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# STRATEGIC FORESIGHT AND CONFLICT PREVENTION IN FOREIGN POLICY

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## ABOUT THE AGENCY FOR PEACEBUILDING

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 sustainable means.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## GLOSSARY

**EEAS** – European External Action Service

**ESPAS** – European Strategy and Policy Analysis System

**EU** – European Union

**GFC** – Government Foresight Community

**IMF** – International Monetary Fund

**JRC** – Joint Research Centre

**MAECI** – Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy

**MEF** – Ministry of Economy and Finance

**MFA** – Ministry of Foreign Affairs

**NGO** – Non-Governmental Organisation

**OECD** – Organisation for the Economic Cooperation and Development

**OPSI** – Observatory of Public Sector Innovation

**PAN-PCSD** – National Action Plan for Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development

**PCM** – Peace, Partnership and Crisis Management Directorate

**SNA** – National School of Administration

**UAP** – Analysis, Programming, Statistics, and Historical Documentation Unit

**UNDP** – UN Development Programme

**UNESCO** – UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

**VIEWS** – Violence & Impacts Early-Warning System

## AT A GLANCE



Strategic foresight and early warning have become indispensable components of effective foreign policy, enabling governments to anticipate, assess, and respond to emerging global challenges. By embedding foresight mechanisms within foreign policy institutions, decision-makers can move beyond short-term crisis management and develop long-term strategies that enhance foreign policy and conflict prevention.



Integrating strategic foresight allows for a more coordinated approach across different policy areas, ensuring that governments are better prepared to handle complex, interconnected risks. The main challenge remains to build a strategic foresight ecosystem at the national level in synergy with international institutions and to connect it to medium-high-level policy-making.



The Italian MFA is well-positioned to have the lead in fostering a culture of anticipation, provided there is a deliberate investment in capabilities, coordination, and internal demand for long-term thinking. For Italy to navigate future challenges effectively, it must move from episodic foresight exercises to a coherent and sustained foresight infrastructure, rooted in policy relevance, institutional ownership, and a clear strategic vision.



Strengthening the MFA capacities on strategic foresight, positioning strategic foresight focal points or units close to decision-makers, building participatory processes, opening to professional communities and stakeholders, such as key think-tanks, NGOs, universities and private businesses and investing in conflict prevention and early warning systems are among the recommended actions to build a foresight system for Italian foreign policy.

## INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected and rapidly changing global landscape, the ability to anticipate and respond to emerging threats and crises is crucial to effective foreign policy. Strategic foresight and early warning systems are essential tools that enable states and international organisations to address uncertainty, mitigate risks, and seize opportunities. The attempt is to integrate problem-solving approaches and reactive mechanisms based on the past with a systematic awareness of plausible and desirable futures.

**Strategic foresight is not a new oracle.** It does not aspire to predict the future, instead, it builds up a structured and systematic way of thinking about the future to anticipate and better prepare for change. This does not make a state or an organisation future-proof, but future-aware and, hopefully, future-ready and future-fit. It is therefore an effort to think forward, anticipate, and adapt to potential future challenges and opportunities.

Different governments and international organisations are becoming more aware of the necessity of developing anticipatory innovation governance capabilities to help them preserve continuity and trust in the public system and public services while quickly adjusting to a new environment of rapidly changing and continuously evolving demands, volatility, and complex issues. In order to accomplish this, public officials must also acquire new competencies and abilities, such as systems thinking, strategic vision, and the capacity to create and carry out novel policy approaches.

Although there is growing attention and investment in foresight capabilities, there is still limited reflection and literature on what exactly makes foresight effective in foreign policy. This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of how strategic foresight can effectively support foreign policy and conflict prevention. The paper also dedicates specific attention to Italy and strategic foresight. This methodology is rather new for Italy and innovations come in particular from the foresight programme and projects led by the OECD and the European Union. The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI) has an interest in developing more capacities and infrastructure to be future-aware, with specific instruments for foreign policy as part of a broader Italian strategic approach. The hope is that this study can support exchanges and policy dialogue on strategic foresight at the national level and beyond.

The paper is structured in four main parts. The first part analyses the evolution and state of the art of strategic foresight at the global level. The second part is specifically dedicated to strategic foresight in foreign policy. The third part is devoted to models and institutions at the international level, chiefly the European Union. The fourth part is dedicated to Italy with particular attention to foreign policy. Some final recommendations for Italian stakeholders are also provided for future programming. Methodologically, the analysis is based on a literature review and on a series of confidential interviews conducted between December 2024 and March 2025 with national and international institutions, stakeholders and experts working on strategic foresight.

