-China trade in goods (in USD thousands). Source: World Integrated Trade Solution (UNCTAD & The World Bank Group)

An economy-oriented approach has addressed core concerns of the BiH population across different demographics and ethnic groups. In a 2022 Balkans-wide survey led by IRI, 85% of the BiH respondents said their country is going in the wrong direction, while pointing out that unemployment (24%), high cost of living (22%) and corruption (17%) are the main problems BiH faces (CISR, 2022). BiH leaders of various provenience agree on the primacy of getting out of the economic dead-end and have therefore embraced China as a potential new and supplementary source of capital and multiplier of economic opportunities. The most enthusiastic voices describe China's initiative as a "belt of hope" and "road of salvation" for the BiH economy (Borić, 2019). A more moderate view is shared by the public. While 33% of BiH citizens view China as a purely economic partner who provides benefits, 36% see it as an economic partner that brings benefits but also carries some conditions; a minority (15%) see China as primarily motivated by influence and control (CISR, 2022).

In the 2010s, all economic indicators of cooperation between China and BiH went up. The asymmetry, however, is staggering; for example, in 2021 BiH imports from China amounted to over a billion USD, and its exports 21.9 million USD, of which wood amounts to approximately 16 million USD (Table 2). BiH has hosted some notable development projects in the domains of transport and energy infrastructure, (a list of all projects up to the early 2020s is available in Table 3) split between the two entities.

Name of the Project	Chinese Construction Company	Announced	Started	Status	Location	Project Cost (EUR million)	Financing Agreement	PRC Involvement
Section of the Highway 5C	China State Construction Engineering Corporation Ltd	2019	2019	Under construction; Delayed	FbiH; Počitelj - Zvirovići	56.52	EIB Loan	100%
Section of the Highway 5C	Sinohydro Corporation Ltd (China) and PowerChina Roadbridge Group Co. Ltd (China), AzVirt L.L.C (Azerbaijan)	2019	2019	Under construction; Delayed	FbiH; Počitelj - Zvirovići	28.11	EIB Loan	N/A (consortium)
Tuzla Thermal Power Plant, construction of the new block (block 7)	China Gezhouba Group Company Ltd, China Energy Engineering Group, Guangdong Electric Power Design Institute Co., Ltd	2014	2019	Stalled	FBiH; Tuzla	722	Chinese loan 85%	100%
Ulog hydro power plant	Power Construction Corporation Of China/ Sinohydro Corporation Ltd	2017	2019	Under construction	RS; Ulog village	70	Domestic investor	100%
Upper Drina Hydro Power Plant Buk Bjela	China National Aero-technology International Engineering Corp	2017	N/A	Under construction	RS; Foča	195.1	ICBC Loan	100%

Name of the Project	Chinese Construction Company	Announced	Started	Status	Location	Project Cost (EUR million)	Financing Agreement	PRC Involvement
Stanari Thermal Power Plant	Dongfang Electric Corporation	2010	2010	Completed	RS; Doboj	500	70% Loan + Concession	100%
Dabar Hydro Power Plan	China Gezhouba Group	2019	2020	Under construction	RS; Bileća	222	ExIm Bank Loan	85%
Kamenograd Lignite Power Plant	Energy China International	2017 (MoU signed)	N/A	Stalled	FbiH; Sanski Most	N/A	Investment?	N/A
Higway - Banja Luka Prijedor	China Shandong International Economic & Technical Cooperation Group Ltd	2018	2021	Under construction	RS; Banja Luka - Prijedor,	297	Concession	N/A
Doboj Hospital	China Sinopharm International Corporation and Shanxi Construction Investment Group	2017	2019	Under construction; Delayed	RS; Doboj	52	Tender	N/A
Ivovik Wind Farm	PowerChina China National Technical Import & Export Corporation and PowerChina Resources	2020	2021	Completed	FBiH; Livno	130	Chinese FDI	39% after investor sold its 51% share

Name of the Project	Chinese Construction Company	Announced	Started	Status	Location	Project Cost (EUR million)	Financing Agreement	PRC Involvement
Sarajevo tram reconstruction	China Shandong International Economic & Technical Cooperation Group Ltd and China Railway No10 Engineering Group		2021	Completed	FBiH; Sarajevo	20	EBRD tender	N/A
Prijedor-Kozarska Dubica-Donja Gradina motorway construction	China Shandong International Economic	2024	N/A	N/A	RS	~347	Concession	N/A

Table 2 based on Matura et al; revised and updated with new information by the author.

