

László Márkus¹: Thirty Years After – A Balance Sheet for Dayton

Executive summary

- The Dayton Peace Accords (DPA) have been ensuring peace since 1995 in Bosnia and Herzegovina but failed to end the continuation of the war by political means.
- The DPA created a constitutional framework ensuring checks and balances to protect the interests of the three main ethnic groups, and this equilibrium has essentially remained in place since then.
- By 2005, international efforts had succeeded in forming a single military, the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has been the cornerstone of peace in the country ever since then.
- The role of the United States and the ultimate security guarantee provided by NATO are still essential to ensure long-term stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A crucial aspect of the Dayton peace settlement is the link between its success or failure and American political prestige.
- Despite the assurances from international parties, the peace process did not ensure a seamless transition to NATO and EU membership.

December 14 marks the 30th anniversary of the official signing ceremony of the Dayton Peace Accords (DPA) in Paris. This analysis provides a brief overview of the historical significance of the peace agreement, which concluded the most brutal ethnic conflict following the disintegration of Yugoslavia and led to the longest international state-building project in modern history.

Historical background

The violent disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s was a long crisis that received significant international attention in the early post-Cold War era. Between 1991 and 2001, six wars broke out in the Balkans, and four were concluded through ceasefires/treaties whose implementation required the significant involvement of powerful countries and international organizations, particularly the United States, Russia, the European Union, the OSCE, NATO, and last but not least the UN.²

The war in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina dominated headlines in the world press throughout the first half of the 1990s. On the territory of Croatia, fighting erupted in 1991 between the central government under the control of the Croatian nationalist party HDZ and the ethnic Serb rebels in the so-called Krajinas and in Eastern Slavonia backed by Belgrade, especially in the first stage of the conflict. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the referendum on independence in early 1992 was followed by a bloody and compli-

cated ethnic war that raged for three and a half years among ethnic Serbs, ethnic Croats, and the central government under the control of Bosnian Muslims, also supported by secular pro-Bosnian people with a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

International intervention was a part of both military conflicts from the very beginning. European and American politicians were mediating peace talks in Geneva, although with limited success. Thousands of peacekeeping troops, known as blue helmets, were working to alleviate the chaos of war as part of the UNPROFOR mission. Mandated by UN Security Council resolutions, NATO aircraft patrolled the airspace to enforce no-fly zones and launched airstrikes in defence of UN-established safe havens, such as Gorazde and Srebrenica. Secret support of warring parties, shuttle diplomacy, peacekeeping, and humanitarian relief missions were all part of this plethora of foreign intervention. Western diplomacy took the lead, and by 1995, the EU and NATO had gradually sidelined the UN. NATO's military power played a crucial role in setting the stage for the peace talks in Dayton. In September 1995, NATO conducted airstrikes in Bosnia

¹ László Márkus works as a research fellow at the John Lukacs Institute; he was Deputy High Representative in Banja Luka (2022-2025) and had also previously served for five years as a diplomat in Sarajevo (1997-2002).

² The six wars were in chronological order: the Slovenian Ten Day War in 1991, the Croatian War of Independence in 1991-1995, the Bosnian War in 1992-95, the Kosovo War in 1998-99, the 1999-2001 Albanian Uprising in southern Serbia, and the 2001 Insurgency in North Macedonia. The peace settlements in Croatia, BiH, Kosovo and NM heavily engaged international resources.



John Lukacs

Analyses in Strategic and Defence Studies

2025/21

and Herzegovina (BiH) against the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) to disrupt its Command, Control, and Communication (C3) infrastructure. Operation Deliberate Force intentionally or unintentionally also gave support to the joint land offensive of the Army of BiH, the Croatian Defence Council, and the Croatian Army, thereby softening the rigid negotiating positions of the Bosnian Serbs. The size of international peacekeeping forces deployed in the Balkans in the 1990s and early 2000s exceeded all earlier historical examples. As soon as the ink dried on the Dayton Peace Accords (DPA) in December 1995, NATO deployed the UN-mandated Implementation Force (IFOR) comprising some 60,000 troops. One year later, in December 1996, when the peacekeepers changed their name to Stabilisation Force (SFOR), there were still 32,000 pairs of boots on the ground.

