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The Dayton Peace Process: A Keyhole into Russian and Chinese Engagement with Liberal Peacebuilding

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the roles of Russia and China in a long-standing peace process in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and the broader implications of this for liberal peacebuilding. Using an original dataset of statements from UN Security Council debates (2000–2023), we analyse shifts in their discourse and sentiments. While both countries experienced a negative trend in sentiments towards the liberal peacebuilding project in BiH over time, there are substantial differences in their approaches. Russia places a far greater emphasis on rejection of liberal components of the process (integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions, attempts to preserve the unity of BiH by empowering central institutions to perform their function, and attempts to sanction genocide denial). Meanwhile, China primarily raised concerns around procedural matters but did not object to the liberal components. The findings show that Russia and China's actions complicate liberal peacebuilding efforts but also highlight the need for adaptable strategies that consider the diverse motivations and actions of emerging powers in different peacebuilding sites. They also underscore the need to move beyond the West vs. non-West dichotomy.

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Introduction

In November 1995, the conclusion of the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Dayton Agreement, the Accords), signified the formal cessation of the most violent conflict in Europe since World War II.¹ The Accords and its eleven annexes are a quintessential comprehensive peace agreement of the liberal peacebuilding era. The Dayton Agreement and the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), which

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¹*Dayton Peace Agreement.*

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forms an integral part, explicitly refer to the so-called liberal values – democratic elections, human, minority, religious, gender rights – and treaties, including the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, as the basis of the future state. Attempting to satisfy all three main ethnic groups – Bosniaks,² Croats, and Serbs – they also outline a highly complex power-sharing structure.³ BiH was devised as a single state composed of two entities – the Federation of BiH (FBiH) (mostly Bosniak and Croat) and the Republika Srpska (RS) (mostly Serb) – with FBiH further subdivided into ten cantons. These sub-state political units do not predate the war and are linked to ethnic cleansing campaigns resulting in significant demographic shifts; the most known being the genocide of the Muslim population of Srebrenica, which now falls under the Serb-dominated RS. Linking the new sub-state units was a weak state-level structure with a heavily circumscribed list of responsibilities. Faced with the challenge of implementing a complex and ambiguous peace agreement in a highly divided society, a variety of international organizations were called upon to facilitate and intervene to assist the statebuilding process.

Thirty years later, the peace process and the implementation of Dayton provisions are ongoing. With minor amendments, the aforementioned political system remains; despite repeated attempts, the constitutional structure was never successfully renegotiated. Key international institutions remain active in the country. But BiH has undergone significant political changes, as has the world. Domestically, BiH has witnessed substantial democratic backsliding over the last decade.⁴ With the election of an authoritarian politician Milorad Dodik to the RS presidency in 2010, the entity intensified its obstruction of forming functioning state-level institutions and repeatedly called for an independence referendum. The rhetoric of genocide denial has also been on the rise.⁵ Internationally, the BiH peacebuilding project represented an integralist version of liberal peacebuilding that is no longer practiced today in other contexts. If the 1990s were the peak of the unipolar order and the dominance of liberal actors and ideas on the international stage, today's world is much more fragmented. Geopolitical shifts and tensions are spilling into conflict management and peace processes everywhere.

In this paper, we assess how these geopolitical tensions have translated into the implementation of an agreement brokered in a different era. Specifically, we look at how actors often described as illiberal, namely Russia and China, have interacted over time with a peace process that was initiated when the international system was dominated by liberal democratic states

²Bosniak is a term for predominantly Muslim population of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the English language literature this ethnic group is also referred to as (Bosnian) Muslim.

³Wise, *Bosnia-Herzegovina Case Study*.

⁴Kapidžić, "The Rise of Illiberal Politics in Southeast Europe".

⁵Toal, "Republika Srpska will have a Referendum"; Gueudet, *Republika Srpska*.

and designs. We do so by analysing an original dataset coding Russian and Chinese statements in UN Security Council debates on BiH. Our analysis shows that the two countries differ significantly in their approaches and attitudes towards the BiH peace process but have both experienced a negative trend in sentiment over time. Russia is more overt in its rejection of liberal components of the process (integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions, attempts to preserve the unity of BiH by empowering state-level institutions to perform their function, and attempts to sanction genocide denial). Meanwhile, China primarily raised concerns around procedural matters but did not object to process's liberal components.

Our findings resonate with recent empirical studies of Russia⁶ and China⁷ in the region, while at the same time questioning some of the broader discussions around challenges to the liberal peacebuilding, where China is often seen as the one proposing an alternative peacebuilding model.⁸ We see two interrelated contributions here. First, our study adds to the emerging body of empirical and conceptual literature highlighting differentiation between the two countries,⁹ and the broader literature articulating the need to move beyond the West vs. non-West dichotomy in peacebuilding.¹⁰ Second, our findings also contribute to the debates on norm contestation by demonstrating that the two countries employ distinct types of discourse contestation, each with varying impacts on existing policy. China employs, what Bhatia and Coleman have described as an 'augmentative discourse', which focuses on procedures and reinforces the existing (liberal) paradigm, while Russia increasingly employs a 'transformative discourse', challenging the existing paradigm by presenting alternative frames and arguments. The latter presents a stronger challenge to the liberal peacebuilding project.¹¹

We begin our paper by situating our argument within existing debates and outlining our methodology. The core of the paper is composed of two sections examining approaches of Russia and China towards *the form* and *the substance* of the BiH statebuilding project, the two components of liberal peacebuilding criticized by its objectors. The first section traces their

⁶Bechev, *Rival Power*; Čančar, "Russia is Weaponising Bosnia"; Gueudet, *Republika Srpska*; Huskić, "Bosnia and Herzegovina"; Mahmutaj, "Russian Government Policy in the Western Balkans"; Metodjeva, *Russian Narrative Proxies in The Western Balkans*; Ronc, "Bosnia and Russia".

⁷ECFR, "Mapping China's Rise in the Western Balkans"; Hasić, "The Role of China in Bosnia and Herzegovina"; Shopov, *Mapping China's Rise in the Western Balkans*; Stanicek and Tarpova, "China's Strategic Interests in the Western Balkans"; Vangeli, *Global China and the Quest for Peace*.

⁸Call and de Coning, "Conclusion"; Jütersonke et al., "Norm Contestation and Normative Transformation".

⁹Snetkov and Lanteigne, "The Loud Dissenter and Its Cautious Partner"; Marc and Jones, *The New Geopolitics of Fragility*.

¹⁰Jütersonke et al., "Norm Contestation and Normative Transformation in Global Peacebuilding Order(s)"; Peter and Rice, *Non-Western Approaches to Peacemaking and Peacebuilding*; Levorato and Donelli, "Undoing the Liberal versus Illiberal Peacebuilding Dichotomy".

