AGENCY FOR
PEACEBUILDING

BOLOGNA
PEACE BUILDING
FORUM

Smart Peace.
Tech. Human. Possible.

7–9 May 2025

BOLOGNA PEACEBUILDING FROUM 2025

Event Report

June 2025

ABOUT US

The Bologna Peacebuilding Forum is a leading annual event aimed at strengthening the network of peacebuilding scholars and practitioners to improve policy-oriented research and fieldwork and to open up the field of peacebuilding to a wider audience. Since 2019, the BPF has developed as a major annual gathering fostering open and constructive dialogue on key issues related to peace work. The seventh edition of the BPF was held May 7 - 9, 2025.

www.peacebuilding.eu

The Agency for Peacebuilding (AP) is a think-and-do organisation committed to bridging the gap between research and practice in peacebuilding. AP aims to contribute to more peaceful and just societies by preventing and transforming violent conflict and creating spaces for dialogue and cooperation across sectors and divides. AP's vision is of a world where conflicts can be transformed without violence and where peace can be promoted through inclusive, innovative, and sustainable means.

www.peaceagency.org

IN A FEW WORDS

In its **seventh edition,** held form the 7th to the 9th of May 2025, the Bologna Peacebuilding Forum focused on how technology is reshaping the landscape of peacebuilding. The world of peacebuilding is undergoing deep and fast-paced transformations, and it remains to be seen how actors in the field will adapt to an increasingly complex and volatile global environment.

Technology lies at the heart of these changes. The Forum offered a space to explore how digital tools are already influencing peacebuilding practices, from conflict prevention to dialogue facilitation.

The Forum highlighted a growing set of technological tools: from deliberative platforms that foster inclusive dialogue; to social media listening that tracks emerging narratives and tensions; from AI systems that support strategic planning; to digital diplomacy channels enabling more agile international engagement. Among the various innovations discussed, strategic foresight emerged as a key element of the PeaceTech toolbox, providing ways to anticipate risks,

imagine futures, and better navigate the uncertainties ahead.

At the same time, the discussions exposed the limits and contradictions of PeaceTech. Questions of inclusion, safety, empowerment and lack of political will, remain unresolved. Meanwhile, powerful private actors increasingly shape the digital infrastructure of peacebuilding. And ultimately, the risk of over-relying on technology without addressing deeper structural and political issues was a recurring concern.

One key takeaway stood out across panels: technology is no silver bullet. It can be a powerful assistant, but only when it supports human effort, political will, and long-term vision.

"Tech solutionism is the enemy of peace tech. Technology for peace is not useful if you don't have a good process design and a good political process. Technology supports and makes what people do faster and easier: it's meant to enhance human effort, not replace it. [...] The human-machine interaction point is always very important to keep in mind."

NAVIGATING THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF PEACEBUILDING

Roger Mac Ginty, Professor, Durham Global Security Institute, Durham University, kicked off the discussion framing the evolving dynamics of the peacebuilding landscape.

To better understand the broader picture, it is useful to take a step back and examine the key transformations currently reshaping the peacebuilding field. Several important trends stand out.

Fragmentation of the rules-based international order. Liberal peace actors are retreating, discouraged by the limited returns on their efforts over the past decades. At the same time, humanity is facing major transitional challenges, such as climate change and migration, but, unlike in previous years, there is **no longer great optimism** among liberal leaders about overcoming them. Most visibly, the **United Nations** no longer plays a leading role in peacebuilding, symbolising the broader disruption of multilateralism. Several actors have contributed to this trend: the United States has been one of the main **disruptors**, but they are not the only ones.

Against this backdrop, a fundamental question emerges: if statebuilding is no longer central and shared rules are no longer guiding peace processes, what kind of peace will ultimately be built?

Non-traditional actors filling the vacuum. As liberal actors step back, new ones are moving in, though there is no consensus on how to define them: "non-traditional", "new", "alternative", "non-Western" actors. These include the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, China, Brazil, and the African Union. They promote a **different model of mediation**, one that is more **passive**, with **no normative or ideological agenda**, a feature that appeals to certain states. However, this new mediation model raises important questions: is there a vision beyond humanitarian assistance? Do these actors engage in meaningful peace processes, and if so, what kind of peace are they fostering?

Emergence of a hybrid system. New and old actors increasingly coexist in the same spaces, sometimes working side by side. Whether true cooperation between them will be possible remains an open question.