The breakthrough in ending the war in Bosnia was achieved under the stewardship of US diplomacy in Dayton. To recognize the European contribution to the peace efforts, the Americans agreed to hold the signing ceremony in Paris on the 14th of December 1995. The powers backing the peace deal established the Peace Implementation Council in London on the 7th December 1995, which would later play a decisive role in supervising the peace process. The countries surrounding the Western Balkans were assigned only limited roles at this stage. Hungary contributed an engineering contingent, approximately the size of a battalion, to the Implementation Force (IFOR), which unit was responsible for building bridges throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina and also prepared the reconstruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar. Another asset Hungary provided was the Taszar airbase, located about 200 km from the Bosnia and Herzegovina border, which became a major NATO staging area.

The countries of Central Europe and Turkey gained somewhat more prominent roles in the second and third decades of the peace process, after the great powers reallocated their resources to other global priorities. Slovakian top diplomat Miroslav Lajcak became High Representative in 2007 and he was followed by the Austrian Valentin Inzko, who stayed in that position for 12 years. The Austrian military provided some nine generals to serve as EUFOR commanders between 2009 and 2024. Hungary also provided a COMEUFOR and three Deputy High Representatives in Banja Luka since 2016. Austria, Slovenia and Germany became key trade partners and the top investors in BiH, alongside neighbouring Croatia and Serbia.

However, when it comes to hard power, the role of the United States and the ultimate security guarantee provided by NATO are still essential to ensure long-term stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Experience from the field shows that despite all the progress in the Common Foreign and Security Policy and Common Security and Defence Policy, the European Union's capacity to replace the US and NATO in serious crises is still limited. This was proven again in 2025, when the most serious constitutional-political crisis in the Republika Srpska entity since perhaps 1999 seemed to have been resolved only through the decisive intervention of US diplomacy. Unfortunately, the scarce results of the Brussels dialogue and the indispensable presence of KFOR in the light of recent security challenges may lead us to similar conclusions in Kosovo as well.

The balance sheet of Dayton

Dayton was most frequently analysed and judged in the first decade of the peace process. It is fairly unhelpful that, since then, it has become a much less fashionable business in the light of other international priorities. Distance, however, especially in time, often improves analysis. Now that we have three decades behind us since the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords, we can more clearly see the historical role of that peace settlement.

Assets

The Dayton Peace Accords not only ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina but also ensured at least three decades of absence of hostilities. This period of peace has lasted longer than the time between World War I and World War II, and it is already two-thirds of the 45 years during which communist Yugoslavia governed Bosnia and Herzegovina in relative harmony and prosperity. Since the signing of the Dayton Agreement, most Bosnian men who served in the military during the war have returned to civilian life, married, and started families. Their children have now grown into young adulthood. Many people in the Middle East would likely feel fortunate if they could say that the war in their country lasted only three and a half years, followed by 30 years of peace.



John Lukacs

Analyses in Strategic and Defence Studies

2025/21

The DPA brought peace not only to BiH, but also to neighbouring Croatia. Milosevic and Tudjman reached a deal on Eastern Slavonia in Dayton.³ As a consequence, the last piece of land was returned to Croatian sovereignty without further hostilities, after a short period of international administration under UNTEAS (1996-98). This is often an overlooked triumph of Dayton, marking the beginning of consolidation in Croatia, which ultimately led to the country's membership in NATO (2009) and the EU (2013).

The peace settlement preserved the territorial integrity of two new states within their internationally recognized borders in the early post-Cold War era. This was at a time when the new and old borders came into question in wider Eastern Europe. In the mid-1990s, the preservation of territorial integrity carried a wider message with a preventive edge and stabilising effect. Now we know that the effect was only temporary, lasting only for a decade. The referendum on independence in Montenegro (2006) and especially the unilateral declaration of independence in Pristina (2008) brought a fresh wave of questions about the validity of old rules of international law. The principle of territorial integrity has been further undermined by Russia's changing attitude, including the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the occupation of Crimea, and, lastly, the recent full-scale war for territory in Ukraine.

Annex 4 of the DPA created a constitutional framework for the further existence of BiH, ensuring checks and balances to protect the interests of the three main ethnic groups. The Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Annex 4) has faced significant criticism from both international and domestic sources over the past 30 years. Nonetheless, it has maintained a balance among the three ethnic groups, which may explain why it has not been amended since its adoption in 1995. Despite having realistic opportunities for amendments in 2006 and 2009, no changes were made. Some extra-constitutional elements of the Dayton Agreement were modified between 1998 and 2006 due to strong international pressure and occasionally through imposed solutions. This has been called centralization and has been the major grievance of Bosnian Serb nationalists led by the SNSD.