¹¹Bhatia and Coleman, "Ideas and Discourse".

approaches towards the key international civilian institution – the High Representative (HiRep) – with perceptions of the HiRep used as an indicator of the two countries’ sentiments towards institutions at the centre of the heavy-handed statebuilding of the liberal era. The second section traces the sentiments of Russia and China towards Euro-Atlantic integration, namely integration into the EU and NATO, and the Republika Srpska, as the entity became increasingly engaged in genocide denial and secessionist politics. These are used as indicators of the two countries’ discourses about liberal values promoted in the BiH peacebuilding project. These analyses are situated within critical junctures of Russia’s and China’s broader foreign policies and BiH’s domestic context. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our findings for the BiH peacebuilding project and liberal peacebuilding generally.

Focus and Methodology

Critiques of liberal peacebuilding – both scholarly and those emanating from emerging powers – have centred on its form and its substance.¹² In its form, liberal peacebuilding is seen as promoting a heavy top-down approach,¹³ imposing conditionality from above,¹⁴ and prioritizing international over local expertise.¹⁵ Emerging powers, including Russia and China, have voiced concerns around liberal peacebuilding modalities seeing them as interventions into the internal affairs countries, with statebuilding institutions themselves seen to undermine sovereignty and hinder domestic ownership of post-conflict states.¹⁶ These concerns are amplified in operations with executive mandates, such as the one in BiH, where the HiRep has the powers to pass, annul or amend laws deemed incompatible with the peace agreement and sanction individuals obstructing its implementation.¹⁷

When it comes to substance, critics of liberal peacebuilding have focused on its bloated agenda,¹⁸ leading scholars to conclude that peacebuilding ‘reflects the practical and ideological interests of the global north’.¹⁹ Chinese and Russian critiques resonate with this criticism, with scholars highlighting that the two particularly disagree with the focus on political and civil rights and participatory governance.²⁰ As one strategy, these two permanent United Nations Security Council (UNSC, Council) members,

¹²Osland and Peter, “UN Peace Operations in a Multipolar Order”.

¹³Campbell, *Global Governance and Local Peace*.

¹⁴Richmond, “The Problem of Peace”.

¹⁵Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution*.

¹⁶Call and de Coning, “Conclusion”; Sørensen, “That is Not Intervention”.

¹⁷Caplan, *International Governance of War-Torn Territories*; Chandler, *Empire in Denial*; Knaus and Martin, “Lessons from Bosnia and Herzegovina”.

¹⁸Oksamytna and Lundgren, “Decorating the ‘Christmas Tree’”.

¹⁹Mac Ginty, “Hybrid Peace,” 393.

²⁰Jütersonke et al., “Norm Contestation and Normative Transformation”.

have actively worked to defund human rights posts within United Nations missions.²¹ Beyond the multilateral approaches, there has been a growing focus around the Russian authoritarian ‘peace’ approach, aimed at empowering central government prioritizing ‘authoritarian stability over justice, human rights and democracy’.²² Through this approach Russia is seen to pursue the short-term goals of conflict management over long-term goals of conflict resolution.²³ In parallel, China is often described as articulating an alternative, developmental peace vision to managing conflict affected states, where economic development fosters longer-term political stability.²⁴

The case of BiH is particularly interesting considering these dynamics, as it represents one of the most intense and interventionist forms of peacebuilding that explicitly pursued liberal values. To gauge how Russia and China have engaged *the form* and *the substance* of the BiH statebuilding project, we developed a novel dataset tracking their activities and perceptions in the UNSC debates on BiH. This forum was specifically chosen because the verbatim records of debates between UNSC member states associated with the briefings and reports of the HiRep for BiH offer a rare and detailed representation of Chinese and Russian perceptions of liberal peacebuilding institutions, particularly those that involve external executive authority. Bi-annual briefings by the HiRep and associated UNSC discussion became commonplace after 2000. Thus, the data are taken from 2000 to the end of 2023, providing forty-eight observation points per country. UNSC statements have their biases, as they articulate what individual countries want other countries to hear. However, the longitudinal nature of our study and a consistent engagement allows us to track both major shifts in Russian and Chinese approaches to the peace process in BiH through sentiment analysis, and the more subtle changes in their discourse through a qualitative assessment of their discursive contestation. In this way, we compare Russian and Chinese sentiments towards the norms that have shaped the peace agenda in BiH.

We subjected this data to interpretive affective valence as well as more substantive qualitative sentiment analysis to ascertain and compare the official Russian and Chinese perceptions of executive state-building institutions associated with the liberal peacebuilding experience in BiH. We contextualize these sentiments within the broader discourse of these governments to understand the deeper social and political stimuli and

²¹Fung and Lam, “Staffing the United Nations”; Charbonneau, “Oppose Russia and China’s Assault on Human Rights”.

²²Lewis, “Contesting Liberal Peace”.

²³Averre, *Russian Strategy in the Middle East and North Africa*; Badache, Hellmüller, and Salaymeh, “Conflict Management or Conflict Resolution”; Houghton, “The Competition over Norms”; Lewis, “Russian Diplomacy and Conflict Management”.

²⁴Meng, *Developmental Peace*; Wong, “The Rise of China’s Developmental Peace”; Call and de Coning, “Conclusion”.

rationales associated with them.²⁵ Our discourse analysis approach accounts for language, policy actions, historical context, and shifts in global balances of power, and highlights the intrinsic nature of diplomatic statements, and language, to peacebuilding discourse.²⁶ Due to this approach, the concepts of ‘sentiment’, ‘perception’ and ‘discourse’ are closely related. Sentiments were extracted and coded from expressed perceptions, particularly as they related to the broader discourse forwarded by the actors under scrutiny. Our research shows that perceptions tend to reflect broader discourse about liberal peacebuilding and were often instrumentalised to promote discourses intended to either transform or reinforce the extant peacebuilding norms, particularly as they relate to BiH.²⁷

Our dataset codes Russian and Chinese sentiments towards all key international institutions associated with the peace process, with our qualitative analysis focusing on the shifts in their perceptions of the HiRep and his Office (OHR). This does not diminish the contributions of other institutions involved in the peace process, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the United Nations Mission in BiH (UNMIBH), or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). However, the OHR’s role as a long-term political oversight body, combined with data collected from UNSC meeting notes where state representatives discussed HiRep reports, makes it particularly illustrative of how these two powers have engaged with multilateral institutions in BiH.

