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How Does China View the Western Balkans, Kosovo, and the Normalization Dialogue?

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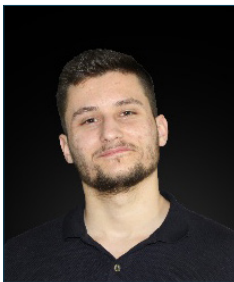
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List of Acronyms

AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CGTN	China Global Television Network
EU	European Union
EULEX	European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo
ICJ	International Court of Justice
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (of the People's Republic of China)
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China (Taiwan)
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNMIK	United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
WTO	World Trade Organization

1. Introduction

A mix of ideological and pragmatic approaches shapes China's engagement in the Western Balkans. While the region of the Western Balkans is not central to Beijing's foreign policy, it offers a critical discursive and geopolitical space through which China challenges the West and tests elements of its broader international relations strategy. In other words, China aspires to rival the West in the Balkans, primarily through economic competition in an effort to preach its political values over international order (or its view of the world) as a model that is, according to the Chinese, better than the model of regional and European integration that the Western Balkans pursues jointly with the West. In this context, Kosovo stands out as an important case. For China, Kosovo is not simply a state that is contested by Serbia but means through which it articulates its opposition to the West and liberal democracy while consolidating its alliance with Serbia. This paper argues that China's stance on Kosovo is not driven by legal principle but by political utility. Kosovo is treated as a "Western project" to be delegitimized rather than a dispute to be resolved.

The paper is structured into five sections. It begins with sections one and two by outlining a conceptual discussion of Chinese foreign policy, aiming to provide a foundation for understanding the underlying principles that drive Chinese foreign policy philosophy. Section three discusses China's presence in the Western Balkans and discusses the path dependency approach of Chinese foreign policy. Section four presents a discourse analysis of Chinese foreign policy to examine the specific language China employs when discussing Kosovo, Serbia, and the normalization process, based on an analysis of 82 texts totaling over 30,000 words, that include official statements, speeches and interviews from officials largely from 2008 to 2024. Section five adopts a more critical, attitudinal perspective, situating China's approach within its broader interests in the

Western Balkans. Drawing from official Chinese statements, UN Security Council speeches, MFA briefings, and diplomatic visits, the paper traces China's positioning toward Kosovo, a subject which, to date, has been largely unexplored in Kosovo. At its core, the paper also identifies a consistent pattern of rhetorical distance paired with alignment with Serbia.

The main findings of the paper are threefold. First, China's discourse on Kosovo is grounded in a legalistic framework in appearance or rhetoric and opportunistic in practice. However, even in its legalistic appearance China always ignores ICJ's opinion on Kosovo's independence in 2010. Second, China's foreign policy toward the Western Balkans is not neutral, but explicitly aligned with Serbia, both rhetorically and technically, and this makes Serbia a key platform for Chinese influence in our region, as other studies have shown.¹ Third, despite its support for the EU-led normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia in principle, China undermines the process by refusing to endorse its objectives, distancing itself from the notion of "normalization," and promoting a status quo that favors ambiguity over resolution. For China, Kosovo is not an issue that needs to be resolved, but a Western design liberal-democratic project that needs to fail. In other words, China's position on Kosovo has largely remained the same since 1998, and viewing Kosovo's "solution" in a way that best fits interests of Serbia, which, as this paper seeks to show, is largely because of Taiwan.

¹ See for instance: Ana Krstinovska, Bledar Feta, Aleksandra Stankovic, Senada Selo Sabic, Aleksandra Davitkovska-Spasovska, and Momcilo Radulovi. (2023). "China's Influence on the Western Balkans' EU Accession Process: Synergies and Obstacles"; Stefan Vladisavljev (2021). China's 'Digital Silk Road' Enters the Western Balkans. Prague, Czech Republic, Association for International Affairs (AMO); Teuta Avdimetaj and Ramadan Ilazi. (2021). "Beyond Economic Considerations: New Frontiers Of Chinese Influence In The Western Balkans" Sbunker

2. An attempt at understanding China's foreign policy approach

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the sole architect and implementer of China's foreign policy and external relations by blending its revolutionary vision for the country with some pragmatic adaptation to global developments. In this sense, Chinese foreign policy is both ideologically rigid and tactically elastic. This section examines the structures, guiding ideologies, and operational instruments of Chinese foreign policy, with a particular focus on the period under Xi Jinping and the conceptual contributions of Marc Lanteigne and Thomas W. Robinson.

The legacy of the “**century of humiliation**” and the deep consciousness of state sovereignty, non-intervention, and territorial integrity are seen in the literature as the major factors shaping Beijing's international relations. The “Century of Humiliation” refers to the period between approximately 1839 and 1949 during which China suffered a series of military defeats, territorial concessions, and foreign interventions. It began with the First Opium War (1839–1842), which led to the Treaty of Nanjing and the loss of Hong Kong, and was followed by subsequent conflicts, including the Second Opium War, the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), and the foreign occupation of parts of China. This period ended with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The narrative of national humiliation has become a central component of Chinese national identity. It is frequently invoked by the Chinese Communist Party to legitimize its rule and foreign policy goals.² In addition to this, the establishment of Republic of China in

Taiwan (ROC), is a major if not a central factor that shapes Chinese foreign policy, especially in relation to Kosovo.

According to Thomas W. Robinson, China's external conduct is rooted in a realist conception of international relations, one in which the country increasingly couples this with international assertiveness to recover its centrality in the global order.³ China follows a sovereigntist approach to international relations. Marc Lanteigne further elaborates that the foundations of Chinese foreign policy have shifted significantly under Xi Jinping,⁴ particularly after 2013. Xi's leadership signaled a departure from Deng Xiaoping's cautious maxim of *taoguang yanghui* (hide your strength, bide your time), and replaced it with a much more proactive posture.⁴ As Lanteigne puts it, China's foreign policy today is a blend of defensive realism and economic assertiveness aimed at creating a favorable external environment for **national rejuvenation**. This shift reflects China's belief that the global balance of power is changing, and that the post-Cold War dominance of the West is being contested. Accordingly, Beijing seeks to shape the norms, institutions, and economic infrastructure of international affairs in accordance with its own vision of the world, rather than merely adapting to them.

A fundamental contradiction characterizes China's foreign policy. It masks its pursuit of hard power in the language of non-interference yet engages in tactical interventions that unmask its rhetoric. The core principles China claims to uphold such as sovereignty, territorial integrity,

2 Alison A. Kaufman. March 10, 2011. Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on “China's Narratives Regarding National Security Policy”. <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/3.10.11Kaufman.pdf>

3 Robinson, Thomas W., and David Shambaugh, eds. *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

4 Lanteigne, Marc. *Chinese Foreign Policy: An Introduction*. 4th ed. London: Routledge, 2019.

and non-interference, function more as norms of insulation than as norms of international relations. The purpose of this is to provide some kind of shield for China from external scrutiny rather than these being guiding norms of its conduct in international affairs. In other words, China is fundamentally driven by (hard) power relations.⁵ China routinely violates the same principles it proclaims define its foreign policy philosophy, when advancing its geopolitical and economic interests abroad. The result is not a coherent foreign policy, but a power-centric approach that weaponizes the rhetoric of non-interference to obscure its interference.

The ideological foundations of Chinese foreign policy have historically been framed through what the CCP defines as guiding ideologies (*zhidao sixiang*) and guiding principles of foreign policy (*waijiao zhidao fangzhen*).⁶ These are not abstract postures, but authoritative frameworks that define China's identity, worldview, and strategy. At the heart of Chinese foreign policy lies the centralized authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which has maintained a monopoly over national decision-making. Chinese foreign policy must always be viewed through the lens of internal political legitimacy and regime stability. This perspective highlights a significant difference from liberal democracies, where foreign relations are closely tied to domestic political calculations. The CCP's legitimacy, especially in times of reform or uncertainty, often depends on the party's ability to project strength abroad.