# I. TAKING STOCK OF STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

According to the Strategic Foresight Unit at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), strategic foresight is a

“structured and systematic way of using ideas about the future to anticipate and better prepare for change. It is about exploring different plausible futures that could arise and the opportunities and challenges they could present. We then use those ideas to make better decisions and act now”.<sup>1</sup>

The term “foresight” therefore refers to a wide range of methods used to better understand present

expectations of potential futures. It is a catch-all term for a range of analyses and anticipatory techniques that focus on the future and frequently entail more than just making one future prediction.<sup>2</sup> Foresight is also useful because most people are more receptive to information that supports their beliefs than to information that challenges them. On the contrary, foresight promotes the exchange of diverse ideas, knowledge, and worldviews; it even demands and benefits from diverse viewpoints. Foresight can challenge and test against the biases of “mental models” and presumptions that underpin conventional planning and policymaking.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to clarify that foresight is not the same as forecasting. While forecasting focuses on the short term (e.g., months or a few years), historical data, assumptions and statistics, foresight focuses on the long-term (e.g., years and decades), and it scans the horizon for emerging changes and futures. To some extent, foresight begins where forecasting ends.<sup>4</sup> With foresight, strategies are developed based on a variety of future scenarios that reflect the uncertainty we face, rather than a single vision of the future.<sup>5</sup>

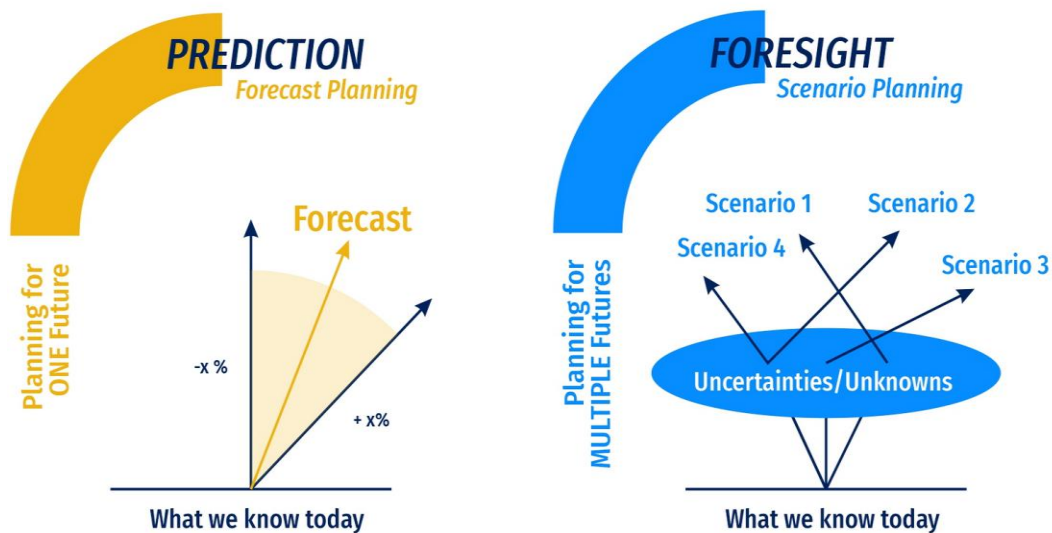


Figure 1 - Source: [Futurestation.ro](http://Futurestation.ro)

<sup>1</sup> [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Strategic foresight.](https://www.oecd.org/strategic-foresight/)

<sup>2</sup> Bressan, S., & Korb, S. (2024). Foresight success factors: Insights from science, practice and innovation. Geneva Science-Policy Interface (GSPI).

<sup>3</sup> Reilly-King, F. (2024). Foresight and futures thinking for international development co-operation. *Development Policy Review*, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Futures Lab. (2023, December). UN Strategic Foresight Guide. United Nations.

