

Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Limits of Externally Managed Security

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Beyond the High Representative

Thirty years after the Dayton Peace Agreement ended the Bosnian war, Europe and the United States remain divided over one fundamental question: can Bosnia and Herzegovina ever become a fully autonomous political-security system?

At first glance, the current disagreement appears to concern the future of the Office of the High Representative (OHR), its mandate, or even the appointment of a particular individual. Such an interpretation, however, captures only the visible dimension of a much deeper problem. The real issue is not who serves as High Representative, but what the Office's continued existence reveals about the nature of security governance in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

From the perspective of **Security Science**, this distinction is crucial. Security is not measured solely by the absence of armed conflict or the existence of functioning institutions. A genuinely resilient security system can produce political stability, institutional legitimacy, and constitutional order through its own institutions rather than through continuous external intervention.

The Dayton Peace Agreement unquestionably achieved its immediate objective. It brought an end to one of Europe's bloodiest conflicts since the Second World War and established the institutional framework necessary for preserving peace. Its historical importance cannot be disputed. Yet ending a war and creating a self-sustaining political-security system are not necessarily the same achievement.

More than three decades later, Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to operate under an institutional architecture that grants extraordinary executive authority to an international institution originally conceived as temporary. Regardless of differing political interpretations of the Office of the High Representative, one objective fact remains: external executive authority

continues to play a significant role in preserving Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitutional equilibrium.

This inevitably raises a broader analytical question.

If a political-security system still depends upon extraordinary external authority more than thirty years after the end of armed conflict, can it genuinely be considered a fully autonomous security system?

This is not a political judgment. It is a Security Science question.

Unlike traditional approaches that primarily analyze diplomacy, constitutional law, or ethnic politics, Security Science examines how security is actually produced. It asks where political authority originates, how institutional legitimacy is maintained, and whether a political system possesses sufficient resilience to preserve constitutional order without permanent external management.

Viewed from this perspective, the current disagreements between Europe and the United States extend far beyond the future of the Office of the High Representative. They reveal two increasingly different approaches to international security governance.

For many European governments, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains primarily a question of continental stability. Any serious political destabilization in the country would inevitably affect the wider European security environment through migration, economic uncertainty, regional instability, and renewed geopolitical competition in the Western Balkans. Continued international engagement is therefore viewed as an investment in European security.

The United States increasingly approaches Bosnia and Herzegovina within a much broader global strategic context. Washington's attention is increasingly focused on strategic competition with China, the war in Ukraine, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, the question of whether Europe should gradually assume greater responsibility for managing long-term stability in its own neighborhood has become increasingly relevant.

The current disagreement over the Office of the High Representative is therefore not simply a disagreement over an institution. It reflects two distinct understandings of how long international security governance should persist after armed conflict ends.

From the perspective of Security Science, however, an even more important question emerges.

Has Bosnia and Herzegovina completed the transition from internationally guaranteed peace to internally generated security?

Or does its continued dependence on external governance indicate that the post-Dayton security transition remains incomplete?

The answers to these questions extend well beyond Bosnia and Herzegovina itself. They challenge one of the central assumptions of international peacebuilding: that prolonged international supervision will naturally evolve into autonomous political legitimacy. Whether that assumption holds remains one of the most important unresolved questions in contemporary international security governance.

From Post-Conflict State to Externally Managed Security System

Traditional political science has generally described Bosnia and Herzegovina as a post-conflict, fragile, or internationally supervised state. While each of these descriptions captures an important aspect of reality, none fully explains the country's contemporary security dynamics. More than three decades after Dayton, Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be analyzed solely through the lens of post-conflict reconstruction. The more fundamental question is how security is actually produced and maintained.

Security Science approaches this issue differently. Rather than focusing primarily on institutional design or constitutional arrangements, it examines the relationship between authority, legitimacy, and the production of security. A security system is considered sustainable only when it possesses the capacity to preserve constitutional order, resolve political disputes, and maintain institutional stability through its own legitimate mechanisms.

Measured against this criterion, Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a unique analytical challenge. The country possesses functioning institutions, conducts regular democratic elections, and enjoys full international recognition as a sovereign state. At the same time, extraordinary international executive authority continues to play an important role in preserving the constitutional framework established by the Dayton Peace Agreement. The Office of the High Representative, originally conceived as a temporary post-conflict mechanism, remains an essential element of the country's overall security architecture.