Despite the uncertainties generated by the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical turbulence, in the period of reinvigorated BRI, it is to be expected that China will continue to be proactive regarding the Balkans and BiH. The already accumulated Chinese presence and the prospects for increase in the future poses the question of 'to what end?' in addition to 'how much?' when discussing China's footprint in the country. Finally, and importantly, how does China's economic involvement contribute to the professed goal of contributing to lasting peace?

Transport infrastructure development cooperation is already adding to the overall economic output and GDP of BiH, while contributing to building new connectivities that are of pan-European importance ([Gruebler, 2021](#)). BiH is known for its challenging physical terrain, which has often made infrastructure projects unpopular with traditional partners. However, the risk-taking attitude, and experience, of Chinese companies, gained during China's own infrastructure boom, are important factors in their appeal to BiH. Energy infrastructure development also helps to advance energy security in BiH, and ensure its position as a net energy exporter by pre-empting energy market disturbances. Transport and energy are two domains where China's contribution can help BiH overcome structural barriers to progress.

However, both areas of cooperation have been accompanied by inherent risks. Chinese lending for infrastructure projects has come in the form of 'tied loans', ensuring that Chinese companies are hired as lead contractors. In contrast to the alarmist "debt trap meme" ([Brautigham, 2020](#)), China has not exploited debt politically or militarily, however, financial sustainability issues are a potential cause for concern. One such case is of the Banja Luka–Prijeđor highway in RS, for which China Shandong International Economic and Technical Cooperation Group has won concession rights for 33 years ([including three years of construction](#)). This means that upon completion, the road will be maintained and operated by the Chinese partner, meaning it will not generate revenue (via toll fees) for BiH. In such a situation, for the project to be optimally utilised it will need to be integrated into a broader, and bolder long-term development strategy (i.e. of industrialisation and taking advantage of the new mobility), which BiH currently lacks. The lack of transparency and competitiveness can also raise suspicions of corruption.

Moreover, while infrastructure projects serve to improve existing and create new connectivities, the case of BiH is paradoxical because a major infrastructure project just outside of its borders is potentially working towards disconnecting BiH from the world. The Chinese SOE CRBC has won a public EU bid and successfully built the Pelješac Bridge in neighbouring Croatia, connecting the Croatian mainland to the Pelješac peninsula and the semi-exclave of Duvrnjak-Neretva County, bypassing the territory of BiH which previously provided the sole corridor connecting the two parts of Croatian territory. The bridge was built on a maritime territory disputed by BiH, with BiH authorities having also complained that the bridge compromises sea access to Neum, BiH's sole port ([Bickl, 2020](#)). Before the construction of the bridge, Neum used to be an important transition point, which has now lost its function, and with that, an important part of tourism revenue. However, given that the bridge was an EU-funded project, criticism was muted, while China was spared the blame.

When it comes to energy infrastructure, BiH-China cooperation, plagued by environmental concerns in the past, has recently seen an important shift towards sustainability. While BiH has enough energy production capacities, it faces the uphill challenge of transitioning towards a more sustainable energy mix. A potentially trail-blazing endeavour in the energy domain has been the Ilovik Wind farm. The largest wind energy complex in the region, Ilovik Wind Farm was built by the China Power Group, and later had the majority of its shares sold to a Luxembourgese investor within two years. The wind is perhaps Xi Jinping's assurance that China will not invest in new coal capacities overseas. Prior to the wind farm, the landmark projects in the BiH-China energy relationship were coal-burning thermal power plants that cause long-term detrimental effects on the environment and public health. Notably, China Gezhouba Group was supposed to lead the renovation and expansion of Tuzla coal-fired thermal power plant, the largest such capacity in BiH. Due to a synergy of political and environmental concerns, as well as external pressure by the EU, the cooperation has been delayed and it may be abandoned altogether. Hydropower plants that are often marketed as more sustainable solutions also threaten the integrity of BiH's rivers and their ecosystem, and can also have hazardous consequences for the livelihood of people near them (including people in neighbouring countries).