Strategic foresight therefore allows organisations to make sure strategic goals can still be accomplished as best as possible, and to plan more thoroughly and for a variety of likely futures.<sup>6</sup> This approach is a “deliberate attempt to broaden the ‘boundaries of perception’ and to expand the awareness of emerging issues and situations”.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly enough, foresight can also be seen as a **learning process**, a function that can contribute to

having an impact on policy thanks to the connections made between organisations and people in various policy domains both inside and outside of specific professional communities: “Foresight not only improves policy-making through concrete products but also through the participation of stakeholders in the process of developing foresight as such.”<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary foresight is often consolidated as a 4-step process<sup>9</sup>:

CONTEMPORARY FORESIGHT PROCESS	
Step 1	<b>Issue Framing and horizon scanning.</b> Structured process to build a consolidated understanding of the future.
Step 2	<b>Developing and analysing potential alternative futures.</b> Analysing a range of potential alternative futures which could emerge as a result of the collected and analysed data.
Step 3	<b>Contemplating strategic implications from the future.</b> Imagining potential futures can lead an organization towards a broader discussion of the insights or implications that may surface from these plausible futures in the current days, including creating a narrative or scenarios about the future.
Step 4	<b>Developing options for taking action.</b> How the insights, strategic implications, or strategies developed under phase three might impact current decision-making.

Table 1: source [iftf.org](https://www.iftf.org)

<sup>6</sup> Bressan, S., & Korb, S. (2024). Foresight success factors: Insights from science, practice and innovation. Geneva Science-Policy Interface (GSPi).

<sup>7</sup> Habegger, B. (2010). Strategic foresight in public policy: Reviewing the experiences of the UK, Singapore, and the Netherlands. *Futures*, 42(1), 49–58.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ivi*, p. 7-8.



It is possible to say that three key components are necessary for Strategic Foresight to succeed: building topical, methodical, and process expertise; encouraging creativity and lateral thinking to produce fresh concepts and visions; and successfully fostering close relationships with senior policymakers and stakeholders to gain their commitment, trust, credibility, and support.<sup>10</sup>

In the past, foresight in public policy was usually focused on one particular policy field - most often related to science, technology, and innovation policy.<sup>11</sup> The literature traces modern strategic foresight in public policy back to the early 1950s in North America and Europe when some governments, academics, and science institutes began using elements of strategic foresight, including war game simulations, to explore the future of geopolitics. In the 1970s, foresight was also used in the private sector, with the main example of Royal Dutch Shell, to develop future scenarios in the context of the oil crisis. Finally, in a growing diffusion of policy foresight, an increasing number of actors over the past ten years, including governments, international organisations, civil society organisations, and other private sector actors, have started integrating strategic foresight into efforts to advance global development goals.<sup>12</sup> International organisations such as the OECD, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Educational,

Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) launched their studies or programmes in this domain.

Among governments, the United Kingdom (UK), Singapore and the Netherlands were among the first countries to invest in foresight. The UK started in the 1960s with a programme focused on science and technology policy. This approach paved the way for the UK Foresight Programme in the mid-90s. Singapore had a scenario planning programme in the 1980s. The challenging situation related to terrorism in the early 2000s pushed Singapore to develop a more structured system. Finally, the Netherlands Horizon Scan 2007 was a single foresight project, therefore more specific compared to the other two precursors.<sup>13</sup>

A few authors also highlight examples of foresight units being incorporated into governments in the Global South with hubs of foresight expertise (for example, Brazil, India, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, the Philippines, and South Africa) or of foresight being used as part of strategic planning processes (like in Costa Rica, Rwanda, Lao PDR).<sup>14</sup> Overall, despite their increasing popularity, strategic foresight analysis and practice are still not fully incorporated into the policies and procedures of many international development agencies and organisations.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Habegger, B. (2010). Strategic foresight in public policy: Reviewing the experiences of the UK, Singapore, and the Netherlands. *Futures*, 42(1), 49–58.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> Reilly-King, F. (2024). Foresight and futures thinking for international development cooperation. *Development Policy Review*.

<sup>13</sup> Habegger, B. (2010). Strategic foresight in public policy: Reviewing the experiences of the UK, Singapore, and the Netherlands. *Futures*, 42(1), 49–58.