This does not imply institutional failure. Nor does it suggest that Bosnia and Herzegovina is incapable of functioning as a state. Rather, it indicates that the country's long-term political stability continues to depend, at least in part, on mechanisms originating outside its constitutional system.

This distinction is particularly important because Bosnia and Herzegovina's principal political disagreements are no longer limited to ordinary public policy. They concern the very foundations of constitutional legitimacy. Significant figures in the Croatian political community continue to argue that the existing constitutional arrangements do not adequately reflect the principle of constituent equality. In contrast, much of the Serb political leadership continues to insist on

preserving Republika Srpska's constitutional autonomy and remains skeptical of further centralization. Whether these positions are politically justified is not the analytical question. What matters from the perspective of Security Science is that no universally accepted constitutional consensus has emerged despite more than three decades of international supervision.

Consequently, the principal source of stability is no longer found exclusively within domestic political consensus. International guarantees, constitutional arbitration, and external executive authority also reinforce stability. This observation fundamentally changes the analytical perspective. Rather than asking whether Bosnia and Herzegovina is stable, Security Science asks a different question: **who actually produces that stability?**

An equally important question concerns the long-term political sustainability of such a system. A state may continue to exist under international law, maintain functioning institutions, hold democratic elections, and enjoy broad international recognition while simultaneously lacking a fully internalized constitutional legitimacy among its constituent political communities. In such circumstances, the state may survive institutionally, yet remain dependent upon external governance for the preservation of its constitutional equilibrium.

This distinction is particularly relevant in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The principal challenge is not whether the state formally exists, but whether it is perceived by all constituent communities as the primary and legitimate framework of their collective political future. Significant segments of the Croat political leadership continue to question whether the existing constitutional order adequately reflects the principle of constituent equality, while much of the Serb political leadership continues to identify Republika Srpska as its primary political framework and remains reluctant to support further constitutional centralization. These positions should not be interpreted as evidence that Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot survive as a state. Rather, they indicate that a fully shared constitutional identity has yet to emerge. From the perspective of Security Science, this explains why external authority continues to function not merely as a peacekeeping mechanism but also as a guarantor of constitutional stability

Viewed through this lens, Bosnia and Herzegovina represents far more than a regional political issue. It has become one of the most significant contemporary case studies of international security governance. Its experience challenges long-standing assumptions about post-conflict stabilization and raises broader questions regarding the relationship between sovereignty, legitimacy, and externally supported security governance.

It is precisely this analytical gap that creates the need for a new conceptual framework capable of distinguishing between security systems that generate stability independently and those whose long-term equilibrium continues to depend upon external governance.

A New Security Science Classification of Security Systems

The Bosnian experience suggests that the traditional vocabulary used to describe contemporary states is no longer sufficient. Terms such as *strong states*, *weak states*, *fragile states*, and *failed states* remain useful for assessing institutional capacity. Yet, they provide only a partial explanation of how security is actually produced. They describe the state's condition but not the origin of security governance.

Security Science proposes a complementary perspective. Instead of asking how effective state institutions are, it asks a more fundamental question: **where does the authority that generates security actually come from?** The answer to this question allows us to distinguish among three ideal types of security systems.

Autonomous Security Systems (ASS) are systems in which political stability, constitutional order, and institutional resilience are generated primarily through domestically legitimate institutions. External actors may cooperate, advise, or provide support, but they are not indispensable to the functioning of the constitutional system. The responsibility for maintaining security rests with institutions whose authority is recognized within the political community itself.

Externally Managed Security Systems (EMSS) are fundamentally different. They possess functioning institutions, conduct democratic elections, and enjoy international recognition as sovereign states. Nevertheless, their long-term constitutional equilibrium depends upon continuous external supervision, international arbitration, executive intervention, or external security guarantees. Domestic institutions perform most governance functions, but the ultimate stabilizing authority remains at least partially external. Bosnia and Herzegovina represents perhaps the clearest contemporary European example of this category.