The literature identifies distinct historical stages of Chinese foreign policy, characterized by shifts in leadership and the global context. China's foreign policy behavior can be best understood through its evolving self-perception, structured by both revolutionary roots and pragmatic

developmentalism. Vélez-Serrano identifies three stages: Maoist activism and ideological alignment, Deng-era introversion for economic development, and Xi Jinping's confident assertiveness.⁷

Under Mao Zedong, foreign policy was shaped by a combination of revolutionary internationalism and pragmatic survival. This period was marked by ideological confrontation with the West and the Soviet bloc, reflecting Mao's dictum to "lean to one side" and his belief that "the East wind is prevailing over the West wind," a metaphor for the ascendancy of socialism over capitalist decay.⁸ Deng Xiaoping's era ushered in a refined ideological approach. Deng's mantra, "hide your strength, bide your time" (*taoguang yanghui*), reflected a strategy of restraint, economic focus, and deliberate avoidance of international confrontation. Deng's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence —mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence —have become the rhetorical cornerstone of China's non-aligned posture and overall philosophy in foreign affairs.⁹ Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin extended this pragmatism, embedding it within a discourse of "peaceful development." However, as Marc Lanteigne observes, peaceful development was not merely a posture of reassurance to the West but a strategic narrative to mask growing capabilities. Xi Jinping's ascent to power in 2012 signified a departure from what we can see as Chinese strategic introversion. Xi has articulated a more assertive vision centered on national rejuvenation (*zhonghua minzu de weida fuxing*) and the "China Dream, a period of revolutionary pragmatism with global ambitions, or a fusion of developmental nationalism and geopolitical confidence."¹⁰ The 2018 constitutional

5 Notes from discussion with an international relations researcher, June 26, 2025 (AC).

6 Vélez-Serrano, Mayra, 'Stood Up, Grew Rich and Now Is Growing Strong': An Introduction to the Historical Stages of China's Foreign Policy (November 20, 2018). *Relaciones Internacionales* 91 (2), 1-23, 2018, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3373829> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3373829>

7 Ibid.,

8 Robinson and Shambaugh, eds., 1996.

9 Chaubey, M. (1994). I Establishing a New International Order on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: Deng Xiaoping: III Documents. *China Report*, 30(2), 267-279. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000944559403000213> (Original work published 1994)

10 Lanteigne, 2019.

revision in China, which removed presidential term limits and enshrined “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” formalized this transformation, projecting Xi’s vision as an enduring strategic compass for the nation.

Three primary objectives drive Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping: securing the regime, projecting power, and shaping global norms. China’s core interests — *hexin liyi* — include sovereignty over disputed territories (Taiwan, Hong Kong, South China Sea), regime security, and the continuation of the CCP’s central role. Although, South China Sea may not be viewed as a disputed territory but rather a territory occupied by China, as Beijing expanded its territory into international waters. And the way it defends such conquests of international waters along the lines of “we are a big country, so we need more space to develop” is deeply **colonial approach**.¹¹

Any perceived threat to these interests triggers sharp diplomatic or coercive responses, such as sanctions, retaliatory trade measures, or cyber-attack operations. Lanteigne emphasizes that “China’s new bottom-line thinking (*dixian siwei*)” reflects a doctrine of red lines, particularly around territorial integrity, beyond which Chinese diplomacy becomes confrontational.¹² In terms of regional approach, China has shifted from a focus on immediate periphery diplomacy (ASEAN, SCO, etc.) to global initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), designed to deepen infrastructural, financial, and normative interdependence, including in the Western Balkans. The BRI exemplifies what Robinson calls “developmental geopolitics,” leveraging **economic connectivity** to build spheres of influence while evading the overt militarization of foreign policy.

China’s foreign policy toolkit has grown more diverse and sophisticated. Traditional hard power remains essential, particularly in the

Asia-Pacific. The modernization of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the development of blue-water naval capabilities, and the enhancement of cyber warfare capacities signal a transition from a focus on territorial defense to a global presence. China is increasingly focused on power projection, Yet Beijing recognizes the limitations of hard power. It has invested heavily in cultivating soft power through Confucius Institutes, media diplomacy (China Global Television Network-CGTN), and so-called development aid, which are loans that lead to dependency, as the case of Montenegro and other countries has shown.¹³ However, the limitations of soft power in liberal democracies have led to an increased use of **sharp power**, or manipulative influence operations that exploit openness and democratic vulnerabilities, such as in the European Union (EU) and the Western Balkans. This includes co-opting media narratives, cultivating elite networks, and leveraging economic dependency, of which Serbia is a prime example.¹⁴

China’s engagement with multilateral institutions is ambivalent. It participates in global institutions such as the UN, WTO, and WHO, but often resists institutional norms that contradict its sovereignty-first approach. Beijing has also promoted parallel institutions (e.g., the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to offset Western institutions. Lanteigne argues that China’s multilateralism is functionalist and selective, preferring institutions it can shape or lead, and resisting those that constrain its autonomy. For instance, while China criticizes NATO for bypassing the UN in Kosovo, Libya, and Iraq, it has simultaneously expanded its presence in UN peacekeeping, including deployments in

11 Notes from discussion with an international relations researcher, June 26, 2025 (AC).

12 Lanteigne, 2019, p. 46

13 Hans von der Brelie. (2021, May 7). The billion-dollar motorway leading Montenegro to nowhere, Euronews, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/05/07/the-billion-dollar-motorway-leading-montenegro-to-nowhere>

14 Teuta Avdimetaj and Ramadan Ilazi. (2021). “Beyond Economic Considerations: New Frontiers Of Chinese Influence In The Western Balkans”. Sbuker and KCSS, <https://qkss.org/en/publikimet/beyond-economic-considerations-new-frontiers-of-chinese-influence-in-the-western-balkans>

Mali and South Sudan.

China's efforts to redefine global norms are visible in its rhetoric around "win-win cooperation," "community of common destiny," and "new type of international relations." These concepts are not ideologically neutral. They reject the liberal-democratic premise of universal norms and instead prioritize sovereignty, non-interference, and regime stability, a vision attractive to many autocratic or semi-democratic regimes, such as Serbia.¹⁵ China presents itself as a defender of global stability, yet engages in behavior that destabilizes maritime security and participates in international cyberattacks.

A central dilemma in interpreting China's foreign policy lies in its **dual posture**: assertive yet cautious, revisionist yet status quo oriented. China claims to support a rules-based international order—but one in which

the rules are reinterpreted through "Chinese characteristics." This ambiguity is not accidental. Chinese foreign policy thrives on strategic ambiguity.¹⁶ This is evident in China's behavior in the South China Sea, where it has militarized disputed islands while promoting a "peaceful rise" narrative. It is also apparent in China's stance on contentious political issues, such as Kosovo's independence, which it refuses to recognize. China is increasingly utilizing soft power instruments, such as Confucius Institutes and digital diplomacy, to shape public perceptions globally. However, these are often coupled with sharp power tools, such as propaganda, disinformation, and elite capture, in countries with autocratic tendencies.