The promise of PeaceTech. PeaceTech holds great potential to contribute to peace and conflict resolution. Yet in an era awash with data, a key question persists: will these technologies truly help build a better, more peaceful world? To assess the real value of PeaceTech, several aspects must be considered: is it demand-led or supply-driven? Does it provide tangible benefits, such as saving and improving lives? Is it emancipatory, or does it reinforce existing power structures? And finally, how can it complement, rather than replace, human-centered approaches to peace?

"We shouldn't be too negative. We do have a peace system. We do have a huge number of people working for peace. [...] Most importantly, the biggest peace movement on the planet is around everybody's kitchen table. [...] It's individuals, families and communities that are the largest and most successful peace organisations on our planet."

SESSION I – PEACETECH: WISHFUL THINKING OR REALITY?

From digital dialogue platforms to social media listening, from AI to foresight tools, PeaceTech is already shaping the field: not in theory, but in practice. These tools open up new possibilities: they can help detect emerging tensions, connect with hard-to-reach communities, and make peace processes more inclusive and responsive. But alongside these opportunities come important questions. Who controls these technologies? Are they helping or complicating the work of peacebuilders? This panel looked at both the opportunities and the risks of PeaceTech. To make PeaceTech truly useful, we need to understand where it falls short and what limits still need to be addressed, and how we can shape it to support human efforts for peace.

We delved into the promises and challenges of PeaceTech with **Michele Giovanardi**, Programme Officer, Digital Peacemaking - CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, **Andrea Locatelli**, Professor, Università Cattolica, Milan; **Lena Slachmuijlder**, Senior Advisor, Digital Peacebuilding and Co-Chair, Council on Tech and Social Cohesion. **Evelyn Pauls**, AP Senior Advisor, moderated the discussion.

Shortcomings and challenges

- **Tech Companies and the power paradox**. Tech companies play a central role in developing PeaceTech by creating and providing the tools that peacebuilders use. However, unlike NGOs and peacebuilding actors, tech companies are primarily driven by profit rather than humanitarian goals. While this isn't inherently problematic, the real challenge lies in aligning corporate incentives with peacebuilding objectives. A key concern is accountability: how can we ensure that companies remain transparent and responsible, given their market-driven motivations? Furthermore, the issue goes beyond companies themselves, these entities are controlled by powerful individuals, and the technologies we rely on are often concentrated in their hands. This raises a deeper conundrum: can we truly trust technologies developed and governed by profit-seeking companies, controlled by "super-empowered" individuals?

- **Data collection: shortcomings.** Closely linked to the growing power of tech companies is the issue of data protection, which lies at the heart of the discussion. Companies often regard individuals primarily as data sources. While this data can be used for benevolent purposes, in the wrong hands it can be manipulated for coercion, intimidation, and the repression of minorities. Another important point concerns the "data myth": the belief that the faster and more data we collect, the more we can

"data our way out" of conflict. Yet PeaceTech must go beyond mere data extraction and avoid falling into this reductionist trap.

- **Polarisation, hate speech, and misinformation**. At times, digital platforms themselves become part of the problem. They foster the spread of fake news and misinformation, which can trigger violence both online and offline. Furthermore, the design of social media platforms inherently promotes the polarisation of content: echo chambers are growing smaller and more personalised, with algorithms designed to create "bubbles" in which users only see what aligns with their existing beliefs. In such an environment, the truth is unlikely to surface if one does not actively seek it out.

- **Digital diplomacy: a missed opportunity?** Digital diplomacy is still largely defined as the use of digital technologies by states and international organisations to communicate, conduct diplomacy, and advance foreign policy goals. From this limited perspective, different critical reflections emerge. Many actors remain excluded from the discussion, including private companies, transnational movements, and NGOs. Then, diplomats have not significantly changed their work. Digital diplomacy remains largely confined to communication and remote negotiation and its potential is still underutilised.

Takeaways

- **Regulation and accountability.** A major concern is ensuring that companies operate with transparency and accountability, particularly regarding data safety and protection. A key tension exists between individuals, states, and corporations. States must guarantee the protection of their citizens and push back against the unchecked power of corporations. Two key levers can help counterbalance corporate power: politics and the market. Politics has the duty to regulate, and legal competencies are required to do so effectively. Meanwhile, the market itself could foster incentives for companies to comply with ethical and regulatory standards. Additionally, regulation must aim to make the platforms less harmful and less polarised.