Collapsed Security Systems (CSS) represent the opposite end of the spectrum. In these systems, the state has lost the capacity to exercise effective sovereign authority. Constitutional institutions no longer perform their essential security functions, governance becomes fragmented among competing actors, and the state is unable to preserve political order without fundamental reconstruction.

This classification does not replace existing concepts developed within political science or international relations. Rather, it complements them by introducing a variable that has received comparatively little systematic attention: **the source of security governance**. Two states may possess institutions of similar capacity while differing fundamentally in who ultimately guarantees their constitutional stability.

Viewed from this perspective, Bosnia and Herzegovina should not be analyzed primarily as a fragile or failed state. Its defining characteristic is neither institutional collapse nor the absence

of democratic procedures. Instead, its distinctive feature is the continuing coexistence of domestic constitutional institutions with an enduring framework of international executive authority. In Security Science terminology, this represents an **Externally Managed Security System**.

The strategic objective of every Externally Managed Security System should be a peaceful transition toward an **Autonomous Security System**. If such a transition never occurs, external governance risks becoming a permanent substitute for domestic legitimacy rather than a temporary instrument for achieving it. The essential question therefore is not whether externally managed systems can preserve stability for prolonged periods, but whether they can ultimately generate the internal political legitimacy required for autonomous security governance.

Can Externally Managed Security Systems Survive?

The introduction of the concept of **Externally Managed Security Systems (EMSS)** inevitably raises a broader theoretical question. Can such systems remain politically sustainable over the long term, or does prolonged external governance eventually undermine the very legitimacy it seeks to preserve?

History offers no simple answer. International supervision has repeatedly demonstrated its capacity to prevent violence, preserve constitutional continuity, and reduce the risk of renewed conflict. In many post-conflict societies, external engagement has provided the political space necessary for institutions to recover and democratic processes to develop. In this sense, externally managed governance can be an effective instrument of stabilization.

Stabilization, however, should not be confused with autonomy.

From the perspective of Security Science, a security system reaches maturity only when its institutions derive their authority primarily from domestic constitutional legitimacy rather than from the continued presence of external guarantors. Stability maintained through international oversight may endure for years, even decades. Still, its long-term resilience ultimately depends upon whether domestic political actors themselves become the accepted source of constitutional authority.

This distinction leads to what may be described as the **Security Governance Transition**—the gradual transformation of an **Externally Managed Security System (EMSS)** into an **Autonomous Security System (ASS)**. The transition is not measured solely by the withdrawal of international institutions. It is measured by the emergence of sufficient political legitimacy to ensure that constitutional order, institutional stability, and conflict resolution can be maintained without extraordinary external intervention.

Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrates both the achievements and the limitations of externally managed governance. The country has preserved peace for more than three decades and developed functioning democratic institutions. At the same time, the continued importance of

international executive authority suggests that the transition toward fully autonomous security governance remains incomplete. The presence of functioning institutions does not automatically imply fully internalized constitutional legitimacy.

This observation should not be interpreted as a criticism of the Dayton Peace Agreement or of the international community. On the contrary, Dayton achieved what it was designed to achieve: it ended the war and created the conditions for peace. The analytical question is different. It concerns whether the mechanisms that successfully preserve peace in the immediate post-conflict period can remain equally effective when they become semi-permanent features of constitutional governance.

For Security Science, this is perhaps the central lesson of the Bosnian experience. The success of international peacebuilding cannot be evaluated solely by the absence of renewed armed conflict. Its ultimate measure is whether externally supported stability gradually evolves into internally generated legitimacy.

The future of Bosnia and Herzegovina should therefore not be assessed only by the continued presence or eventual closure of the Office of the High Representative. The more important indicator will be whether the country's constitutional order becomes sufficiently legitimate and resilient to function independently of extraordinary international authority.

The fundamental question is therefore no longer whether Bosnia and Herzegovina is stable. The real question is whether **stability created through external governance can ultimately be transformed into stability sustained by domestic legitimacy**. The answer to that question will determine not only the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina but also the future relevance of externally managed security governance as a model for resolving post-conflict crises elsewhere in the world.

Europe's Security Dilemma

The contemporary disagreement between Europe and the United States over the future of the Office of the High Representative should therefore not be interpreted simply as a difference of opinion regarding one international institution. It reflects a broader strategic question concerning the future of international security governance and the distribution of responsibility within the Euro-Atlantic community.