While the story of Chinese investment in BiH is mixed, with China also engaged in sustainable energy investment, major FDI in production capacities in BiH are missing, which is a point of complaint often voiced by BiH leaders. While improving economic performance and creating more structure for future development, without FDI China's economic activity in BiH does little in terms of generating net high-value-added activities that could help BiH move up the value chains and achieve a developmental leap. Indeed, China's economic engagement in BiH at times perpetuates trends of peripheralisation. A quarter of BiH exports to China are raw materials, including metal ores and as of late, wood. As China subsidises wood imports (due to an insatiable demand resultant of outlawing domestic logging), Chinese companies and individuals have been involved in both the mass buying of wood from BiH companies or engaging in illicit logging activities, by taking advantage of legal loopholes (e.g. inadequate regulation in FBiH and lack of implementation of regulation in RS). This has hurt BiH's own wood industry and wood consumers, undermined good governance, and affected the environment ([Krstinovska and Vuksanović, 2023](#)). It is important to note, however, that European countries remain the biggest importers of BiH wood, and that China is only a newcomer to the competition. Nevertheless, it is an example of Chinese actors reinforcing negative, ongoing trends.

Cooperation in sectors where a developmental breakthrough can be achieved, such as tech, has also been on the BiH-China agenda. However, as policy discourse on technology became securitised in the West, BiH also adjusted its attitude towards technology cooperation with China. The most significant development has been the advancement of the US-led "Clean Network Initiative", which has prevented strengthening of the cooperation between BiH and Chinese telecom giants like Huawei ([Vladisavljev, 2021](#)).

Ultimately, traditional stakeholders have exercised their structural power in a variety of areas, ensuring that BiH complies with its strategic commitments to, and the regulatory standards of, the West – even if the Chinese option makes more sense in commercial terms (as in the case of 5G) (Pavličević, 2019; Vangeli, 2022). Parallel to this regulation, the EU has refashioned its approach in light of the perceived Chinese influence, offering new and more adequate economic development instruments, starting from the Berlin Process, to the latest Growth Plan, while at the same time devising the Global Gateway initiative as a competitor to the BRI. The US has also been trying to restore its role in development cooperation by reinvigorating its International Development Finance Corporation and launching its own competitor to the BRI, Build Back Better World, later repackaged as the Partnership for Global Investment in Infrastructure under the banner of the G7. While further constraining the role of China in the region, these developments have made China an international (re)setter that has brought economic development to the fore of the global agenda. This shift is underlined by an implicit admission of certain inadequacies in the Western approach to economic development.

Society. In its cooperation with BiH, China's state-centric approach is manifest in locating ownership of cooperation initiatives with incumbent elites. Beyond the immediate political and economic consequences of such an approach, there are also tangible impacts on the formation of China's image in the eyes of BiH citizens, and its inability to relate to the general population. The substance of the society-to-society interaction between BiH and China is reflected in an official, state-framed discourse which, by design, cannot genuinely capture the hearts and minds of BiH citizens. While the popular representations of cargo trains and noisy factories that are prompted with the imaginaries of the New Silk Roads do boost China's image in the region, there seems to be emotional barrier, which leads to the maintenance of China's image as a distant partner.⁵ This is particularly evident in Chinese media in BiH, which makes little effort to grasp local contexts, or go beyond the pre-set approach to BiH set by Chinese institutions (Hasić and Duraković, 2022).⁶