Peacekeeping forces under NATO command fully implemented the military elements stipulated in Annex 1A of the DPA. IFOR/SFOR successfully prevented the renewal of conflicts in Bosnia for 10 years, even in the tense moments of the NATO campaign against neighbouring Serbia in 1999, or in the foiled attempt to declare a third, Croat-led entity in 2001. By 2005, international efforts had succeeded in forming a single military, the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has been the cornerstone of peace in the country ever since. Likewise, internationals with local consent formed a strong security sector at the state level, including SIPA in the field of law enforcement, the State Border Service, and OSA, the Bosnian security and intelligence agency. These changes enabled the departure of NATO troops in 2005 and the handover of peacekeeping tasks to the European Union/EUFOR.

Civilian implementation, under the leadership of OHR, focused on institution-building in governance (executive), legislation, and judiciary to lay down the basis of a democratic political system and free-market economy. The implementation of DPA Annex 7, with the dedicated work of a plethora of international organizations on the ground, achieved a breakthrough in the early 2000s and enabled the return of at least some of the people expelled from their homes during the war. Thanks to that effort, some 50,000 Bosniaks can now live in Republika Srpska and elect their Vice-President to the entity and their delegates to the legislature in Banja Luka. Implementation of Annex 7 also enabled the return of many Serbs to Western Bosnia (Grahovo, Drvar, Glamoc, Bosanski Petrovac) from where they fled at the very last stage of the war, in autumn 1995⁴

Liabilities

The DPA did not address the Kosovo issue, as Slobodan Milosevic categorically refused to do so before and during the Dayton negotiations.⁵ This likely explains why the Dayton Agreement did not achieve lasting regional stability in the Balkans. While there was an ambition to create such stability, as evident in Annex

³ Richard HOLBROOKE: *To End a War*. Random House, New York, 1998, pp. 264-268.

⁴ According to the 2013 census conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) accounted for the 14% (171.839) of the population in the RS (total: 1,228,423). Both numbers have significantly dropped since then, due to large scale emigration from all over BiH. In the Federation of BiH, Serbian return was less spectacular. Serbs accounted for the 2,5% (56,550) of the population in that entity (total: 2,219,220). These numbers have to be taken with some reserve as the conduct of the census was marked by irregularities. Source of data: [Popis 2013](#). [online] 2013 Source: Statistika.ba [02 12 2025]

⁵ Wesley K. CLARK: *Waging Modern War*. PublicAffairs Ltd., Oxford, 2001, p. 65., HOLBROOKE: *End a War*, p. 357.



John Lukacs

Analyses in Strategic and Defence Studies

2025/21

1B, which outlined a regional arms control system similar to the CFE Treaty, these efforts were not sufficient in the absence of treating the underlying political issues. The unresolved Albanian question soon exploded and led to a new war in the Balkans in 1998, prompting an even bigger international intervention. This caused the loss of Kosovo for Serbia and the fall of the regime in Belgrade in October 2000. Milosevic, one of the men indispensable for the success in Dayton and thought to be the ultimate guarantor of peace in Bosnia, ended up in The Hague by mid-2001 and never returned from there.

The implementation of the DPA did not prevent the continuation of war by other means; the ethnonationalist parties have successfully preserved divisive topics in public discourse, which often serve only their tactical interests. Sadly enough, wartime narratives still overshadow life in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is in connection with the failure to achieve reconciliation based on a mutually accepted interpretation of the war between 1992 and 1995.⁶

International nation-building efforts did not focus on changing those cultural habits, which may harm or ultimately even undermine democracy and the rule of law. Adopting liberal democratic rules does not automatically produce a flourishing democracy; much depends on the daily practice of implementing those rules and the supervision of that implementation by the judiciary and citizens. In this sense, we still see serious shortcomings in BiH. Current political elites prefer a weak state with 'a mid-range democracy' as a fig leaf towards the West.⁷

It proved to be impossible to maintain long-term international attention and consensus that would ensure the realization of strategic goals. As soon as the attention of great powers and donors had lapsed, the implementation of the peace agreement effectively stalled. The withdrawal of Russian support for international efforts in Bosnia further weakened prospects and drove the country into the frontline of geopolitical struggles. We saw it in the case of OHR that the absence of a UN Security Council resolution backing Christian Schmidt's nomination as High Representative diminished his political influence somewhat and exposed him to attacks from internal political forces.