For the European Union, Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a distant foreign policy issue. It lies at the heart of the Western Balkans, a region whose stability is directly linked to European security. Any serious political destabilization in Bosnia and Herzegovina would have immediate consequences for neighboring states, migration flows, organized crime, foreign influence operations, and the credibility of the European integration process. From this perspective, continued international engagement is often seen not as an exceptional measure but as a strategic investment in Europe's security.

The United States increasingly evaluates Bosnia and Herzegovina within a broader global strategic environment. American national security priorities today extend far beyond the Western Balkans and include strategic competition with China, the war in Ukraine, instability in the Middle East, and the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific. In such circumstances, Washington increasingly expects its European allies to assume greater responsibility for managing long-term security challenges within their own neighborhood.

These different strategic perspectives do not necessarily represent opposing political objectives. Both Europe and the United States remain committed to preserving peace and stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Their disagreement concerns the most appropriate method for achieving that objective and, above all, the appropriate duration of extraordinary international governance.

From the perspective of Security Science, this disagreement illustrates a broader dilemma confronting contemporary international peacebuilding. External governance can successfully terminate armed conflict and create the institutional conditions necessary for political recovery. Yet the longer such governance continues, the more difficult it becomes to determine whether it is facilitating the emergence of domestic legitimacy or inadvertently postponing it.

This is the strategic paradox of **Externally Managed Security Systems**. The mechanisms that initially preserve stability may, if maintained indefinitely, reduce the incentive for domestic political compromise by transferring ultimate responsibility for constitutional equilibrium to external actors. International authority then evolves from a temporary instrument of stabilization into a permanent component of the political system itself.

Bosnia and Herzegovina therefore represents far more than a regional political issue. It has become a critical test of whether externally managed security governance can successfully achieve its ultimate purpose: creating the conditions under which it is no longer required.

For Security Science, the answer to that question extends well beyond the Western Balkans. Future international interventions—in Europe and elsewhere—will increasingly be judged not only by their ability to stop wars, but by their capacity to transform externally guaranteed stability into durable, internally generated security governance. Bosnia and Herzegovina may therefore become one of the defining reference points for evaluating the effectiveness and the limits of international state-building in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Three decades after the Dayton Peace Agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to occupy a unique position in the international security landscape. It represents neither a conventional post-conflict state nor a failed political system. Instead, it illustrates a distinct form of security governance in which domestic constitutional institutions coexist with enduring international executive authority.

Viewed through the analytical framework of **Security Science**, this reality cannot be adequately explained by existing concepts such as *fragile state* or *failed state*. These classifications primarily describe institutional performance, whereas the Bosnian experience demonstrates the importance of a different analytical variable: the origin of security governance itself. The distinction between **Autonomous Security Systems (ASS)**, **Externally Managed Security Systems (EMSS)**, and **Collapsed Security Systems (CSS)** offers a complementary framework for understanding not only Bosnia and Herzegovina but also future cases of internationally supported political stabilization.

The debate between Europe and the United States over the Office of the High Representative should therefore not be understood merely as a disagreement over institutional arrangements. It reflects a broader strategic question: how long can external governance remain compatible with the creation of autonomous political legitimacy? The answer to that question will influence not only the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina but also the design of future international peacebuilding and state-building missions.

For Security Science, the ultimate measure of success is neither the longevity of international supervision nor the simple absence of armed conflict. Success is achieved when external governance gradually becomes unnecessary because domestic institutions have acquired sufficient legitimacy, resilience, and public confidence to preserve constitutional order independently.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has therefore become much more than a regional political issue. It has become one of the most important contemporary laboratories for examining the possibilities and limits of international security governance. Whether its future confirms or challenges the effectiveness of externally managed security systems, its experience will remain a valuable reference point for both scholars and policymakers.

Perhaps the most important lesson is that sustainable security cannot be permanently imported. International intervention may create the conditions for peace, but only domestically accepted legitimacy can transform peace into durable and autonomous security. Ultimately, the success of any **Externally Managed Security System** should be measured by its ability to evolve into an **Autonomous Security System**. If that transition never occurs, external governance risks becoming not a bridge to sovereignty, but a substitute for it.