15 Nĕmec, J., & Stojarová, V. (2025). Chinese Economic Influence in Serbia: The Malign Synergy of Pollution and Illiberalism. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 77(4), 638–657. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2025.2491484>

16 Lanteigne, 2019.

3. The Western Balkans as a case for the interpretation of Chinese foreign policy

Although they may not be regarded as a principal priority within China's foreign policy agenda, the Western Balkans have become increasingly attractive to China for several reasons. First, the region provides an entry point into the EU's enlargement policy and process. Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have become essential platforms or paths into the European market for Chinese goods. As noted in the European Parliament research, "China seeks a gateway to the EU via cash-strapped Balkans" and has committed billions in infrastructure and energy projects, particularly in Serbia.¹⁷ Second, China promotes its non-Western alignment as an asset in its foreign policy for the Western Balkans. It promotes a narrative of "non-interference" and "win-win cooperation" that appeals to governments in the region, which face pressure to deliver on reforms in the European integration process.¹⁸ For example, Serbian officials often contrast EU conditionality with China's respect for sovereignty. In contrast, EU loans and other financial support mechanisms for Serbia are cheaper and more transparent, they come with conditions attached.¹⁹ This suggests that Serbia perceives China as an actor that does not seek to influence internal issues. In this sense, from a particular perspective, China offers a more "dignified" partnership in the eyes of leaders, who have a harder time working with actors like the EU, which seek that democratic

norms and human rights be respected in exchange for support. However, the perception that somehow China's support is benign and free of any strings attached is only a perception, as in reality Chinese support is not without strings attached (i.e., what would happen if Serbia, based on its supposed non-aligned/multi-vector foreign policy, chose a more neutral policy towards Taiwan?). The concept of **strategic ambivalence**, as explored in the work of Homi K. Bhabha, may help to better understand China's role in the Western Balkans, where China appears benign while subtly reinforcing dependencies.

Third, China's stance on Kosovo serves both a domestic and geopolitical function. By refusing to recognize Kosovo, Beijing aims to appear as committed to what would be seen in the Chinese perspective as the principle of "non-intervention" and gain favor with Serbia.

China's role in the Western Balkans, however, is not uncontested. The European Union views China's involvement as potentially fragmenting its enlargement process and the region's alignment with EU norms and standards. However, the EU's policy on China's role in the area is also ambivalent, and China enjoys good relations with some EU member states. In this context, the Western Balkans has become a testing ground for China's outward push, a model of influence that avoids confrontation but gradually deepens its economic, political and security presence, increasingly moving towards creating some degree of dependency. Most recently, Serbia has purchased Chinese military equipment, including air defense systems and combat drones.²⁰ According to Krstinovska

17 Matthieu Burnay, Dr. Kolja Raube, and Prof. Dr. Jan Wouters, China's Foreign Policy and External Relations (Study requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs), 2015

18 Analysis of the text from statements of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs

19 Branimir Jovanović and Sonja Stojadinović. "The EU's and China's grants and loans in the Western Balkans", April, 2025 Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw),

20 Reuters, Serbia highlights importance of Chinese

et al. (2023, Serbia accounts for nearly two-thirds of all Chinese loans and contracts in the region).²¹ Beyond Serbia, Montenegro signed a controversial €1 billion highway loan with the Export-Import Bank of China. In North Macedonia, Chinese companies were involved in highway construction projects later tainted by corruption allegations. Albania remains more cautious, limiting Chinese involvement to non-strategic sectors. Kosovo, due to its complete alignment with US and EU partners, has maintained minimal engagement with China. Digital infrastructure has become a significant vector of Chinese influence.²², with Huawei gaining access to critical infrastructure.²³

Three key motivations seem to inform Beijing's engagement in the Western Balkans. First, the Western Balkans are **geostrategically important**, and China views the region as an integral part of its Belt and Road Initiative. Second, the Western Balkans can offer China **leverage vis-à-vis the EU**. While China formally supports the European Union's integration of Western Balkan countries, its bilateral ties, especially with Serbia, undermine collective EU interests, such as the diffusion of norms from democratic institutions into other policy areas. Third, China is capitalizing on what it perceives as a sense of **fatigue with enlargement in the EU**. With little progress since the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, many Balkan states remain in a state of geopolitical limbo.²⁴ This vacuum creates space for external actors such as China to project influence without facing direct contestation from Brussels or Washington.

China's objectives in the Western Balkans fall into three broad categories. One, increasing support

for China on international issues. China values diplomatic support for its "One China" policy and the principle of non-interference in its internal affairs. Serbia has been particularly vocal, with President Vučić describing relations as a "friendship of steel," and Xi Jinping reciprocating by referring to Serbia as "China's closest partner in Europe"—two, market expansion and access to public contracts. Chinese firms benefit from opaque procurement practices in Serbia and Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, often circumventing both national and EU environmental and labor norms, through three normative disruptions and soft balancing. China does not promote an ideological alternative to the EU, but instead focuses on "mutual benefit" and "non-interference," providing local elites, especially those with authoritarian tendencies, with a convenient narrative to avoid reforms.

China's growing presence in the Western Balkans creates both friction and complexity for the EU and NATO's ambitions in the region. Based on the analysis of existing research, three effects are most salient in the growing and unchecked Chinese influence in our area: one is the weakening of EU leverage and erosion of the transformative power of the European integration process. Two, undermining geostrategic cohesion in the Western Balkans, as **Beijing seeks to fragment the security architecture in our region**. Third, the most troubling effect is normative, as China's "authoritarian developmentalism" presents a potential alternative model where growth, state control, and authoritarian practices coexist. According to Krstinovska et al., Chinese-funded projects are implemented in disregard of good governance and rule of law standards.²⁵

China's role in the Western Balkans is **malign**, overtly **hostile**, and **opportunistic**. By operating through bilateralism and partnering with elites who prefer autocratic governance, like President Vucic, China embeds itself in the region. Until the EU and NATO establish a clear definition of their stance towards China in our area and devise a robust response, Chinese influence and presence in the Western Balkans are likely to continue growing.

defence equipment, October 23, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/serbia-highlights-importance-chinese-defence-equipment-2023-10-23/>

21 China's Influence on the Western Balkans' EU Accession Process: Synergies and Obstacles,

22 Sasa Dragojlo, "China's Huawei Opens Tech Centre, Consolidating Presence in Serbia", September 15, 2020, Balkan Insight, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/09/15/chinas-huawei-opens-tech-centre-consolidating-presence-in-serbia/>

23 In 2020, Huawei signed an agreement with Serbia's Office for Information Technologies and eGovernment, to place equipment by Huawei in the State Data Center in Kragujevac. <https://e.huawei.com/en/news/ebg/2020/serbia-office-egovernment-agreement>

24 Krstinovska, et.al., 2023

25 Ibid., p.12

4. Discourse analysis of the Chinese foreign policy towards Kosovo

This paper adopts a content and narrative analysis framework to examine how the People's Republic of China constructs its political narrative around the Kosovo issue. The methodological approach employed a structured, thematic, and sentiment-based coding system to analyze speeches, statements, interviews, and other sources from Chinese public officials. Similarly, we use a binary content analysis method, complemented by qualitative narrative interpretation, which focuses on the presence or absence of predefined thematic categories across 82 primary source texts.

The corpus of analysis included 82 publicly available texts published between 2008 and 2024 by Chinese state officials and institutions. These are grouped into three categories:

- > **Texts 1–23:** Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Press Conferences and Statements.
- > **Texts 24–79:** Speeches delivered at the UN Security Council (UNSC) regarding Kosovo.
- > **Texts 80–82:** Speeches and interviews by senior Chinese leaders concerning the Western Balkans.

Each text was assigned a unique identifier and analyzed individually to preserve the contextual meaning of each word. The documents were examined in their original English-language versions provided by official Chinese government sources or verified UN records.