On the other hand, the mere presence of novel and significant Chinese actors – which are culturally different not only from the host society, but also from all of BiH's primary (e.g. Western) and secondary (e.g. Russian, Turkish or Gulf) partners – helps develop at least some reflexivity and identity in global politics. Sometimes, the interactions between Chinese and BiH actors can depart from the Chinese agenda, as in response to the contrast in cultures, BiH actors cement their position of distance (e.g. this is particularly the case when someone with little experience in dealing with China visits China and experiences a culture shock – something that Chinese hosts often do not account for).⁷ Chinese migrants, although not integrated in BiH society, enrich cultural diversity while avoiding being framed as particularly significant Others. BiH has a visa free regime with China, and this allows for a rise in Chinese tourists, which, aside from the economic impact, has cultural relevance as well. BiH sites and monuments of its socialist past make the country a “red tourism” destination for Chinese visitors (Talmacs, forthcoming). The overall positive discourse on SFRY in China and Chinese Yugonostalgia are particularly relevant in the case of BiH; the movie *Walter Defends Sarajevo* has been one of the most broadcasted foreign movies in the history of China, with a cult-like following until the present day (Yee, 2020). While more of an exception than a macro-trend, such Chinese discourse on BiH diverges from the common Orientalist tropes of conflict, deep-seated ethnic hatred and backwardness that have been part of the mainstream discourse on BiH since the 1990s.

China has a lack of historical and political baggage in its relations with BiH, and this perhaps was a significant factor in why its charm offensive was not resisted in the first decade of the BRI. But this may change in the near future. The issue of Xinjiang, although not organic to BiH, entering debates instead through Western media, has already had a significant impact on the perception of China in the country. Most notably, the issue of Xinjiang has split the Muslim community in BiH. Part of the Muslim community has aligned with the positions of a number of majority-Muslim states in the Middle East who have supported China on the issue of Xinjiang. The former grand mufti has joined a delegation organised by UAE clerics and travelled to Xinjiang; upon his return to BiH he has claimed that Western accusations against China are not based on reality. He has then faced backlash by the current leadership of the Muslim community including the incumbent grand mufti which holds a strong anti-China line. These contentious dynamics were previously unseen in BiH-China relations.

Finally, it is important to note that China's presence is diversified, and so are the myriad of outcomes at a local level. There are some standalone examples of positive local impact. In the Confucius Institute at the University of Banja Luka (Interview, 2023), for example, a local input by Sinologists (as opposed to the top-down dynamic of other CIs in the world, including the one in Sarajevo, making them often subject of securitised discussions of Chinese influence) was crucial not only in giving new impetus to the work of the CI, but also to kickstarting a successful and popular Sinology program tied to it, which over the short period of its existence has started to attract a growing number of new students. The rise of China studies in Banja Luka has stimulated local youth by bringing novel content to an area that otherwise has difficulties retaining young people. While it could be easy to dismiss operations of CI as influence operation, the Banja Luka China studies experience has been a result of local pro-activity in utilising the opportunity to cooperate with China, which is in some sense an exception to the rule of China being the driver of the cooperation (as most-often, Chinese presence is not associated with local ownership of the initiatives). Other potential smaller scale examples could be sought elsewhere; the launch of a Chinese cultural centre in [Trebinje, for example, a small town in RS which has little exciting contents to offer to its youth](#). Another example could be sought in Huawei's corporate social activities, such as the Seeds for the Future program (internships and scholarships for advanced IT students) as well as its sponsorship of Sarajevo Unlimited, perhaps the biggest start-up festival in BiH, offering opportunities for BiH young entrepreneurs and innovators – although security concerns regarding tech cooperation with China limit the potential of such endeavours.

Conclusions

While not having participated in common peacebuilding activities, Global China is an impactful actor whose footprint in BiH in the post-Global Financial Crisis era affects the trajectory of the country and its quest for lasting peace. While China is not a decisive actor, it is increasingly consequential and managing relations with it can steer BiH's socio-political and economic development, and ultimately its quest for lasting peace in different directions.