Interpretive affective valence sentiment analysis involved categorizing Russian and Chinese statements about individual institutions as *negative*, *neutral*, or *positive*. If no statement was made, it was marked as a non-mention. Statements were coded as negative if there were more negative than positive remarks, or if at least one negative statement was present alongside neutral ones. Positive statements were identified when there were more positive than negative remarks, or if at least one positive statement was present alongside neutral ones. Neutral statements were those with equal positive and negative remarks or purely factual content. Positive sentiments were indicated by verbs like ‘welcome’, ‘praise’, ‘commend’, ‘support’, ‘appreciate’, and ‘thank’, or by expressions of continued cooperation and preference for an institution. Negative sentiments included verbs like ‘condemn’, ‘denounce’, ‘be concerned’, and ‘be outraged’, or by desires to reduce or remove an institution, or to operate outside its mandate, such as through boycotts or disengagement.

The data are shown in stacked bar charts in [Figures 1 and 2](#) for the OHR. Each graph includes two data points per year, corresponding to the two annual

²⁵Gaspar et al., “Beyond Positive or Negative”.

²⁶Neumann, “Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn”.

²⁷Bhatia and Coleman, “Ideas and Discourse”.

meetings on BiH. A column reaching 2 indicates two positive statements made that year, while a column at -2 indicates two negative statements. Columns at 1 or -1 show that one positive or negative statement was made alongside a neutral statement or no mention in the other meeting of the same year. A circle on the X axis represents a neutral statement. In some years, both a bar and a circle may appear, indicating one meeting had a negative or positive statement while the other had a neutral one.

Our dataset also systematically tracks the two countries' perceptions of the substantive agenda pursued in the BiH statebuilding project. In our analysis of their engagement with the so-called liberal agenda, we analyse Russian and Chinese sentiments regarding (1) BiH's Euro-Atlantic integration and the 'West's' role and approach to BiH, and (2) their support for Republika Srpska as the main challenger to the integralist agenda.

Our sentiment analysis aggregates references to all transatlantic institutions under 'Euro-Atlantic integration', with our discourse analysis highlighting any nuances between the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). We made this choice as Russia and China most commonly use the umbrella term 'Euro-Atlantic integration' in their statements, only occasionally referring to specific institutions. Statements were coded as 'against Euro-Atlantic integration' if they expressed concern or condemnation of efforts to integrate BiH into these organizations. Anti-West statements blamed the West or Western states for problems in BiH and the region. We supplement this analysis of their approach towards the liberal agenda by looking at their perceptions towards the only EU institution for which there was consistent data: the EU military mission EUFOR-Althea (Figures 4 and 5). Considering approaches to local actors that obstruct the liberal agenda, we analyse Russian and Chinese perceptions of the RS. Pro-RS statements showed sympathy or support for Republika Srpska or its government, such as defending it from criticism by international institutions or endorsing its controversial stances. These sentiments are displayed in a comparative line graph (Figure 3), with the Y axis representing the two annual UNSC meetings on BiH. Since these are dichotomous variables, a value of 1 or 2 on the Y axis indicates the number of meetings where such sentiments were expressed each year, while 0 indicates no such sentiments were expressed.

The graphs representing the sentiment analysis do not reflect the qualitative severity of Russian and Chinese statements; this is detailed in the following discourse analysis. Our analysis does not take a normative stance but focuses on the sentiments expressed by Russian and Chinese representatives.

Attitudes Towards Liberal Peacebuilding Institutions

Over the past three decades, the civilian presence in BiH has involved a wide range of international actors tasked with overseeing, facilitating,

and, when necessary, intervening in various aspects of the peace process.²⁸ The HiRep, established in Annex 10 of the Dayton Agreement, remains the key international institution wielding considerable powers in the country. What elevates the OHR from a monitoring and facilitation mission to an international administration, are his enforcement powers and power to interpret the peace agreement. The HiRep became ‘the final authority in theatre regarding interpretation of this [Dayton] Agreement on the civilian implementation of the peace settlement’. In 1997, in response to the local parties’ intransigence during the early years of the peace process, the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), which included Russia and China, more explicitly affirmed the HiRep’s enforcement powers.²⁹ The so-called Bonn powers enabled the HiRep to pass binding legislation to unlock the peace process and amend or annul domestic legislation deemed to obstruct it. They also gave the HiRep powers to sanction individuals who were obstructing the peace process.

The HiRep’s interpretation and enforcement powers are one of the most expansive in any peacebuilding operation and strike at the heart of sovereignty and non-intervention debates, values that both Russia and China prioritize in their peacebuilding discourses. These are highly controversial powers and over the years have attracted substantial attention in scholarship and the policy community,³⁰ but as the analysis below shows, were not uniformly objected to by Russia and China.

Russia and the OHR

Until 2008, Russia discursively supported the OHR, making positive statement and largely praising the actions of the institution, with only two neutral statements in 2001 and 2005, as shown in [Figure 1](#). From 2008 onwards, Russia consistently made negative statements about the HiRep’s activities.

While various factors have shaped Russia’s discourse about the OHR since 2000, including internal developments in BiH, key shifts in Russia’s foreign policy played a significant role. After the Soviet Union’s collapse, Moscow hoped that closer ties with the West would benefit its economy and international relations. During this period, Russia generally engaged positively with the peacebuilding process in BiH. While Russian sentiments towards the OHR between 2000 and 2008 were mostly positive, some concerns were raised. In 2000, the Russian representative warned against the OHR overusing its power, potentially creating a ‘protectorate of the international

²⁸Kostakos, “Division of Labor among International Organizations”.

²⁹OHR, “PIC – Summary of Bonn Conclusions”.

³⁰Caplan, *International Governance of War-Torn Territories*; Knaus and Martin, “Lessons from Bosnia and Herzegovina”; Peter, “Whither Sovereignty?”.