Inspired by operational code analysis and adapted for this case, we developed a binary coding scheme (1 = presence, 0 = absence) to register whether a given text explicitly included one or more of the following themes, such as

sovereignty and territorial integrity, dialogue, unilateral actions, UN, EU/NATO/US. Each theme was clearly defined in our internal research design, which provided inclusion and exclusion criteria, as well as illustrative quotations, to ensure intercoder reliability. Coding was cross-validated by a second coder for 20% of the texts, yielding over 90% agreement.

Out of the 82 documents analyzed: 66 texts included statements that included support for Serbia's sovereignty and territorial integrity; 65 referenced support for dialogue as a preferred method of conflict resolution; 22 criticized unilateral actions by Kosovo; 63 referenced the authority of the UN, particularly UNSC Resolution 1244; 15 included antagonistic portrayals of the U.S. or NATO. Notably, the EU was not explicitly framed as an antagonist in any of the texts, a finding that prompted a critical reflection on the original coding category.

The analysis of 82 sources referring to Kosovo by China from 2008 to 2025 has revealed that Beijing has maintained a largely consistent stance, aligning with Serbia's position on Kosovo. However, there were a few slight adjustments to China's position. China was somewhat more neutral in the early years (2008–2011). Which is to say, that while supporting Serbia, they also encouraged progress in the dialogue and commended both parties for advancing reconciliation. However, as the international system became more polarized, they have progressively adopted an even more supportive posture towards Serbia. To compare, in 2008 a statement from Beijing said "China appreciates the reasonable spirit and the restraint demonstrated by Serbia and Kosovo", while in 2023 they expressed "the Kosovo authorities

once again took unilateral action, insisted on holding elections in northern Kosovo and announced the election results despite a turnout of less than 4 per cent, leading to an escalation of local conflicts and regional tensions. China is deeply concerned about that” (Text 77; 29).

4.1 Main Findings

China’s discourse on Kosovo is characterized by a carefully calibrated narrative that reaffirms its core foreign policy principles, aligns strongly with Serbia, and preserves some flexibility. Through our analysis of 82 texts, including press briefings, UNSC speeches, and senior-level declarations, China systematically seeks to portray itself within a normative framework centered on sovereignty, legality, and multilateralism. The analysis reveals a consistent hierarchy of themes: support for Serbia’s territorial integrity (132 mentions), endorsement of dialogue (130), invocation of UN authority (126), opposition to Kosovo’s unilateral actions (44), and critique of the United States and NATO (30). The European Union, although occasionally referenced, is not explicitly framed in an antagonistic manner, but it is implied.

Affirmation of Serbia’s Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity

China’s most consistently expressed position concerns its unambiguous support for Serbia, and, from Beijing’s perspective, for Serbia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. This framing, articulated 132 times in the 82 analyzed texts, reflects a broader continuity in Chinese foreign policy, particularly its sensitivity to what China sees as secessionist movements. While Chinese officials often describe the Kosovo case as “unique” (Text 79), the defense of Serbia’s territorial claims must also be understood as a self-serving interest for China, as it fears

developments regarding Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Tibet. Significantly, this position has intensified in moments of perceived instability or escalation on the ground. Chinese statements frequently reiterate that “sovereignty must be respected” and that the “Kosovo issue” cannot be resolved outside the framework of international law. This rhetorical emphasis serves a dual function: shielding China from potential future precedents that could be applied to its domestic challenges, and projecting an image of principled consistency on the global stage.

Legality through the UN Framework: Resolution 1244 and the Role of UNMIK

Closely related to its sovereignty framing is China’s repeated invocation of the United Nations as the appropriate forum for addressing the “Kosovo issue”. In 126 instances, China reaffirms that UNSC Resolution 1244 remains the cornerstone of the international legal order governing Kosovo’s status. Chinese officials consistently emphasize that UNMIK retains a neutral mandate and that no institutional development outside the UN framework can alter this status (Text 73). China’s insistence on the primacy of Resolution 1244 must be seen as an effort to anchor the issue within a forum where it holds veto power. In doing so, Beijing resists processes, including the EU-led dialogue, that could consolidate Kosovo’s statehood outside the reach of multilateral constraint. Notably, when UNMIK scaled down operations following Kosovo’s 2008 declaration of independence, China described these changes as “technical” and not reflective of a substantive shift in the UN’s position. The strategy here is subtle but essential, as by framing its international presence through a neutral, legally binding resolution, China seeks to delegitimize Kosovo’s claim to statehood without engaging in overt confrontation.

Limited Endorsement of Dialogue

Support for dialogue appears in 130 texts and represents the second most frequent narrative theme. Beijing seems to endorse dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia as the primary means to resolve the dispute, often citing the Brussels Dialogue (Texts 12, 13). However, China's support for dialogue is accompanied by an equally apparent disinterest in participating directly. While rhetorical backing is there, Beijing positions itself outside the process. This narrative choice is about China being able to reject any outcome of the process, as fundamentally, for Beijing, the success of normalization dialogue could be detrimental to its interests. China's broader posture is to appear constructive without taking on political risk or becoming entangled in EU-led processes it cannot shape or influence. It also reflects an instrumental approach to normalization dialogue, which China sees as a mechanism that preserves Serbia's status claims. China also selectively uses the dialogue framing, particularly when invoking the need for Kosovo to implement previously agreed-upon arrangements, such as the establishment of the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities (Texts 26, 27).

Kosovo's "Unilateral Actions" as a Source of Destabilization

The narrative of Kosovo's "unilateral actions" is a recurring theme, present in 44 of the texts analyzed. China consistently portrays Kosovo's moves to assert sovereignty, whether through actions in the north to establish a coherent currency regulation or institutional consolidations, as destabilizing and illegitimate (Text 79). This framing operates within a broader discursive strategy by Beijing to help portray Serbia as the "legal" and "dialogue-oriented" actor, in contrast to Kosovo's allegedly provocative actions. By labeling these moves as "unilateral," China seeks to portray Serbia as

associated with multilateralism and the rule of law, while portraying Kosovo as associated with disruption and illegality.

Differentiating the West

In 30 of the texts, China adopts a more critical stance toward the United States and NATO. This antagonistic framing draws heavily on the memory of the 1999 NATO intervention and, notably, the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (Text 82). These grievances are periodically reintroduced into contemporary discourse as reminders of "Western unilateralism and interventionism". China holds the United States principally responsible for the Kosovo war and presents it as a destabilizing actor in the region (Text 21). However, this critique does not apply equally to all Western entities. The European Union is treated with greater nuance, and it is recognized as a facilitator of the normalization dialogue, provided it maintains a neutral position (Texts 74, 76, 79). The EU's mission, EULEX, is also described in favorable terms.

Reconciliation and Minorities

Beyond geopolitical narratives, China also periodically invokes the themes of reconciliation, coexistence, and minority rights (Texts 25, 26, 72). Although these references are less frequent, they serve as a symbolic function. By focusing on the need to protect minority communities and promote reconciliation, China wants to position itself as a normative actor committed to peace and social cohesion. Ironically, the Chinese record on human rights is disastrous not only domestically but globally.²⁶

26 Amnesty International. "China: Xi Jinping's continued tenure as leader a disaster for human rights." 23 October 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/10/china-xi-jinpings-continued-tenure-as-leader-a-disaster-for-human-rights/>; Kenneth Roth, "China's Global Threat to Human Rights", Human Rights Watch (HRW), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/global>

Delegitimizing Kosovo's Moral Authority

Between 2008 and 2013, China repeatedly referenced allegations of illegal organ trafficking in Kosovo (Text 64), including a formal citation of the UN Secretary-General's report (S/2011/43) (Text 67). These statements serve as moral indictments, positioning Kosovo as not only politically illegitimate but also ethically compromised. Unfortunately, such claims by China and Russia, especially accusations of organ trafficking, were often echoed by officials in the EU, without any evidence to substantiate them. Such allegations, in the context of China's foreign policy, play a delegitimizing role in Beijing's broader narrative: China questions Kosovo's readiness for statehood while undermining its claims to recognition. There are also contradictions in Chinese positions. While China actively advocates against Kosovo's statehood, it also offered a minor signal that it might be open to change.