High politics are not at the centre of China's agenda, but are the focal point for BiH and its Western partners. China's bet on the sovereignty of BiH reflects its general foreign policy principles, and in some ways can be emancipatory for BiH, who has long been an actor constrained by the complex post-DPA arrangements that limited its agency on the international stage. However, China's approach lacks nuanced understanding of the BiH context, which can then lead to awkward, unintended consequences. One such example is China's vote against the extension of the mandate of the OHR, where, while acting out of its principles of non-interference, China appears to be not only contradicting the liberal peacebuilding agenda but also assuming a role of a disruptor of the status quo. Related to this is the perceived greater sympathies for China in RS, despite China's attempt to project an equal treatment approach towards all demographics and ethnicities in BiH. Support of and by China is a recurrent reference in the ethnonationalist and even secessionist rhetoric employed by the RS leader Dodik. The association of China with Dodik, paradoxically, not only taints China's role in BiH, but is also problematic for China itself, as China remains firmly opposed to secessionism due to its own territorial issues. Ultimately, such an approach undermines stability and could negatively contribute to efforts to maintain peace.

Beyond politics, economics remain the main avenue where China seeks to play an active role both in terms of deepening the bilateral economic relationship, and by precipitating a broader shift in the international peace and development agenda on BiH whereby traditional stakeholders now also address the predicament of economic underdevelopment, in response to China's initiative. Sino-Bosnian transport infrastructure projects carried out in cooperation with China are poised to have a potentially transformative impact on BiH's economy in ways we cannot predict at present.

However, potential positive impact notwithstanding, circumventing procurement regulation increases risks of corruption and betraying public interest. The practice of build-operate-transfer concession agreements is a stark reminder of the commercial imperatives of Chinese actors. Regarding energy infrastructure investment, the case of the Ilovik Wind Farm should be used to build momentum towards a shift to sustainable energy. The move away from hydropower where environmental risks are high and phasing out of highly polluting coal – should they be maintained – will ultimately synergise the sustainability agenda with the peacebuilding one. Ultimately, extractive and unsustainable economic practices must give way to economic cooperation that would instead empower local communities. The desires of BiH elites for more Chinese FDI should be translated to policy priorities; although what stands in their way may as well be the same governance issues that discourage other investors.

There is a certain cultural gap between BiH and China which, while limiting how far can their interaction go, also allows developing relations unburdened by the symbolic weights of history. Chinese migrants and tourists enrich the diversity of BiH and can play a positive role in society. However, the issue of Xinjiang burdens BiH's Muslim community and is one potential example of, not only discord between the two sides, but of China turning into a contentious domestic issue. In practice, while China prefers a top-down approach and government ownership of initiatives and interactions, there are examples from BiH that demonstrate local impact – e.g. the Banja Luka CI – that show bottom-up dynamics are an exception to the rule but are also the ones which carry the highest transformative potential. Local ownership of cooperation projects and outcomes needs to be encouraged as it is most conducive to contributing to the agenda of lasting peace.

Endnotes

¹ Originally established as 16+1 in 2013 (counting 16 CESEE members, including Albania, BiH, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia), then enlarged to 17+1 (as Greece joined in 2019), then reduced to 14+1 (as the Baltic states suspended their participation).

² BiH's political system is also considered to have in-built discrimination features. A landmark decision by the European Court for Human Rights in 2009 on the case of Sejdić and Finci, a Roma and a Jewish activist respectively, has shown that the BiH ethnocracy by design discriminates against those who are not part of the three constituent ethnic communities (Bardutzky, 2010).

³ The platform has commonly been referred to as 16+1 (later expanded to 17+1 with Greece joining the format in 2019). As of 2023 it is reduced to 14+1 as Baltic states froze their membership in 2022-23 after the Sino-Lithuanian tensions over Taiwan.

⁴ Aside from apparent evidence of this – e.g. pursuit of projects across the whole territory of BiH, Confucius Institutes in both Sarajevo and Banja Luka, anecdotal evidence suggests that even when buying and helping export BiH wines to China, Chinese officials ensure that they either include both or at least alternate between Trebinje in RS and Mostar in FBiH in order to appear balanced. Expert interview, 02 December 2023.

⁵ These points were corroborated by interview with a Sarajevo-based expert in November 2023.

⁶ Moreover, BiH is notably the first country in the Balkans to host a dedicated outlet to China's perspective and its BRI (Glas Kine – The Voice of China issued by the Sarajevo-based Bosnia-China Friendship Association), but these seem to have limited audience.

⁷ Insights based on years-long participant observation of regional China-initiated track-2 diplomatic exchanges.

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