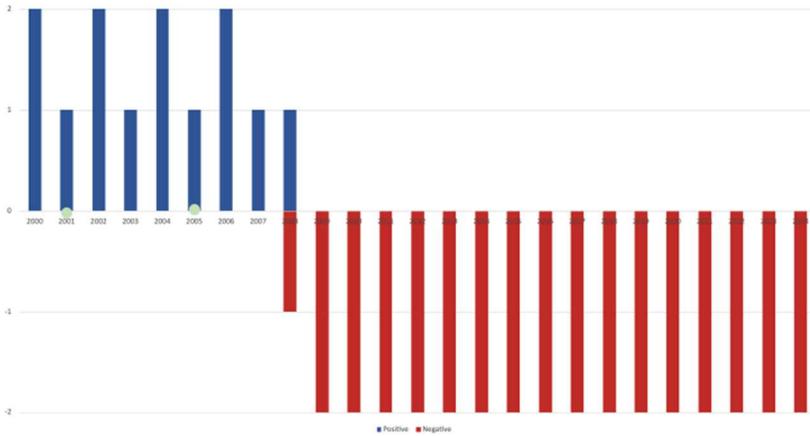


Figure 1. Russian perceptions of the OHR.

community’.³¹ Moscow also voiced concerns about the OHR unilaterally passing laws affecting state institutions.³²

During Lord Ashdown’s tenure as the HiRep (2002–2006), Russia consistently maintained a positive attitude towards the OHR, praising its work and the progress in implementing the peace agreement. This is notable because Ashdown extensively used the Bonn powers in ways that did not align with Russia’s foreign policy priorities. He focused on bringing suspected war criminals, mostly Bosnian Serbs, to the ICTY and facilitated defense reforms towards greater alignment with NATO – both issues of concern for Moscow in later years. In 2004, Ashdown conditionally removed fifty-nine individuals for obstructing ICTY cooperation.³³ In 2003, he established the Defence Reform Commission and guided local parties towards a new Defence Law, necessary for BiH to join NATO’s Partnership for Peace. Despite Russia’s known opposition to NATO expansion, it did not publicly object to these reforms at the UNSC. However, Russia frequently called for a swift drawdown of the OHR and, in early 2005, mentioned the undesirable ‘array of sanctions implemented by the High Representative’³⁴, but stopped short of condemning these.

The subsequent HiRep, Christian Schwartz-Schilling (2006–2007), received consistent praise from the Russian delegation, likely because he avoided using the Bonn powers. Nevertheless, Moscow frequently expressed its preference for avoiding the Bonn powers altogether and quickly transferring the OHR’s responsibilities to the EU Mission.³⁵ In a 2006 meeting, the

³¹UNSC, “4136th Meeting”.

³²UNSC, “4303rd Meeting”.

³³OHR, “List of Removed and Conditionally Removed Officials”.

³⁴UNSC, “5147th Meeting”.

³⁵UNSC, “5675th Meeting”.

PIC Steering Board decided to create a plan for the closure of the OHR. In 2008, it set out a set of criteria, known as the 5+2 Agenda, which called for resolving several outstanding legal and governance issues. The closure of the OHR was conditioned on a positive assessment by the PIC Steering Board that the Dayton Accords were fully complied with and that there was greater legal alignment with the EU.³⁶

From 2007 to early 2009, Miroslav Lajčák served as the HiRep. During most of his tenure, Russian representatives were generally satisfied with the OHR's work. However, in 2008, coinciding with Putin's interim term as Prime Minister, Russian statements about the OHR took a negative turn, reflecting a more assertive Russian foreign policy globally. In the first UNSC meeting on BiH in 2008, Russia emphasized the need to wind down the OHR and cautioned against adding new preconditions for this process. Despite this, it expressed a willingness to cooperate with the institution and other partners. However, during the meeting discussing Lajčák's final report as HiRep, Russia's tone shifted notably. Officials criticized the latest PIC Steering Board report for not reflecting reality and obstructing the transition from the OHR to the EU Special Representative Mission.³⁷ This negative sentiment has persisted.

By the late 2000s, Moscow realized that Western powers would not prioritize Russia's interests as hoped after the USSR's fall. Initially, the Kremlin had believed that aligning with the Western-dominated international system would benefit Russia. However, this strategy proved ineffective, prompting a new foreign policy approach.³⁸ Moscow's failed attempt to link its Chechen war with George W. Bush's Global War on Terror, and perceived Western interference through 'colour revolutions' in Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, further strained relations.³⁹ Protests in Russia between 2011 and 2013, blamed on Western agents, worsened tensions. Preventing former Soviet states and countries within Russia's desired sphere of influence, particularly in Eastern Europe, from joining NATO became a priority. Georgia's NATO aspirations led to Russia's 2008 war there, and Crimea's annexation in 2014 occurred amid Ukraine's NATO rapprochement.⁴⁰ Russia claimed its 2022 invasion of Ukraine was driven by Ukraine's constitutional commitment to join NATO and the EU, reflecting fears of pro-democratic shifts threatening Putin's regime.⁴¹

The subsequent HiRep, Valentin Inzko (2009–2021), refrained from using the Bonn Powers until his last few days of a twelve-year mandate, when he

³⁶OHR, "Agenda 5+2".

³⁷UNSC, "6033rd Meeting".

³⁸Kocho-Williams, *Russia's International Relations in the Twentieth Century*.

³⁹Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*.

⁴⁰Donaldson and Nadkarni, *The Foreign Policy of Russia*.

⁴¹Lewis, *Russia's New Authoritarianism*; Person and McFaul, "What Putin Fears Most".

passed his only executive decision criminalizing the denial of genocide in BiH. Despite his relative inactivity, Russian representatives at the UNSC intensified their criticism, reflecting the influence of these geopolitical developments on Russia's engagement with the BiH peace process. Russian representatives took issue with Inzko's reports, which often censured Republika Srpska for hindering the peace process. In 2015, Russia first described the OHR's criticism of RS as 'illegal'.⁴² During this period, Russia urged the UNSC to consider parallel reports from the RS Presidency and to address challenges to the Dayton Accords' implementation caused by the Federal government and rising Islamism in the Federation of BiH. Another point of contention was the OHR's role in promoting BiH's Euro-Atlantic path. Although Moscow agreed to the 5+2 Agenda for the OHR's closure in 2008, aiming to make BiH a 'peaceful, viable state irreversibly on course for European integration',⁴³ this orientation became increasingly controversial in the 2010s. During Inzko's tenure, Moscow vehemently denounced the OHR for allegedly hijacking the BiH peace process to further the 'Euro-Atlantic agenda' portraying the OHR as a tool of Western states.

Tensions escalated with the appointment of Christian Schmidt as the HiRep in August 2021, just before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia, a member of the PIC Steering Board, disagreed with Schmidt's appointment, marking the first public instance of a Steering Board member being 'outvoted' in selecting the HiRep. Moscow insisted that without a consensus, any HiRep appointment should be approved by the UNSC, where Russia and China could exercise their veto power. Schmidt assumed his role without UNSC approval, leading to Russia and China's rejection of his appointment. In July 2021, Russia and China proposed a UNSC resolution to extend the OHR's mandate by one year, aiming for the OHR's closure.⁴⁴ The resolution failed to gain support beyond the proposing states. When presenting the document to the UNSC, the Russian representative noted that the HiRep had gradually acquired a complex web of powers and competences becoming a 'unilateral czar' allowed to 'render justice with impunity'.⁴⁵ Since then, Russian representatives have consistently highlighted the dangers of the OHR's continued presence, particularly its use of the Bonn Powers to annul domestic laws, which Russia argues oversteps Bosnia's sovereignty.⁴⁶

Criticism intensified as Schmidt resumed using the Bonn powers, passing nineteen decisions in 2022 and 2023 related to countering genocide denial and facilitating the establishment of key state-level institutions. In 2023, Russia accused the West of interfering in BiH's internal politics through

⁴²UNSC, "7440th Meeting".