Kosovo as a Unique Case

A notable observation in China's stance towards Kosovo is its ambiguity regarding the broader implications of the Kosovo case. While firmly rejecting Kosovo's declaration of independence, China has also described the case as "unique" (Text 79), suggesting a potential openness to acceptance. This language enables China to maintain its current stance while preserving the option to change position should the circumstances change.

5. Attitudinal analysis of Beijing's foreign policy towards the Western Balkans

This section shifts the analytical lens from a methodologically defined discourse analysis to a more interpretive and critical assessment of China's foreign policy positioning toward the Western Balkans, with particular focus on the Kosovo–Serbia normalization dialogue. Whereas Section 4 adopted a structured narrative coding and document analysis approach, Section 5 synthesizes these empirical insights to evaluate the attitudinal dimensions of Chinese foreign policy, including its preferences, perceived allies, normative framings, and strategic silences. By “attitudinal analysis,” this section refers to the interpretive reading of China's foreign policy posture that goes beyond explicit statements to assess implied priorities, rhetorical patterns, and geopolitical calculations. The Western Balkans, while peripheral in China's global diplomacy in terms of scale, represents an ideologically and strategically functional discursive space for Beijing.

The analysis unfolds in three parts. The first subsection examines the Western Balkans in China's foreign policy discourse broadly, second subsection explores China's stance on Kosovo, tracing a legalistic discourse that aligns unambiguously with Serbia, third subsection turns to China's approach to the EU-facilitated Kosovo–Serbia normalization dialogue, identifying a rhetorical posture that appears to support dialogue but in practice it does not want it to succeed. Throughout, the analysis underscores that China's engagement with the Western Balkans is **neither passive nor ideologically neutral**. The aim is not to dominate the region but to create dependencies and shape its political orientation in ways that support China's broader foreign policy narratives and interests.

5.1 Western Balkans in China's Foreign Policy Discourse

A clear and disciplined logic underpins China's growing presence in the Western Balkans. While its engagement in the region is not on the same level as that of the European Union (EU) or the United States, in terms of both scale and depth, Beijing's approach towards the area is based on an emphasis on alignment with Serbia and ideological contrast. From its perspective, **China does not seek dominance but rather manipulative dependency** in the Western Balkans; it is carefully cultivating its grip in different sectors, especially in critical infrastructure, and promotes narratives of multipolarity, offering solidarity with states that appear dissatisfied with the Euro-Atlantic community, namely the EU and the US. In practice, China's presence in the Western Balkans has proven detrimental to democratic norms and the European Union's interests in the region.²⁷

This section examines China's positioning on the Western Balkans region as a whole, drawing on speeches in the UN Security Council, statements by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and diplomatic communications and visits. Three themes emerge: (1) China's identification of its “friends” and less cooperative actors in the region; (2) its prioritization of issues such as sovereignty and multilateralism; and (3) its broader foreign policy objectives, including economic and normative, which make our region relevant to Beijing's global positioning.

27 Krstinovska, et.al., 2023

Among Western Balkan states, Serbia stands alone as China's most valued and visible partner. This is not only a matter of diplomatic courtesy or rhetorical generosity on the part of Beijing, but it is a product of deliberate and growing economic and security cooperation by both sides. The notion of "ironclad friendship," frequently invoked by senior Chinese officials, including President Xi Jinping, is more than a diplomatic nicety. It reflects China's perception of Serbia as a long-term, reliable partner in the EU's courtyard.

Serbia is consistently portrayed in Chinese statements as a country that upholds sovereignty, pursues an independent foreign policy, and offers "mutual respect" and "reciprocity" in its dealings with China. This understanding is echoed by Serbia's willingness to support the PRC's "One China" principle unequivocally, as evidenced by public statements from President Aleksandar Vučić, who has stated that: "There are thousands of things that we can and should learn from our Chinese friends," and that "Taiwan is China — full stop."²⁸ This powerful support from Serbia for China's position, which is in contrast to the positions of key EU member states, has elevated Serbia's value to Beijing. In contrast to Serbia, Kosovo has expressed support for Taiwan. In 2023, members of the Kosovo-Taiwan Parliamentary Friendship Group visited Taiwan, meeting with President Tsai Ing-wen.²⁹

At the economic level, Serbia has also become China's most important investment destination, not only in the Western Balkans but also in the broader context of Central and Eastern Europe, with large-scale infrastructure, energy, and industrial projects facilitated under the Belt and Road Initiative. Serbia is the only European country to have signed a Free Trade Agreement

with China, as well as an agreement to build a "shared future".³⁰ Serbia is represented in the Chinese foreign policy discourse as a partner that shares with China mutual understanding and a shared strategic vision. For China, Serbia serves as a platform to project influence in wider Europe and also as a testing ground for various approaches or models of engaging with other European countries that are not part of the EU. In other words, Serbia is China's poster child for bilateral relations.³¹ However, what seems to be a significant factor in the facilitation of China-Serbia relations is that Serbia is widely considered an autocracy.

In contrast to the obvious and often emotive relationship with Serbia, China's posture toward the rest of the Western Balkans is one of **measured pragmatism and restraint**. Chinese statements rarely refer directly to Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, or Kosovo in detailed or bilateral terms, unless they are connected to broader international issues or a specific situation.

Montenegro, a potential case study of the Chinese debt-trap tactic as a tool for creating dependency, receives occasional diplomatic attention, based on the analysis of text from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs addressed to the Western Balkans. Most recent studies indicate that "Montenegro's external debt continues to be substantially tied to the Chinese Exim Bank."³² China has called the debt-trap argument a prejudice.³³ But, while the economic

28 Andrew Higgins, On European Tour, Xi Jinping Heads to Friendly Territory in the East, May 7, 2024, The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/07/world/europe/xi-serbia-hungary-europe.html>

29 President Han: "Taiwan-Kosovo friendship continues to grow from strength to strength. I thank Kosovo's warm comfort about Hualien earthquake.", April 18, 2023, <https://www.ly.gov.tw/EngPages/Detail.aspx?nodeid=45579&pid=240306>

30 Dusan Stojanovic and Jovana Gec, "China and EU-candidate Serbia Sign Agreement to Build a 'Shared Future'", May 9, 2024, <https://thedi diplomat.com/2024/05/china-and-eu-candidate-serbia-sign-agreement-to-build-a-shared-future/>

31 Xinhua, China, Serbia decide to build community with shared future, May 9, 2024, http://en.cppcc.gov.cn/2024-05/09/c_985473.htm

32 Philipp Lamprecht and Bernd Christoph Ströhm. "China's Expanding Influence in the Western Balkans: Why Montenegro Matters", February 2025, ECIPE, <https://ecipe.org/blog/china-influence-in-montenegro/>

33 Support 4 Partnership, "After narrowly avoiding the 'debt trap', Montenegro continues to do business with China", April, 2025, <https://support4partnership.org/en/news/after-narrowly-avoiding-the-debt-trap-montenegro-continues-to-do-business-with-china>

foothold of China in Montenegro is continuing and growing, the country receives generic and infrequent mentions in Beijing's foreign policy statements as well.