- **Inclusivity: a prerequisite for sustainable peace.** Digital inclusion offers a powerful opportunity to involve more people in peace processes. Inclusivity is essential to building truly sustainable peace. Digital tools can help reach broader audiences, but inclusivity must also amplify the voices that are typically marginalised: women, youth, minorities or the LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, inclusivity means considering all perspectives, even those that are different or opposed to one's own: peace is made between enemies, not friends. In this context, "low-tech" solutions can also serve as valuable tools for digital inclusion, helping to counteract power imbalances.

- **Empowerment of local actors.** PeaceTech should not be viewed as a top-down solution imposed on communities. Local actors must be the protagonists of peace processes. This could also mean involving local communities in the creation and development of the technologies themselves. This also means shifting people from apathy to agency: giving communities the tools to become protagonists of change.

- **Need for adaptation.** Is the peacebuilding playbook sufficiently updated? This was one of the central questions raised during the discussion. The transformation driven by digital technologies is already here, yet peacebuilding practices and expertise still require adaptation. How can PeaceTech become mainstream? How must peacebuilders update their approaches to leverage it in building a better world? For instance, in the realm of diplomacy, there is a clear need for adaptation. Communication is evolving, and diplomats must develop new skills to engage differently, shifting from traditional word-based communication toward visual storytelling and emotional engagement.

- **Complementarity of tech and human efforts.** It is crucial to approach technology pragmatically. Tech solutionism is the "enemy of peace": technology alone will not resolve conflicts where human efforts have failed. The guiding principle should be complementarity: technology can and should support human peacebuilding efforts but must not replace them.

SESSION II – TECHNOLOGY FOR PEACE: REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Technology is not just shaping the future of peacebuilding: it is already transforming how conflict unfolds and how people respond to it. In places like Sudan, Syria, and Israel, digital platforms have become both tools and battlegrounds. In this panel, speakers shared concrete examples from their regions, reflecting on how technology is influencing the dynamics of conflict, how technology can be used to manipulate reality and silence truth-tellers, but also how it can support accountability, offer deeper insights into conflict dynamics, and build coalitions for peace. These contrasting uses framed the discussion, beginning with the challenges of information warfare and leading to reflections on how expertise, context, and collaboration can help turn technology into an asset for truth to come out and peace to move forward.

Regional perspectives were shared by distinguished experts: **Ariel Bernstein**, Researcher and human rights advocate (formerly: Breaking the Silence, Bellingcat); **Asma Ahmed,** Country Manager - Sudan, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue; **Mahmoud Bastati,** SWANA Lead at Build Up. **Giulia Ferraro**, AP Project Manager, thoughtfully facilitated the discussion.

Shortcomings and challenges

- **Wars of narratives and distorted reality.** In several contexts, media is actively shaping narratives and politically justifying the conflict, playing a key role in both regional and cross-border dynamics. Information and narratives are heavily instrumentalised to justify power struggles and mobilise support. Media is also used as a tool for recruitment into armed groups. In an environment of fear, where people are desperate for information, critical thinking and fact-checking are often abandoned. This vulnerability is exploited by powerful actors who distort reality, hide information, and spread misinformation. Unfortunately, technology is amplifying these dynamics. AI can generate false images, and bots can produce and spread false narratives. Moreover, media generate profit, and there are individuals and networks, often operating from outside the war-affected countries, who financially benefit from the polarisation of content, the incitement of violence, and the circulation of misinformation.

- **Protection of truth tellers: anonymity is not enough.** In conflict settings, anonymity alone is no longer enough to ensure protection. In several war contexts, individuals who dare to speak out often pay an extremely high social price and are left without adequate protection, to the point where many may decide it is no longer worth the risk. It is crucial to recognise the value of those who seek and expose the truth, not only professional journalists, but also ordinary individuals who create space for truth-telling. At the same time, those who take the risk to speak the truth, for example, on social media, are often silenced by the platforms themselves. The truth exists, but in the midst of active war, those trying to reveal it are actively suppressed.

- **Lack of political will.** Accountability requires more than exposing the truth, it also depends on political will. Even when evidence is available, the main challenge often lies in the absence of political will to act on it. Furthermore, when it comes to the availability and development of technology in regional contexts, political processes are fundamental, and they are still largely missing.

"Today, it's really challenging because we are trying to build a culture of peace without shared truths. As peacebuilders, we need to consider how to help people develop trust, so they can embrace different perspectives and feel comfortable with diversity and differences."