⁴³OHR, "Agenda 5+2".

⁴⁴UNSC, "China and Russian Federation: Draft Resolution".

⁴⁵UNSC, "8823rd Meeting".

⁴⁶UNSC, "9029th Meeting".

the OHR. This followed Schmidt's decisions to amend the Constitution of FBiH to push for government formation, which Moscow argued was reminiscent of colonial interference.⁴⁷ Additionally, Russia withdrew its funding and functional support for the OHR in 2022, coinciding with its invasion of Ukraine.

China and the OHR

China is often seen as acting in unison with Russia when countering the liberal agenda in the UNSC. However, in contrast to Russia's position, Chinese statements on the OHR show that Beijing remained positively predisposed towards the institution until 2020 (Figure 2). The period before 2020 includes two neutral statements in 2011 and 2019. The November 2019 statement was the first in which the Chinese delegation expressed discontent with the HiRep overstepping his mandate.⁴⁸ Since the COVID-19 pandemic all Chinese UNSC meeting statements regarding the OHR's activities have been negative.

For two decades (2000–2019), Chinese representatives consistently expressed support for the HiRep at UNSC debates. They praised the OHR's effectiveness in implementing the Dayton Peace Agreement and the progress made in police and judicial reform. Reforms in these sectors prioritized liberal values such as transparency and accountability but were also crucial for the stability of the country, which China needed to secure its growing investments in the region.

Despite initial positivity towards the OHR in the early twenty-first century, Chinese statements often favoured non-imposition of decisions, whether through UNSC resolutions invoking Chapter VII of the UN Charter or the OHR's Bonn powers. However, Beijing never specifically criticized individual implementations of the Bonn powers, suggesting BiH was not a priority, and that China did not closely follow developments there. This is reflected in China's shorter, more generic UNSC statements compared to Russia's. However, the Bonn powers are among the most extensive executive powers conferred to any international body in the post-Cold War era, and contradict China's policy of prioritizing the norms of sovereignty and non-intervention. Beijing's lack of engagement when the HiRep passed laws or dismissed officials likely indicates that while China supported these norms discursively, it was primarily interested in BiH's stability, which the OHR was seen to facilitate despite its heavy-handed approach.⁴⁹

China's first relatively negative statement about international missions in BiH came in November 2020. While not specifically criticizing the OHR,

⁴⁷UNSC, "9319th Meeting".

⁴⁸UNSC, "8659th Meeting".

⁴⁹Vangeli, *Global China and the Quest for Peace*.

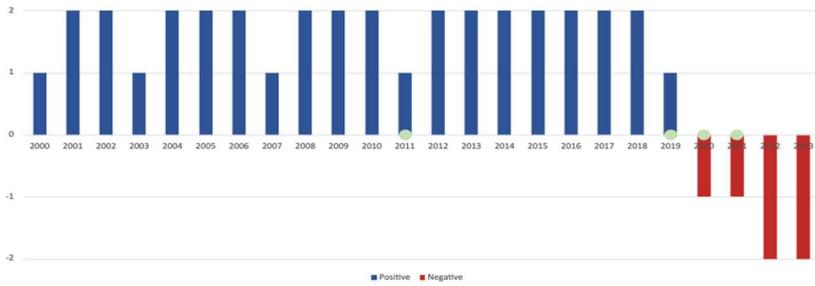


Figure 2. Chinese perceptions of the OHR.

China's representative warned senior representatives to adhere strictly to their mandates and maintain neutrality.⁵⁰ In 2021, after Christian Schmidt's appointment as HiRep without Russia's consent, China joined Russia in criticizing the process. From 2021 onwards, Chinese statements described the OHR's Bonn Powers as a temporary arrangement. In June 2021, China called for the OHR's drawdown,⁵¹ marking its first such request, nearly 15 years after Russia's. China argued that Schmidt's appointment lacked UNSC approval, as supposedly required by the Dayton Peace Agreement. By May 2022, Beijing stated it was inappropriate for Schmidt to brief the UNSC as HiRep.⁵²

In addition to questioning the legality of Christian Schmidt's appointment, China also asserted that the OHR was not an impartial force. In the same statement in 2022, the Chinese representative stated that '[e]xternal forces choosing sides', referring to the High Representative, 'will not help to [...] resolve the disagreements among ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina'.⁵³ Previously, Beijing noted that the Parliament of Republika Srpska called for the immediate closure of the OHR. Given the RS's position, the Chinese delegation stated that '[t]he international community should reassess the role and the mandate of the High Representative in order to ensure that the Office adapts to the current reality and the needs of the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina'.⁵⁴

In recent years, China has become more economically active in BiH, primarily investing in the RS. China's newfound assertiveness in the UNSC could therefore be linked to its economic activity and competition with the West, signalling support for authorities receptive to its investments. However, BiH is a relatively minor market for Beijing, making it more likely that the change in Chinese perceptions is linked to procedural

⁵⁰UNSC, "Letter dated 8 May 2020 from the President of the Security Council".

⁵¹UNSC, "8810th Meeting".

⁵²UNSC, "9029th Meeting".

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴UNSC, "8810th Meeting".

issues with Christian Schmidt's appointment and with Beijing's wish to support its strategic partner, Russia. Schmidt's appointment almost perfectly coincided with increasing tensions around Ukraine and the subsequent Russian invasion. This has meant that China could show discursive support for following procedural rules and norms of non-intervention while simultaneously supporting its partner. It could do so in a region of lesser strategic significance for Beijing. However, it is important to note that negative Chinese perceptions are motivated by different factors than those of Russia, with China primarily interested in the stability of the region.

Attitudes Towards Liberal Peacebuilding Agenda

UNSC meetings about BiH expound much about the sentiments and stances of the UNSC members towards peace implementation in the country and the direction of BiH development. With a heavy presence of statebuilding institutions in the country and BiH's ambition to join the EU and NATO, the reforms advanced by international institutions not only have a liberal substance (e.g. judicial and police reforms, power-sharing, minority protection, accountability for war crimes) but are also directive (in addition to the HiRep's powers, conditionality arrangements by the EU and NATO, sanctions by individual states). In this section we explore how Russia and China have responded to this agenda, systematically tracking their engagement regarding BiH's Euro-Atlantic integration (accession to the EU and NATO) and views on the Republika Srpska, as the entity engaging in secessionist tendencies and genocide denial. This allows us to track both the attitudes towards actors promoting the liberal agenda and those who are thought to defy it. We also seek any explicit anti-Western sentiments in their statements, incorporating this into our discussion on their attitudes towards the Euro-Atlantic integration and the RS.