Moreover, China's discourse rarely includes recognition of domestic political dynamics or interethnic challenges within the region's other states. This is not **an oversight, but a deliberate practice by China to boost its image as a non-interference actor**. Beijing treats the Western Balkans as a space of externalized interest, where it may invest, express positions, or deliver rhetorical critiques of Western actions, but not as a site where it seeks to shape internal politics or assume a leadership role. However, this does not mean China lacks ambition; rather, it is the position that affords it the best influence. China in the Western Balkans seeks to cultivate an image as a non-interventionist significant power, carefully managing the region through formal diplomatic channels and in accordance with international law. At the same time, in practice, the picture is much more complex, and China constantly works with political elites to modify and adjust laws and policies, including procurement procedures, to its interests.³⁴

In other words, China is neither neutral nor passive. It actively supports regimes that align with its interests, such as in Serbia, through economic leverage, disinformation through media partnerships, and political endorsement in international mechanisms.³⁵ While it refrains from public involvement in domestic political issues in the region, it cultivates elite networks, especially in the business sector, creates dependencies, and deepens ideological affinities not only with government institutions but also with public officials who resist Western influence. China recruits, funds, and supports journalists, businesses, politicians, and academics in the

Western Balkans, but especially in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as channels of soft power. This approach enables China to exert influence without the need for overt visibility, thereby helping to reinforce authoritarian tendencies while avoiding perceptions of interference. Moreover, China's self-proclaimed commitment to non-interference is highly selective and conditional. Countries that challenge their positions, for instance, such as on Taiwan, are met not with restraint, but with direct political pressure and economic retaliation. Beijing's reactions show that its supposed commitment to non-interventionism is instrumental rather than principled. In that sense, the non-interventionist image it projects in the Western Balkans is less a matter of conviction than of a tactical approach.

China's overarching foreign policy messaging in the Western Balkans is structured around a small set of consistent themes: respect for state sovereignty and territorial integrity, opposition to unilateral actions, the importance of dialogue under the UN framework, and rejection of power-based interventionism.

The principle of sovereignty is the keystone of China's narratives in the Western Balkans. It is invoked in every statement that touches on Serbia, Kosovo, or broader regional stability. China presents itself as a normative power by promoting in its statements arguments that, from Beijing's perspective, are about non-interference and equality of states. For instance, following Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence, China framed the decision as a threat to peace in the Western Balkans and to UN authority, even though the UN appointed envoy for determining the future status of Kosovo based on Resolution 1244 proposed that Kosovo's status be an independent country. This framing recurs in other statements of China towards Kosovo, often without change in tone or content. Closely tied to this, China insists in its statements that it has a preference for multilateral diplomacy centered on the United Nations. Yet, it opposed the UN process for determining Kosovo's future status and the proposal by President Ahtisaari. China always

³⁴ Krstinovska, et.al., 2023

³⁵ Ramadan Ilazi and Stefan Vladislavjev, "The Implications of China-Serbia Relations for Kosovo" December 28, 2023, The Diplomat, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/the-implications-of-china-serbia-relations-for-kosovo/>

references the UN Security Council Resolution 1244, but fails ever to mention the ICJ Opinion on Kosovo's declaration of independence, which was requested by the UN General Assembly and also acknowledged in both cases by unanimous vote. This is another example of China's **normative hypocrisy**.

In China's MFA press conferences and official statements, the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia/Serbia in 1999 is a recurring theme. During this campaign, NATO bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, an act it described as an accident.³⁶ However, China's criticism of the NATO intervention reflects a concern China has, of defending its spheres of influence against the precedent of Western-led humanitarian interventions. This approach by China, which criticizes the West for intervention, seeks to portray China as a power that offers solidarity without conditionality, upholds legal principles without political prescriptions, and invests without ideological interference. However, this is not reflected in practice.

From the foreign policy perspective, the Western Balkans is an essential discursive zone in which China can test and articulate its global foreign policy identity. In this sense, three functions of this discursive zone are crucial to note. First, the Western Balkans allows China to advance its narrative of a "just and multipolar order" without significant risk. The stakes are lower than in East Asia or the Middle East, and opposition from the West is less coordinated or intense against China in the Western Balkans. As such, the Western Balkans, especially Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, offer a relatively safe space for China to test and reinforce broader claims.

Second, it provides China with a platform to contest the legitimacy of Western institutions

and norms, particularly those of the US, the EU, and NATO. China often portrays the West as a dominant actor in the Western Balkans, one that imposes itself and seeks to remake the region in its image, thereby being detrimental to the national interests of the countries in the area. This allows China to portray itself as a benevolent friend, one that does not ask for anything in return, but rather as a "win-win" partnership. Of course, the reality is entirely different, as studies have shown. Chinese officials often draw analogies in their foreign policy discourse that are intended to be understood globally, ranging from India to Pakistan, Syria to Ukraine, and the Indo-Pacific. The Western Balkans serves as a vital **testing ground** for some of these analogies.

Third, the region enables China to position itself as an alternative economic actor, not to replace the EU, but to present a version of globalization that is less normative and more transactional in nature. The infrastructure projects, loans, and high-level visits are designed less to transform the region than to showcase China's reliability and presence. However, the Chinese emphasis on being an economic actor is a façade, as in reality, arms sales from China to the region, specifically Serbia, have increased. Serbia recently purchased a Chinese air defense system and combat drones.

From China's perspective, the Western Balkans is a space of opportunity for symbolism, as well as economic and diplomatic interests. China's engagement in the Western Balkans is best understood as a projection of its global posture and as a trusted alternative to traditional global powers. The region is where China tests some of its tools in its power toolbox and has found receptive partners to help it do so, notably in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. As resistance to China in our region is lower than that of the US and the EU, China continues to expand its reach and scope of influence in the area, encompassing both the economy and security.

36 US Department of State, Thomas Pickering, Under Secretary of State Oral Presentation to the Chinese Government Regarding the Accidental Bombing of The P.R.C. Embassy in Belgrade June 17, 1999, https://1997-2001.state.gov/policy_remarks/1999/990617_pickering_emb.html#:~:text=The%20bombing%20of%20the%20embassy,the%20embassy%20being%20mistakenly%20targeted.

5.2 Kosovo in China's Foreign Policy Discourse

China's stance on Kosovo is a textbook case of **disciplined ambiguity**. While China is clear on its non-recognition of Kosovo's independence, its approach avoids escalation and an active voice in the normalization dialogue. Instead, Beijing consistently promotes in its statements' wordings such as respect for sovereignty, opposition to unilateralism, and the authority of the UN Security Council. But again, while calling for respect to multilateralism and the UN, it fails to reference the ICJ opinion on Kosovo's declaration of independence.