<sup>14</sup> Reilly-King, F. (2024). Foresight and futures thinking for international development cooperation. *Development Policy Review*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

## II. STRATEGIC FORESIGHT IN FOREIGN POLICY

Strategic foresight has a specific area of application in foreign policy, supporting analysis and decision-making regarding security and foreign policy issues. With very few exceptions, Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) have only recently attempted to improve their strategic anticipation capabilities. Research on the effectiveness and impact of strategic foresight for foreign policy is still limited to some seminal documents.<sup>16</sup>

As highlighted by Jütersonke and Munro, strategic foresight is not to be taken for granted for MFAs, usually more reactive to changes and crises. Furthermore, MFAs are traditionally rigidly structured in geographic and thematic desks. At the same time, MFAs have specific staff rotation systems, status and procedures that differentiate them from other ministries and national institutions.<sup>17</sup>

Despite these differences and challenges, it is consolidated in the literature that national coordination among different ministries can be beneficial to strategic foresight and to better analyse complex themes. This does not preclude the individual ministry from implementing specific internal exercises or activities. This “whole-of-government approach” not only can generate better forecasting but can also establish synergies and relations beyond the traditional political cleavages.<sup>18</sup> For example, it is well-recognised in the mediation domain that working on the future helps to find joint issues and to transcend present divisions.

Usually, as in the case of Italy, foresight capacities are placed in policy-planning units or departments. Yet, the key issue is to be close enough to the decision-makers, firstly the minister’s office. On the one hand, the foresight unit should work with a

certain degree of scientific independence, while on the other hand, they should be well-connected to influence the minister and policy-makers. “Utilisation” should therefore be at the core of foresight’s efforts and can be considered even more relevant than a single methodology or approach.<sup>19</sup>

Overall, methodology should remain flexible and adaptable to serve different purposes. The involvement of the key people in terms of their time and resources is paramount. Dedicated and skilled staff is central, and continuity should be carefully planned (for example, involving a team of senior and junior staff without a full turnover). At the same time, a dedicated budget line in the medium-long term is necessary for proper foresight activities. The buzzword “ecosystem” is probably redundant, but the idea is to guarantee expertise, attention from decision makers, continuity and resources.

In terms of team members, foresight needs different kinds of profiles: policy-planning teams tend to include valuable analysts, but they also need people who can work well with others, collaborate effectively, facilitate dialogues, lead discussions, and interact with a variety of internal and external stakeholders. It is advantageous to have team members with diverse academic and professional backgrounds because foresight necessitates perspectives from various domains.

At the same time, another issue to be decided is if and how to outsource part of the foresight work also due to the sensitivity of the issues. The primary method of outsourcing involves keeping a roster of consultants or trusted specialised partners hired at different stages of the foresight process, but primarily during the input and/or review phases.<sup>20</sup>

A feature of foresight in foreign policy, compared to other domains, is to utilise a shorter horizon, often around 5-7 years, rarely more than a decade. This work can generate wide-scope reports, geographically based foresight papers or briefs for the minister and government. Foresight staff can also be involved for other specific activities such as international meetings, missions, etc.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Munro, R. (2024). Developing anticipatory governance capacities in ministries of foreign affairs. Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), and Bressan, S., & Korb, S. (2024). Foresight success factors: Insights from science, practice and innovation. Geneva Science-Policy Interface (GSPi).

<sup>17</sup> Munro, R. (2024). Developing anticipatory governance capacities in ministries of foreign affairs. Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> Bressan, S., & Korb, S. (2024). Foresight success factors: Insights from science, practice and innovation. Geneva Science-Policy Interface (GSPi).

<sup>20</sup> Munro, R. (2024). Developing anticipatory governance capacities in ministries of foreign affairs. Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

**A privileged area of application of strategic foresight in foreign policy is conflict prevention and early warning.** Conflict prevention looks to the future and can benefit from synergies with foresight work. Conflict prevention requires close cooperation between foresight units, peace and security units and geographic desks. Early warning systems are arrangements that use future-oriented analysis methods to detect early signals of potential or likely developments and incidents in the future and produce alerts.<sup>22</sup>

Conflict early warning is usually imagined for a short horizon (1-3 years) and can be connected more to forecasting. At the same time, **foresight can provide the framework for early warning systems.** These systems can help to adopt shorter timelines and apply foresight approaches. While the attention is often dedicated to whether the predictive models are effective, for conflict early warning, a key aspect remains how it is connected to the decision-making process.

Conflicts can be predicted and warnings launched, but if they are not trusted or listened to, they remain an academic exercise.