Despite the assurances from international parties, the peace process did not ensure a seamless transition to NATO and EU membership. Bosnia has fallen behind in the EU integration process, and we have reached a point where the lack of domestic political will may delay or even obstruct the start of accession talks. Chances for NATO membership are even poorer, as the RS entity leadership has been openly opposing it at least since 2013.⁸

A milestone in history

The military implementation of the DPA marked a milestone in NATO's history. This was the first time that the UN Security Council mandated the military alliance to establish a peacekeeping force that would remain under the unified command and control of NATO throughout the entire operation.⁹

It was also a milestone in the history of international crisis management. The UNSC mandated the NATO-led multinational peacekeepers to *enforce* the implementation of the peace agreement, which was probably the key guarantee of the spectacular success of the early stage of the peace process. The UNSC also clearly recognized the right of IFOR 'to take all necessary measures to defend itself from attack or threat of attack', which constituted a major progress in the philosophy of peacekeeping, as earlier, much softer rules of engagement had often left blue helmets in an unenviable position.¹⁰

The implementation of the DPA was a turning point from another aspect as well. Along with UNTAES in Croatia and UNTAC in Cambodia, this was one of the early examples of providing a strong civilian component in peace settlements. UNTAC and UNTAES were examples of temporary international administrations on the territory of sovereign states. OHR has been a hybrid organization that was intentionally

⁶ The question arises whether it is realistic to expect inter-ethnic reconciliation within one generation after a gruesome war? It took 60-70 years after WW II for Serbs and Hungarians in Vojvodina to reach a consensus on the memory of brutal mutual violence between 1942 and 1944.

⁷ [Global State of Democracy](#). [online] July 2025 Source: Idea.int [02 12 2025]

⁸ Ratka BABIC: [Bosnia Serbs Will Call Referendum on NATO Banja Luka](#). [online] 12 02 2013, Source: BIRN [02 12 2025]

⁹ 'I believe that BiH cannot become a NATO member as long as Serbia does not, if at all, enter NATO.' Letter of Dr Mladen Ivanić, BiH Presidency member from Republika Srpska addressed to Milorad Dodik, President of Republika Srpska, 26 March 2018. [online] 26 03 2018, Source: Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina [02 12 2025]

⁹ UN Security Council Resolution 1031 (1995), adopted on 15 December 1995.

¹⁰ Ibid.



John Lukacs

Analyses in Strategic and Defence Studies

2025/21

not subordinated to the UN but to an ad hoc assembly called the Peace Implementation Council. OHR did not conduct public administration but, under the Bonn Powers, claimed partial and ad hoc legislative competencies.

Dayton also opened a new chapter in the post-Cold War international engagement of the United States. The DPA and its implementation are part of the Pax Americana and spectacularly displayed American diplomatic and military might in the 1990s. Engagement in the Balkans indicated that isolationism was no longer on the agenda; instead, the Bosnian peace settlement marked the beginning of a series of nation-building projects inspired by the United States. A crucial aspect of the Dayton peace settlement is the link between its success or failure and American political prestige. Complete disengagement from Washington has never been a feasible possibility. After the less-than-graceful withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and considering the recent peace-making efforts in Gaza and Ukraine, it is unlikely that America's global credibility can afford to endure further damage.



John Lukacs

Analyses in Strategic and Defence Studies

2025/21

'Analyses in Strategic and Defence Studies' are periodical defence policy papers reflecting the independent opinion of the authors only.

The Research Program for Strategy and Defence within the John Lukacs Institute for Strategy and Politics of the Eötvös József Research Centre at Ludovika University of Public Service carries out research in strategic studies and defence policy. The views and opinion expressed in its publications do not necessarily reflect those of the institution or the editors but of the authors only.

The data and analysis included in these publications serve information purposes.

ISSN 2063-4862

Publisher: John Lukacs Institute for Strategy and Politics

Edited by:
Tamás Csiki Varga

Contact:

1581 Budapest, P.O. Box. 15.

Phone: 00 36 1 432-90-92

E-mail: jli@uni-nke.hu

© László Márkus, 2025