Takeaways

- **Deep knowledge of the context and attention to detail.** Deep contextual knowledge is essential. Technology may offer powerful tools, but it is the people who use them who make the real difference. Social media listening must be carried out by individuals who are deeply familiar with the context, those who understand the nuances of language, tone, and hidden meanings. Without this expertise, it is easy to misinterpret content and draw misleading conclusions. Contextual knowledge is also key in the process of fact-checking. For example, AI-generated images often fail to reproduce context-specific details, and a person familiar with the local setting can spot these inconsistencies, recognising fake images.

- **Technology: dealing with misinformation.** One encouraging aspect is that, these days, it is increasingly difficult to hide the truth completely. While technology can certainly be used to generate misinformation, it also provides tools to detect and expose it. Everything leaves a trace and everything is recorded, making it harder to conceal what is really happening. Social media listening tools allow peacebuilders to detect fake news and respond quickly to rumors, helping to prevent violence from escalating.

- **Deeper understanding of conflict dynamics.** In conflict situations where communication and infrastructure are weaponised or targeted, social media still provides opportunities for dialogue and inclusive engagement. Social media listening makes it possible to reach dispersed populations and to gain a deeper understanding of conflict dynamics, identifying key actors and narratives. Classification of data around categories such as hate speech, polarising content, and political discourse allows local peacebuilders to better understand their context and respond accordingly.

- **Building coalitions.** Building coalitions is crucial for advancing peace. There is a clear need to connect different types of humanitarian, political, and legal expertise, and to unite forces around common goals. For example, collaboration between open-source investigators, whistleblowers, and individuals working directly with victims on the ground is essential. Only through such coalitions can meaningful, sustained progress be achieved.

BEYOND THE PRESENT: STRATEGIC FORESIGHT AND CONFLICT PREVENTION IN FOREIGN POLICY

This seminar was opened by **Rita Monticelli,** Delegate Councillor for Human Rights, Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue of the Municipality of Bologna. The discussion brought together respected voices in the field: **Sabrina Bandera,** Head of the Research Innovation Strategy Division at SNA – Italian National School of Government; Michael Leigh, Senior Adjunct Professor at SAIS Europe; **Bernardo Venturi,** Head of Research and Policy at the Agency for Peacebuilding. The conversation was expertly led by **Azzurra Meringolo,** Specialist Foreign Correspondent at Rai Radio 1.

Among the various tools technology is advancing within the field of PeaceTech, **strategic foresight** is emerging as a critical component. The ability to anticipate risks, imagine alternative futures, and act preventively is becoming indispensable for foreign policy and peacebuilding. Foresight moves decision-makers beyond reactive crisis management and toward long-term strategies that can better address the complexity of today's global challenges. In this light, foresight is not just a planning tool, it is a mindset shift, pushing institutions to think ahead, adapt early, and build resilience into peace efforts.

Looking ahead, not just forecasting. Foresight is often confused with forecasting, but they are fundamentally different. Forecasting relies on historical data, assumptions and statistics to make short-term predictions, often spanning months or a few years. Foresight, in contrast, scans the horizon for long-term changes and explores multiple possible futures. It includes a wide range of anticipatory tools, not to predict one outcome, but to better understand the range of what could happen.

A missed opportunity in foreign policy. Despite its growing relevance, strategic foresight is still underutilised by most Ministries of Foreign Affairs. Conflict prevention and early warning are areas where it could add particular value. Yet in many cases, there is little integration between foresight units and the geographic or peace and security desks. Worse, a persistent gap remains between those who build scenarios and those in power who often resist engaging with difficult or uncomfortable futures.

The political disconnect. Foresight analysis tends to stay within planning cells or ministries, while real foreign policy decisions are often taken by heads of government, bypassing official channels. Presidents and prime ministers are more likely to listen to trusted advisers than to institutional foresight outputs, especially when those outputs challenge prevailing narratives. As history has shown, even when warnings are issued, they are frequently ignored.

Building a strategic foresight ecosystem. A key challenge is developing a robust strategic foresight ecosystem at the national level, one that links across policy areas and connects with international institutions. Foresight should not remain a solely analytical exercise but become a core component of medium- and high-level decision-making. To be impactful, foresight units must balance scientific independence with institutional proximity, ensuring they can both produce credible insights and influence policy effectively.

Towards a culture of anticipation. The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is well-positioned to lead in this shift, provided it commits to sustained investment in foresight capacity and coordination. Italy must move beyond episodic exercises toward a permanent, policy-driven foresight infrastructure. Key actions include strengthening MFA expertise, placing foresight units close to leadership, engaging external stakeholders - such as think tanks, NGOs, universities, and businesses - and boosting early warning and conflict prevention systems to turn anticipation into strategic action.