China's rejection of Kosovo's independence is essentially an act of alignment with Serbia, although China seeks to justify it as an act of compliance with international law. Analysis of Chinese foreign policy discourse on Kosovo suggests that Beijing is also concerned about setting a precedent and maintaining internal territorial integrity. From the earliest MFA statements following Kosovo's 2008 unilateral declaration of independence, Beijing framed the move as a violation of international norms, destabilizing both the Balkan region and the global order. However, Beijing never acknowledged that Kosovo's declaration of independence was recognized as legitimate by the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

The February 2008 statement by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Liu Jianchao set the tone for what remained a remarkably consistent message: Kosovo's independence was a unilateral act taken outside the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 1244, and therefore illegitimate. *"The resolution of the Kosovo issue bears on peace and stability of the Balkan region, the fundamental norms governing international relations as well as the authority and role of the UN Security Council,"* the statement declared. This formula is repeated across nearly two decades of Chinese communications on Kosovo. However, while China presents its opposition to Kosovo's statehood in legalistic terms, the real

reason, based on an analysis of foreign policy statements, seems to be that, besides helping a friend, Serbia, China views Kosovo as a Western project. Therefore, this is about **China vs the West on Kosovo**, rather than about China upholding international law. China says that the only viable solution for Kosovo must be mutually acceptable to both Serbia and Kosovo and based on UNSC Resolution 1244. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in 2010 that Kosovo's declaration of independence did not violate international law and was recognized by UNSC Resolution 1244. Beyond the mere opposition of Kosovo, China seeks to portray Prishtina in its foreign policy discourse as a systemic risk. In multiple MFA statements, Beijing suggests that recognition of Kosovo could lead to a "series of consequences," not only in the Balkans but also globally. This indicates that China does not view Kosovo as a merely regional issue to be resolved, but rather as a process that must be contained. This implies that, beneath the rhetorical aspect, lies an active advocacy by China against Kosovo's consolidation in the international community.

This also implies that for China, Kosovo's integration into international organizations is a significant foreign policy agenda and occupies a crucial position in Beijing's global discursive repertoire. In particular, China uses the Kosovo case to illustrate its critique of U.S. and NATO foreign policy and to assert its vision of international order, again showing that for China, Kosovo is about China vs the West. In both UN speeches and MFA press conferences, Chinese officials regularly cite the "flagrant violation" of sovereignty represented by NATO's airstrikes in 1999, especially the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. Xi Jinping's 2024 letter, published in *Politika* on the eve of his visit to Serbia, reiterates the significance of this episode: "NATO flagrantly bombed the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia, killing three Chinese journalists... This we should never forget." For instance, to mark the 25th anniversary of the NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia (and the Chinese Embassy in Serbia), Xi Jinping visited Serbia in May 2024 – an event in which he and Serbian President Vučić invoked anti-NATO

sentiment.³⁷ Similarly, on May 9, 2025, they met in Moscow³⁸ during Putin's Victory Day Parade, reaffirming the commitment to the one-China policy. Therefore, the narrative function here is twofold: to condemn the West's intervention and to lend credibility to China's presence in the region, through a supposed shared experience of victimhood with Serbia.

In this narrative, Kosovo has become emblematic of what Beijing actively promotes in its rhetoric as Western double standards for China. In a 2022 statement, MFA spokesperson Zhao Lijian said, "The history of NATO is one of creating conflicts and waging wars." Kosovo is framed in Chinese foreign policy discourse as the first in a chain of interventions (Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Libya), that, by China's account, have destabilized rather than secured the global order. However, China fails to recognize that it supported UNSC Resolution 1244, which established an international mission in Kosovo to provide temporary governance until the future status is determined. President Ahtisaari was appointed to lead that process and proposed that Kosovo should be an independent country.

At times, China and Serbia appear to be in coordination in critiquing what they perceive as a selective morality in media coverage and human rights discourse. In one 2022 MFA press briefing, the spokesperson noted that *"people in Serbia unfurled huge banners carrying the names of victim countries and regions of wars launched by the US and NATO at a Europa League match. It was a scene to behold, yet it received very little media coverage in the US."* Again, for Beijing, Kosovo is about China versus the West, and it uses Kosovo as a case for its broader critique of liberal internationalism and the U.S.'s role.

However, beyond what China says about Kosovo, an essential aspect of China's discourse on Kosovo is what it avoids. What can be termed China's operational distance from Kosovo

is largely about **symbolism** and carefully controlling any engagement with Kosovo, so that it does not give even the slightest hint of any de facto recognition. China uses terminology when referring to the Kosovo government, such as "temporary institutions in Prishtina," "Provisional Self-Government Institutions," or simply "Kosovo authorities." China maintains a firewall on senior-level engagement with Kosovo institutions, but this is mutual, as Kosovo also appears to be reluctant to engage at the highest level with China. Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti has referred to China as "an enemy" and, during the COVID-19 pandemic, refused Chinese vaccines.³⁹ However, China has an informal liaison office in Kosovo, as an outpost of its embassy in Belgrade.⁴⁰ In 2024, the head of the Chinese Liaison Office in Kosovo, Cheng Lei, met with the Mayor of Prishtina, perhaps the most senior-level meeting between the two countries. The meeting was promoted as focusing on trade and business cooperation.⁴¹

While China does not comment on internal developments in Kosovo, such as elections, protest, or other issues, the only exception was the Banjska terrorist attack of September 2023, China's language and statements shifted toward a concern about "the security and lawful rights and interests of all ethnic groups in Kosovo," again **coded language** that is mainly about **defending Serbian interests**. Kosovo features prominently in China's diplomatic vocabulary when dealing with Serbia, but it often seems to be subordinate to larger themes such as sovereignty and territorial integrity. In bilateral declarations, like the 2009 and 2024 China-Serbia joint statements, Kosovo is referenced to affirm China's support for Serbia's territorial integrity. In multilateral forums, such as the UN

37 Delauney, Guy. China's Xi Gets Red-Carpet Welcome in Serbia. BBC News, 8 May 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cm54pp11x3go>

38 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China "Xi Jinping Meets with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić." 10 May 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202505/t20250510_11618656.html.

39 Politiko. "Kosovo rejects Russian and Chinese vaccines from Albania, Kurti: Only from countries that have recognized us", <https://politiko.al/english/kosova/kosova-refuzon-vaksinat-ruse-dhe-kineze-ngashqiperia-kurti-vetem-nga-sht-i433285>

40 ECFR, Mapping China's Rise in the Western Balkans, <https://ecfr.eu/special/china-balkans/kosovo/>

41 See the LinkedIn post from Mayor of Prishtina Mr. Perparim Rama disclosing the meeting, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/perparimrama_mir%C3%ABpritan%C3%AB-takim-z-cheng-lei-shef-i-zyres-activity-7185692446377271296-pA8f/

Security Council, China's statements on Kosovo are characterized by a legalistic approach. They emphasize "mutual agreement through dialogue," reject unilateralism, and reassert the role of the UN. Yet even in these forums, China does not propose new mechanisms, offer mediation, or advocate a resolution path. Its role through the veto power in the UNSC is to ensure that Kosovo's path to recognition and international consolidation remains blocked.

In sum, China views Kosovo not as a matter of bilateral importance, but as a China vs the West issue, and in its foreign policy discourse, broadly frames the issue in legalistic terms. It opposes Kosovo's independence, supports Serbia, and undermines what it considers a Western project. China does not want a project of Western intervention to be a success story of development, functionality, and integration. China does not view Kosovo as a problem that needs to be solved, but rather as a "legal anomaly" that must be contained and its potential success countered. Yet, China does engage with Kosovo's institutions. While it has made efforts, senior Kosovo government officials have repeatedly refused to meet, with the exception of meeting the Mayor of Prishtina, as noted previously.

5.3 Kosovo–Serbia normalization dialogue in China's foreign policy discourse

China is essentially, at least in public, adopting a detached and non-interventionist stance regarding the EU-led dialogue for normalizing relations between Kosovo and Serbia. While consistently referencing the importance of normalization dialogue, China does not position itself as an active observer in the process. Its rhetoric is marked by general endorsements of dialogue, framed strictly within the parameters of the UN Security Council, and by an unyielding alignment with Serbia's core positions and interests in the dialogue.