Before diving into the discourse analysis, two overall points should be noted. First, Russian delegates have been more assertive and emotionally charged on the peacebuilding agenda in BiH than their Chinese counterparts, prompting a greater qualitative focus on Russian sentiments in this section. While media often group China and Russia together against 'the West', our analysis reveals significant differences in their expressed views. Second, the sentiment analysis of Russia's statements shows a turning point around 2008, supporting our analysis in the previous section. This shift is most clearly reflected in its opposition to BiH's accession to the EU and NATO and support for RS policies, with explicit anti-Western sentiments emerging by 2017 (Figure 3). We do not find a similar turning point for China showing the difference from Russian positions.

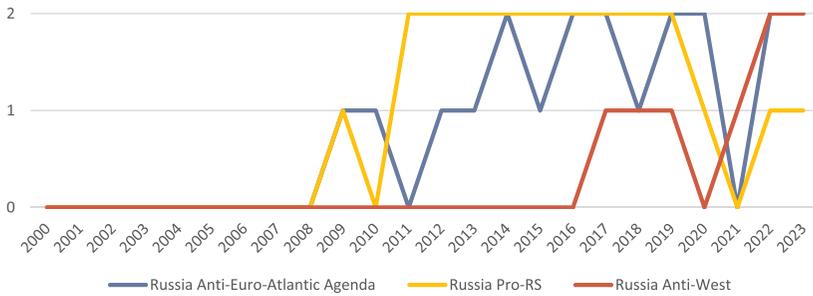


Figure 3. Russia sentiment analysis.

Sentiments about Euro-Atlantic Integration

Overall Russian sentiments towards the Euro-Atlantic agenda are not always clearly discernible, due to the multitude of EU institutions in BiH and their interconnectedness to the OHR – the prime target of Russian criticism in recent years. On several occasions Russia voiced support for the EU Mission in BiH indicating that this non-executive civilian mission should step in and supplant the executive mandate of the HiRep.⁵⁵ Russia also reliably voted for the mandate renewal of the EU’s military mission in BiH (EUFOR-Althea) and expressed positive or neutral sentiments about the work of the mission until 2020s.

But the supportive or neutral stances towards EU institutions in BiH seem to be more directly connected to their limited powers in the country compared to the HiRep, with Russia noticeably shifting its overall discourse around the Euro-Atlantic integration of BiH around 2008. Since then, Russia has continuously argued that this agenda is not in the interest of the entire population, is disputed by certain political leaders in BiH, and, therefore, may lead to conflict.⁵⁶ Specific objection to BiH’s Euro-Atlantic integration began in 2009, just before BiH embarked on its Membership Action Plan with NATO.⁵⁷ By 2014, Russian representatives were more frequently and forcefully expressing their condemnation of attempts to forge closer relations between BiH and NATO and the EU, as seen in [Figure 3](#). It is important to note that around this point, Russia invaded and annexed Crimea, marking another turning point in assertiveness of Russian foreign policy. Indeed, Ukraine’s integration into NATO was of major concern for Moscow.⁵⁸

Russian representatives often claimed that the OHR was an instrument of the West and was primarily concerned with BiH’s Euro-Atlantic integration,

⁵⁵UNSC, “6860th Meeting”; UNSC, “7688th Meeting”.

⁵⁶UNSC, “6421st Meeting”; UNSC, “6771st Meeting”; UNSC, “6860th Meeting”.

⁵⁷NATO, “Membership Action Plan (MAP)”.

⁵⁸Soldatkin and Osborn, “Putin Warns Russia Will Act”.

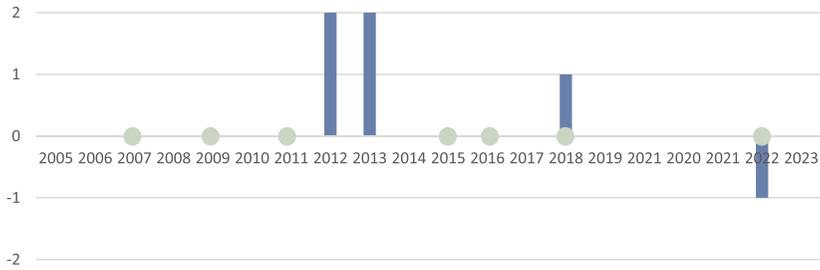


Figure 4. Russian perceptions of EUFOR-Althea.

not peace implementation. Russia viewed efforts towards accession to Euro-Atlantic organizations as being imposed by outside forces rather than as a result of sovereign decision-making. This is despite BiH formally requesting membership in both organizations. As secessionist tendencies amplified in the Republika Srpska and the RS National Assembly adopted a resolution on military neutrality in 2017, Russian representative asserted that Bosnian Serbs should have a say in central discussions on BiH ‘rapprochement with NATO’, which he noted was ‘a very painful issue for Bosnian Serbs’.⁵⁹ In 2018, Russia argued that ‘dragging BiH into NATO ... [would] only worsen the tensions in the country’.⁶⁰

While NATO was more often the focus of Russian criticisms, the EU also faced disapproval. In 2020, Russia accused EU states and unspecified candidates for membership of glorifying collaborators and war criminals.⁶¹ In 2022, there was a stark qualitative escalation in Russian sentiments against BiH’s Euro-Atlantic integration. This came after Christian Schmidt was appointed HiRep in an unorthodox manner but also coincided with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which led to the doubling of troops deployed to EUFOR-Althea. Russian representative stated that it was the West’s pursuit of geopolitical interests that is the source of BiH’s increased insecurity (see Figure 4).⁶² By 2023, Russian delegates were intimating that Brussels and Washington were instrumentalising the OHR aiming to replace the Dayton Accords with Euro-Atlantic integration and NATO accession against the will of BiH’s people.⁶³ The year 2023 also marked the first time Russia denounced the presence of EUFOR-Althea in BiH as a power projection mechanism for some EU countries.⁶⁴

By contrast, China has been supportive of BiH Euro-Atlantic integration. In 2006, the Chinese representative noted for the first time that BiH was on

⁵⁹UNSC, “8089th Meeting”.

⁶⁰UNSC, “8392nd Meeting”.