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PROGRAMME

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BOLOGNA PEACE BUILDING FORUM

7th edition

7–9 May 2025

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DAY ONE
Wednesday 7ᵗʰ May

LEGEND:

■ *CLOSED-DOOR SESSIONS*
■ *OPEN-DOOR SESSIONS*

10:00 -13:00

📍
Sala Conferenze,
Biblioteca Salaborsa,
(3° floor)
Piazza del Nettuno 3,
Bologna

Toward an Italian Peace Mediation Support Structure

Roundtable organised with the Italian Network for International Mediation (RIMI)

Close-doors roundtable

15:00–17:00

📍
Palazzo d'Accursio
(Sala Anziani),
Piazza Maggiore, 6,
Bologna

Beyond the Present Strategic Foresight and Conflict Prevention in Foreign Policy

Launch and discussion of the AP Policy Paper on "Strategic Foresight and Conflict Prevention at the Service of Foreign Policy"

Welcome address:
Rita Monticelli,
Delegate councillor for human rights, interreligious and intercultural dialogue, Municipality of Bologna

Discussants:
- **Sabrina Bandera**, Head of Research Innovation Strategy Division, SNA - Italian National School of Goverment
- **Micheal Leigh**, Senior Adjunct Professor at SAIS Europe
- **Bernardo Venturi,** Head of Research and Policy, Agency for Peacebuilding

Moderator:
Azzurra Meringolo Scarfoglio, Foreign Correspondent, Rai Radio 1

Open seminar

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7th edition

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DAY TWO
Thursday 8th May

LEGEND:

▮ CLOSED-DOOR SESSIONS

▮ OPEN-DOOR SESSIONS

08:45 – 09:45 *Closed-door working breakfast*	**BPF Early Talks** *Changemakers strategic conversation on peacebuilding trends and opportunities*

9:45-16:00

International Conference

📍 Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe, Via B. Andreatta, 3, Bologna

Smart Peace. Tech. Human. Possible.

High-level internationational conference on challenges and opportunities for peacebuilding in a digital era

09:45 – 10:15 | Arrival of participants and welcome coffee

10:15 – 10:30 | **Welcome address**
- **Celina Del Felice**, President, Agency for Peacebuilding
- **Renaud Dehousse**, Rector, SAIS Europe, Vice Dean, SAIS

10:30 – 11:15 | **Keynote speech**
- **Roger Mac Ginty**, Professor, Durham Global Security Institute, Durham University.

11:15 – 12:45 | *Session I – PeaceTech: wishful thinking or reality?*
- **Michele Giovanardi,** Programme Officer, Digital Peacemaking - CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation
- **Andrea Locatelli,** Professor, Università Cattolica, Milan
- **Lena Slachmuijlder,** Senior Advisor, Digital Peacebuilding and Co-Chair, Council on Tech and Social Cohesion

Moderator:
Evelyn Pauls, Senior Advisor, Agency for Peacebuilding

Lunch break

14:00-15:30 | *Session II – Technology for peace: regional perspectives*
- **Ariel Bernstein,** Researcher and human rights advocate (formerly: Breaking the Silence, Bellingcat)
- **Asma Ahmed**, Country Manager - Sudan, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue
- **Mahmoud Bastati,** SWANA Lead at Build Up

Moderator:
Giulia Ferraro, Project Manager, Agency for Peacebuilding

15:30 – 16:00 | **Final remarks: innovative ways forward**

Final aperitif and networking

AGENCY FOR PEACEBUILDING

DAY THREE
Friday 9ᵗʰ May

LEGEND:

▮ **STUDENT-ONLY SESSION**

8:30 - 13.00

Youth Lab

📍
Laboratorio 41
Training centre, Via
Castiglione 41,
Bologna

Next Generation Forum

FORESIGHT LAB FOR PEACEBUILDING THROUGH THE LIVE ACTION ROLE PLAYING (LARP) METHODOLOGY

The Bologna Peacebuilding Forum 2025 offers the opportunity for selected students to participate in the innovative foresight lab for peacebuilding, made through the Live Action Role Playing (LARP) technique. AP trainers will use immersive experience design to gain firsthand experiences of the moral and practical dilemmas of the future of peace and global security. After the immersive experience, the participants will be invited for a debrief and reflection on their experience. A workshop will be organised to engage them with futures and foresight tools which will assist them in using their reflections and firsthand LARP experience to think of different possible and probably future scenarios for peacebuilding challenges that they are faced with in their work and studies.

BOLOGNA PEACE BUILDING FORUM

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