This section examines China's view of the normalization dialogue through three interrelated lenses: (1) the limits of China's rhetorical engagement with the normalization dialogue process; (2) the structural and normative principles that shape its stance; and (3) the geopolitical logic behind China's refusal to play a more visible role. In all, what emerges is a pattern of deliberate distance from China: support for the process, rejection of outcomes that undermine Serbia's interests, and a consistent effort to frame the dialogue within a multilateral (UN) context, rather than a regional (EU) one. Over more than a decade, China has never publicly expressed a position on the EU-led normalization dialogue, agreements facilitated by the EU, or even the most recent Agreement on the Path to Normalization of Relations, signed in February 2023, or any other milestone in the process. It has also never commented on negotiation content, deadlines, conditionalities, or implementation of agreements.

While China supports the instrument of dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, as expressed in this statement: "*China supports the parties concerned in finding a mutually acceptable political solution through sincere dialogue within the framework of relevant UN Security Council resolutions.*" MFA Spokesperson Zhao Lijian, November 2022, does so with some caution and conditional (i.e., within the framework of the UN). Crucially, China does not use the term "normalization". This term, central to EU and U.S. discourse, does not appear in Chinese foreign policy communications. Instead, China speaks in the vocabulary of conflict prevention and legal resolution.

The primary interpretative lens through which China views the EU-led dialogue for normalization of relations is international law, but of course, **the Chinese interpretation of the law**. Beijing appears to have little interest in procedural discussions, instead focusing entirely on the legal implications of any potential outcome of the normalization dialogue. For China, any result of the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue that implies or leads to *de jure* recognition of Kosovo's independence would not be acceptable. However, China has repeatedly said it would accept a deal mutually agreed by both sides (Kosovo and Serbia). China's foreign

policy statements repeatedly reassert that any outcome must: be mutually agreed by both parties; Not violate Serbia's territorial integrity, and be situated within UNSC Resolution 1244. This is the verbatim Serbian position as well.

China also appears to be opposed to the EU's creative ambiguity or "status-neutral" approach in facilitating the normalization dialogue. Beijing's position rejects such ambiguity. As already noted, China neither wants Kosovo as a Western project to succeed, nor does it want the West to succeed in finalizing Kosovo's project of statehood. For China, the interest appears to be in prolonging the normalization dialogue and maintaining the status quo. China also seems to fear the outcome of the Kosovo-Serbia normalization dialogue, as it could set a precedent for other geographical contexts where China dominates or perceives itself as having spheres of influence.

China has unconditional support for Serbia regarding the normalization dialogue with Kosovo. China portrays itself to the Serbian public as a sympathetic power, rather than a supervisory one, which appears to be highly acceptable to Serbian citizens, who, like China, view the West with suspicion, especially regarding Kosovo. This unconditional support serves two purposes. It bolsters China's relationship with Serbia, especially on strategic issues, reinforcing Beijing's image as a consistent and non-intrusive partner. Second, it distinguishes China from others in the eyes of the Serbian public. In other words, while elites are the primary channel or tactic of Chinese dependency policy, China also seeks to address the Serbian public directly on issues, which, Beijing knows, are essential to the Serbian people.

Another key feature of China's discourse is that it does not view the normalization dialogue as a step toward European integration, either for Kosovo or Serbia. Whereas the EU presents the dialogue as a prerequisite for European integration and regional stability, China decouples the dialogue from any enlargement, alliance, or institutional consequence.

Accordingly, ideas to decouple the normalization dialogue from the European integration process seem to align with the Chinese view of the process as well. China frames dialogue as a means of maintaining stability. Statements often link the need for negotiation to the risk of violence, escalation, or external interference, rather than advancing the integration of Kosovo Serbs, resolving disputes between Kosovo and Serbia, or promoting Kosovo's international, European, and regional integration. For instance, following the Banjska terrorist attack in September of 2023, China called for restraint and a "constructive dialogue," but did not link such a dialogue with any platform or framework, i.e., normalization dialogue. This indicates that for China, the EU-led normalization dialogue is an instrumental necessity for Serbia, rather than a process aimed at resolving bilateral disputes and promoting European integration, which are core objectives of the dialogue as stated in the 2010 UN General Assembly Resolution following the ICJ opinion on Kosovo's independence.

To the extent that China engages with the Kosovo-Serbia normalization process, it does so rhetorically and cautiously. It supports dialogue in principle but refuses to recognize the dialogue process as a legitimate political settlement tool unless it remains rooted in the authority of the UN, despite the UN General Assembly welcoming the dialogue in a 2010 resolution. China offers no alternative to the EU-facilitated dialogue, but it also provides no support. Its posture is one of legal maxims, supporting Serbia's stance, and avoiding endorsement of any specific outcome of the normalization dialogue. China's position on the normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia is not about helping the parties find a middle ground or a compromise, nor is it about supporting such efforts; rather, it is about ensuring that the normalization dialogue leads to new ground rules being established. In other words, China fundamentally does not want the normalization dialogue to be successful, as it would become an attractive process for different contexts, especially in areas China considers its spheres of influence.

6. Conclusion

Although prevailing interpretations suggest that China perceives Kosovo and the Western Balkans as issues primarily within the European sphere, the analysis presented in this paper offers a contrasting view, indicating a more nuanced and strategically motivated Chinese engagement in the region. Namely, an interplay of ideological commitments and pragmatic calculations is what shapes China's posture toward Kosovo. At the rhetorical level, China consistently promotes sovereignty, multilateralism, and dialogue; however, these principles are applied selectively and often serve as instruments to shield its alignment with Serbia. China's statements omit or downplay key legal developments, such as the ICJ's advisory opinion on Kosovo's declaration of independence, while emphasizing the authority of UNSC Resolution 1244, despite the ICJ's clear arguments that Kosovo's independence did not violate the resolution. This discursive approach allows China to cloak a geopolitical agenda under the guise of legal neutrality.

Beyond discourse, China's engagement with the Western Balkans is structured to enhance its long-term influence while avoiding the burdens of formal responsibility. Serbia emerges, with no surprise, as China's closest partner not only regionally, but at the EU level. Beijing promotes a discourse that seems to portray China and Serbia as like-minded states that resist Western pressure. This was most clearly reflected in Serbian President Vučić's remarks during his meeting with Xi Jinping in Moscow earlier this year, where he expressed gratitude

for China's support and asserted that he had successfully overcome a "color revolution."⁴² China's economic, diplomatic, and military partnerships with Serbia extend far beyond the rhetoric of friendship, forming the backbone of Beijing's regional presence. China references Kosovo for two reasons: to reinforce alignment with Serbia and to critique the US and NATO. China's insistence on rhetorical non-intervention conceals a more complex reality of behind-the-scenes influence, elite cultivation, and manipulation of the decision-making process in public administrations in the Western Balkans, serving its economic and political interests.

China's approach to the Kosovo–Serbia normalization dialogue is that it is acceptable. Still, China avoids using the word 'normalization' and views the process as not a dispute resolution mechanism designed to advance European and international integration of Kosovo. In other words, for Beijing, the normalization process is not an opportunity. Still, a risk to be managed—a process that must not produce an outcome that would see Serbia and Kosovo recognize each other. China's engagement in the Western Balkans, and particularly in Kosovo, is not passive; it is active, aimed at creating dependencies through debt traps, challenging the West as the only alternative for the Western Balkans, and gaining access to critical infrastructure and public administration. China's interests are served in our region by authoritarian allies and autocratic practices.

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Established in April 2008, the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) is a specialized, independent, and non-governmental organization. The primary goal of KCSS is to promote the democratization of the security sector in Kosovo and to improve research and advocacy work related to security, the rule of law, and regional and international cooperation in the field of security.

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