⁶¹UNSC, “Letter dated 10 November 2020 from the President of the Security Council”.

⁶²UNSC, “9179th Meeting”.

⁶³UNSC, “9319th Meeting”; UNSC, “9466th Meeting”.

⁶⁴UNSC, “9319th Meeting”.

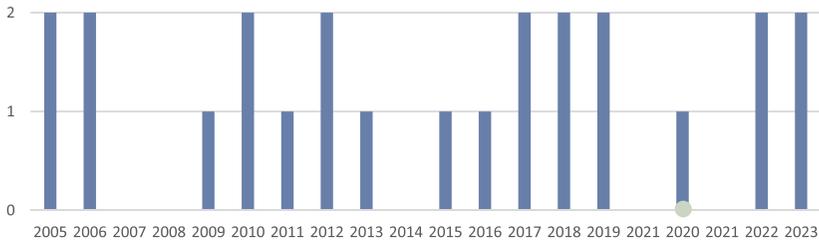


Figure 5. Chinese perceptions of EUFOR-Althea.

the road to EU accession, welcoming this development.⁶⁵ Since then, Chinese delegates have welcomed BiH's gradual integration into the EU, by way of its adoption of laws and regulations to align with the EU; they have also expressed that the EU has promoted stability, security, and social and economic development in the country in accordance with the Dayton Accords. They particularly welcomed the EU role in judicial and police reforms. NATO integration was rarely brought up by China, a notable absence highlighting the difference from Russia. In 2022, Chinese representative linked BiH achievement of 'long-term peace and stability' with its accession to the European Union. However, he noted that both could only be attained once BiH's sovereignty was fully restored, indicating the need for the OHR to close.⁶⁶ This rhetorical commitment differs from that of Russia and more closely aligns with positions of many EU member states.

China has also been consistently supportive of the EU military mission EUFOR-Althea, even after the number of troops was doubled in 2022 to address potential spillovers from the Ukrainian war. Chinese representatives repeatedly noted positive contributions of the mission to BiH's security and stability, as depicted in [Figure 5](#). In fact, of all the international institutions in BiH, China has most consistently praised the EU military mission, not changing its tone to this day. It also highlighted the work of the mission far more often than Russia (compare to [Figure 4](#)).

Sentiments about Republika Srpska

Republika Srpska as one of the two main entities in BiH has been at the heart of debates between UNSC members, particularly the Western actors and Russia. These debates have intensified since 2010, with the election of an authoritarian politician Milorad Dodik as the President of the RS. Since then, the RS has intensified its rejection of state-level institutions and repeatedly called for referendums to secure its autonomy and independence. The rhetoric of genocide denial has also been on the rise. Russian explicit

⁶⁵UNSC, "5412nd Meeting".

⁶⁶UNSC, "9029th Meeting".

support for the RS in the UNSC almost coincides with the election of Dodik (see Figure 3), with statements qualitatively strengthening as the RS escalated its attempts to undermine state-level institutions. Commonly, Russian delegates would condemn the HiRep for exhibiting a bias against Bosnian Serbs and urge the UNSC to consider alternative reports written by Dodik's office about the situation in BiH. These were sent to the Secretary-General, as an 'objective' alternative to the HiRep's report and briefing.

These debates reached several inflection points, linked to developments in BiH and Russia. In 2011, Republika Srpska attempted to organize a referendum aimed at challenging the authority of BiH's state judiciary. It proposed to reject the jurisdiction of the central court system, which RS leaders claimed was biased against Serbs. This move was seen as undermining the central government and asserting the RS's greater autonomy. While no direct threats of the use of force were issued, Western states strongly intimated that they would act as security guarantors of the Dayton Accords and protect the territorial integrity of BiH. There were also pressures on the HiRep to intervene and use his executive powers. Under diplomatic pressure, which included visits by the EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and EU envoy Miroslav Lajčák, Dodik, ultimately withdrew the referendum proposal.⁶⁷ At the time, Russia criticized the West for threats to the use of force or executive powers by the HiRep, but ultimately praised the EU for defusing the situation with diplomacy. Russia saw no alarm in the proposed referendum and praised the RS's 'commitment to international law and the spirit of the Dayton Peace Agreement'.⁶⁸

With Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Russian delegation's pro-RS sentiments qualitatively intensified with Russia starting to more openly side with the RS in its attempts to rewrite the history of the war in BiH. In 2015, on the 20th anniversary of the fall of Srebrenica, the UNSC debated a draft resolution submitted by Jordan, Lithuania, Malaysia, New Zealand, the UK and the US, labelling the Srebrenica massacre a genocide in accordance with prior judgments of the ICTY and the International Court of Justice, and condemning denial of this genocide as hindering efforts towards reconciliation. Russia vetoed the resolution, with the Russian representative employing a classic *all lives matter* argument: 'Do we need to ask ourselves the question of who suffered the most? If one looks at overall result of a decade of conflict the territory the former Yugoslavia – when hundreds of thousands of Serbs were driven from their traditional places of residence – it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that they suffered as much as others, if not more'.⁶⁹ China, on the other hand, abstained from the vote,

⁶⁷Hadzovic and Remikovic, "Bosnia: Dodik Agrees to Drop Disputed Referendum".

⁶⁸UNSC, "6771st Meeting".

⁶⁹UNSC, "7481st Meeting".

commenting that while they supported the spirit of the resolution, more reconciliation on the final text would be needed among UNSC members.

Explicit anti-Western sentiments and attribution of blame for problems in BiH to the West only started appearing in Russian statements from 2017. In 2016, the RS organized a referendum on whether to continue celebrating its own ‘Statehood Day’ on 9 January.⁷⁰ This date marks the 1992 proclamation of Republika Srpska as a Serb entity, which coincided with the start of the Bosnian War. The Constitutional Court of BiH had previously ruled the holiday unconstitutional, as it discriminated against non-Serbs. It also celebrated the war and implied that the RS is a state, undermining the unity of BiH. In response, in 2017, the US sanctioned RS President Milorad Dodik for obstructing the Dayton Peace Accords.⁷¹ These sanctions were followed by explicit condemnations of the US by Russia. China made no mention of these sanctions.⁷²

Russia continued validating RS genocide denial in subsequent years, including by criticizing the HiRep for condemning the work of a Republika Srpska independent commission for crimes committed between 1991 and 1995 in Srebrenica and Sarajevo established by the RS due to perceived failures at the ICTY.⁷³ In response to the HiRep comment that the RS was attempting to rewrite history, Russian representatives highlighted the shortcomings of the ICTY in acknowledging attacks on Bosnian Serbs from areas supposedly under the protection of UN peacekeepers.⁷⁴ These statements were coupled with condemnations of Western powers for their perceived targeting of Republika Srpska through sanctions and rhetoric.

In addition, Russia also repeatedly highlighted positive developments in the RS accusing the HiRep of selection bias in his reporting. In meetings, Russian representatives claimed that the RS was not the problem and had ‘developed more successfully’ than the Federation ‘in all areas, ranging from the economy to inter-ethnic reconciliation and respect for human rights’,⁷⁵ and was ‘free from social unrest’, unlike the Federation.⁷⁶ This wording almost mimicked that found in the alternative reports submitted by the RS to the UNSC. Russian representatives also continuously condemned the HiRep for accusing Republika Srpska of violating the Dayton Accords with the view of impeding BiH unity and seceding, while turning a blind eye to the issues in the Federation. After a January 2019 meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Milorad Dodik, the

⁷⁰Rose, “Bosnian Serbs Defy State with Referendum Landslide”.

⁷¹Reuters, “U.S. Imposes Sanctions on Bosnian Serb Nationalist Leader Dodik”.

⁷²UNSC, “7943rd Meeting”; UNSC, “8248th Meeting”.

⁷³UNSC, “8522nd Meeting”; UNSC, “8659th Meeting”; UNSC, “Letter Dated 8 May 2020 from the President of the Security Council”.

⁷⁴UNSC, “Letter dated 8 May 2020 from the President of the Security Council”.

⁷⁵UNSC, “6771st Meeting”.

⁷⁶UNSC, “7057th Meeting”.

Russian ambassador in the UNSC highlighted the cooperative stance of the entity compared to the other parts of BiH.

In contrast, Chinese representatives rarely mentioned Republika Srpska in statements, nor did they mention the Federation. China never openly offered support for any controversial RS policies nor condemned the HiRep for criticizing the entity. In contrast to Russia, China rarely provided any detailed opinions on domestic developments in BiH reserving their comments to the overall direction the country was heading, and the assistance international institutions can offer. It also remained much vaguer in any criticism of the West, although implicit criticism can be seen in a few of its statements recently. Chinese representatives have for example denounced ‘external forces choosing sides’.⁷⁷ This criticism of external forces started appearing roughly at the same time as their criticism of the HiRep. In its statements, China also criticized the imposition of unilateral sanctions, but never explicitly mentioned the US and the United Kingdom, who imposed sanctions on several politicians and entities in the RS in 2022.⁷⁸

Republika Srpska only entered Chinese discourse after the controversial appointment of Christian Schmidt as the HiRep in 2021. The RS was mentioned explicitly in a June 2021 meeting during which China and Russia jointly tabled a draft resolution proposing the closure of the OHR in a year. During that meeting, China referred to a March 2021 resolution adopted by the RS Parliament as justification for the international community’s reassessment of the OHR’s closure.⁷⁹ The following year, China again highlighted Republika Srpska’s commitment to BiH’s sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity.⁸⁰ This was all part of the discussion on the future role of the HiRep, which, since 2022, China has seen as a problematic entity in BiH.

Conclusions

Our analysis of Russia and China’s engagement with the Dayton peace process offers insights into their broader roles in liberal peacebuilding. It shows their fundamentally distinct approaches and attitudes towards the liberal peacebuilding model in BiH, adding to the emerging literature highlighting the differentiation between the two, and the broader literature articulating the need to move beyond the West vs. non-West dichotomy in peacebuilding.

Russia’s engagement with the Dayton peace process reveals a consistent transformative type of discourse in opposition to the liberal components

⁷⁷UNSC, “9029th Meeting”; UNSC, “9179th Meeting”.

⁷⁸Trkanjec, “UK, US Sanction BiH Government Members”.

⁷⁹UNSC, “8810th Meeting”.

⁸⁰UNSC, “9029th Meeting”.

of peacebuilding, particularly those promoting Euro-Atlantic integration, the formation of functioning state-level institutions, and rejection of genocide denial. Initially supportive of the OHR, Russia's stance shifted around 2008, coinciding with a broader assertiveness in its foreign policy. This shift reflects Russia's strategic interests in countering Western influence and maintaining a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Russia's support for Republika Srpska and its secessionist tendencies underscores its preference for a fragmented BiH, which aligns with its geopolitical goals of weakening Western-aligned states. This opposition to liberal peacebuilding is not merely rhetorical but is also reflected in Russia's actions, such as vetoing UN resolutions and withdrawing support for international institutions perceived as Western tools of power accumulation.

The implications of Russia's role are significant. Its engagement highlights the challenges of implementing liberal peacebuilding in a multipolar world where emerging powers actively resist Western-dominated frameworks. Russia's actions in BiH illustrate how illiberal actors can undermine peace processes by supporting local actors who oppose integration efforts. Even in a region, where Western presence is magnitudes larger than that of Russia, this spoiler role complicates the efforts to promote democratic governance and statebuilding, potentially leading to prolonged instability.

China's engagement with the Dayton peace process presents a more nuanced picture. Unlike Russia, China adopted a more reinforcing discourse in support of the OHR and the liberal peacebuilding agenda until 2020, emphasizing stability and economic development. However, China's stance has become more critical in recent years, particularly following the controversial appointment of Christian Schmidt as the HiRep. China's objections are primarily procedural, focusing on the legitimacy and mandate of international institutions rather than outright opposition to liberal values. China wants the OHR to close, but as recently as 2022, it also openly supported the Euro-Atlantic integration process, linking BiH's long-term peace and stability with its accession to the European Union and a step towards its developmental path. This rhetorical commitment differs from that of Russia and more closely aligns with positions of many EU member states.

The implications of China's role are multifaceted. Its longstanding support for this quintessential liberal peacebuilding project suggests that illiberal actors can engage constructively with international frameworks when their interests align with stability and economic development. However, China's recent criticisms indicate a growing assertiveness in defending principles of sovereignty and non-intervention, while at the same time supporting its partner Russia. This shift could signal a more significant trend where China, while not entirely opposing liberal peacebuilding, seeks to reshape it to better align with its values and strategic interests.

Included among these is the promotion of an alternative global governance agenda based on development, at which Beijing can be at the helm.

The roles of Russia and China in BiH underscore the complexities of liberal peacebuilding in a changing global landscape. Russia's active opposition and China's nuanced engagement highlight the challenges and opportunities of involving illiberal actors in peace processes. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing more inclusive and adaptable peacebuilding strategies that can accommodate diverse perspectives and interests. As the global order continues to evolve, the experiences from BiH offer valuable lessons for future peacebuilding efforts, emphasizing the need for flexibility, dialogue, and a nuanced understanding of the motivations and actions of emerging powers.

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