In the last decade, different organisations have developed an internal early warning system. A paramount example is the World Food Programme with the Conflict Forecast Project<sup>23</sup> to support decision-makers in visualising conflict events through

multiple conflict datasets. A recent and comprehensive system is the Violence & Impacts Early-Warning System (VIEWS).<sup>24</sup> The system works on monthly forecasts for violent conflicts across the world up to three years in advance. Research projects are dedicated to exploring novel methodologies to forecast violent conflicts and their impacts on society and human development. This is a tool for forecasting and not for foresight. Yet, it is relevant in terms of methodology, scientific accuracy and regular evaluation. It is open source with source code<sup>25</sup>, and other organisations can leverage this knowledge. In addition, the VIEWS researchers regularly evaluate the system ex-post to validate predictions and trends. For example, a journal article on predictive accuracy defines the models as “For incidence of conflict, the predictive performance is quite decent”.<sup>26</sup>

The European Union has also developed a focus on conflict prevention with attention to early warning connected to 2-4 year scenarios. The Conflict Prevention Peace, Security and Defence Partnership Division – PCM.2 Peace, Partnership and Crisis Management Directorate (PCM) presents different instruments to be aware of the future, from scenario workshops (under the requests of other Directorate Generals) to conflict intelligence screening, regional analysis and horizon scanning with particular attention to triggers to raise awareness internally.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Lynam, T., Zapata, M., Hegre, H., Bell, C., & Besaw, C. (2023). Early Warning and Predictive Analytic Systems in Conflict Contexts: Insights from the Field. *Civil Wars*, 26(3), 401–429.

<sup>23</sup> [Conflict Forecast. Conflict Forecast. Retrieved April 8, 2025; Innovation WFP. Conflict Forecast. Retrieved April 8, 2025.](#)

<sup>24</sup> The VIEWS consortium is jointly led by Uppsala University and Peace Research Institute Oslo. [For more information visit the website: viewsforecasting.org.](#)

<sup>25</sup> [Prio Data. Prio Data. Retrieved April 8, 2025](#)

<sup>26</sup> For more detailed analysis, see: Håvard Hegre, Håvard Møkleiv Nygård, Peder Landsverk, Can We Predict Armed Conflict? How the First 9 Years of Published Forecasts Stand Up to Reality, *International Studies Quarterly*, Volume 65, Issue 3, September 2021, Pages 660–668.

<sup>27</sup> Agency for Peacebuilding, *Research Interview*, December 2024.

### III. STRATEGIC FORESIGHT: MODELS AND INSTITUTIONS

Different governments have invested in structuring strategic foresight in their institutions. We have mentioned how Singapore, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands have a tradition in this area. More recently, other countries have moved in this direction. Most of them have strategic foresight capacities supporting the government. Canada is a relevant example of how foresight is at the service of the executive power while also utilised to train managers and directors. However, Finland and Germany represent important exceptions with a more decentralised approach.

**Germany** has a support unit at the Chancellery and in different ministries (e.g., the Federal Foreign Office or the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs). The Ministries generally define their priorities and conduct the activities and then share the analysis with other institutions. The connection with decision-makers is in place, mainly with middle-level management, while informing at the minister level remains complex.<sup>28</sup> Strategic foresight is usually conducted by external think-tanks like the Global Public Policy Institute, federal government agencies or federal research institutes like Fraunhofer-Institut für System-und Innovationsforschung, the Leopoldina (the German Academy of Sciences), the Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat), the German Ethics Council (Ethikrat) or the German Council of Economic Experts (Wirtschaftsweisen). In the German MFA, the Stabilisation Department leads on strategic foresight and often adopts a regional focus.

**Finland** is considered a prominent example of strategic foresight. Helsinki has a Strategic foresight unit to support the government, one to work with the Parliament<sup>29</sup> and also the office of the Finnish president has a foresight team. The main idea is that Broad-based cooperation plays a key role. Strategic foresight is carried out by the foresight

network of the Ministry's branch of government, which has members from the Ministry's departments and agencies. The Strategy and Development Unit at the Ministry's Administration and Development Department is in charge of carrying out the foresight activities. To enrich the perspectives on foresight, the Unit invites experts from outside the branch of government to join in the work, for example, in the form of Delphi panels. For the Ministry's branch of government, the purpose of this work is to provide background information for reports, strategies and future reviews and provide a shared outlook for the branch's performance guidance model. Foresight activities are carried out in several ministries, and all ministries are involved in the ministries' joint foresight working group. Furthermore, the National Foresight Network brings together Finnish foresight data producers. The Government Foresight Group supports the Government's work on the future and the activities of the National Foresight Network.<sup>30</sup> Finally, during each electoral term, the Government submits to Parliament a Report on the Future, which aims to identify issues that will require particular attention with regard to decision-making.<sup>31</sup> Overall, Finland has also developed and placed a strong emphasis on involving citizens in foresight activities and creating awareness about its relevance.

CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation represents a significant example in the Finnish context of how strategic foresight can enhance peace mediation. For over ten years, CMI has applied "forward-looking dialogue" in its work, supporting long-term transformation in peacemaking processes and shifting focus toward alternative futures and possible scenarios when faced with obstacles to dialogue or consensus-especially in conflict-affected countries.

Among **regional and international organisations**, the OSCE and the European Union play a central role. Since establishing its Strategic Foresight Unit in 2013, the **OECD** has been a leader in advancing the application of strategic foresight in government capacity in governments. The Unit operates under three objectives: strengthen foresight capacity and practice within the OECD in order to improve policy analysis and advice; support government foresight capacity by leveraging networks such as the OECD

<sup>28</sup> Agency for Peacebuilding, *Research Interview*, February 2025.

<sup>29</sup> Sitra, the Finnish Innovation Fund, is an independent public foundation which operates directly under the supervision of the Finnish Parliament. [For more information visit the website: sitra.fi](https://sitra.fi)

<sup>30</sup> [Finnish Government. \(n.d.\). National foresight network. Retrieved April 8, 2025.](#)

<sup>31</sup> The first Government Report on the Future was published in 1993. [Finnish Government. \(n.d.\). Government report on the future. Retrieved April 8, 2025.](#)

Government Foresight Community (GFC); and bring foresight to bear on OECD priorities and global policy debates.<sup>32</sup> In particular, the GFC has strengthened the ability of governments to foresee by using collective experience. The GFC also serves as an informal network for collaboration and coordination among public sector foresight practitioners and contributes to OECD foresight projects.

There is a plethora of foresight actors at the **EU level**. The Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture, and Sport is in charge of strategic foresight at the political level. The Joint Research Centre (JRC), utilising its internal foresight capabilities, and the Secretariat-General are responsible for implementing the mandate. All Directorates-General are guaranteed long-term policy coordination through the Commission's Strategic Foresight Network, which gathers a focal point of foresight from every Directorate-General. With other EU institutions, the Commission is forming close, forward-thinking partnerships and collaborations, particularly within the framework of the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS). Additionally, it collaborates with foreign partners and forges alliances that utilise the public foresight capacities of Member States via the EU-wide Foresight Network. There is also the European Parliament Panel for the Future of Science and Technology and a dedicated "Policy Foresight Unit" within the European Parliamentary Research Service established in 2019 by the Director General for Research to bring foresight closer to policies.<sup>33</sup>

The launch of an EU-wide Foresight Network was announced in the Commission's 2020 Strategic Foresight Report.<sup>34</sup> Its objective is to develop synergies that draw on public administration foresight capabilities, by bringing together intelligence and foresight expertise from all Member States and the European Commission for strategic exchanges and cooperation on forward-looking issues relevant to Europe's future. Previously, the first Ursula Von Der Leyen Commission in 2019 set up a small unit connected to the JRC and mainly focused on the future of technology to inform policy work. The product was the Annual Foresight Report and foresight was finally on the agenda.<sup>35</sup>

The EU-wide Foresight Network has two levels. "Ministers for the Future", designated by each Member State, meet informally at least once a year.

They discuss key issues of relevance for Europe's future. The work of the Ministers for the Future is supported by a network of senior officials from national administrations, who meet at least twice a year to prepare the ministerial meetings, follow-up on their conclusions and cooperate in thematic working groups.

A series of different tools and methodologies is in place. Firstly, horizon scanning: a systematic scan managed by JRC, published twice a year with a future-scape or visual mapping of new signals of change. Secondly, megatrends analysis: analysis of patterns led by ESPAS on 14 global megatrends relevant for the future of Europe and other minor issues. Thirdly, reference foresight scenarios offering strategic reflections which can serve as a compass for decision-makers navigating under increasingly unpredictable circumstances. Finally, visioning: the determination of a preferred course, with a medium-term roadmap and a clear, shared understanding of the desired future as the result.

Despite the wide number of activities and bodies involved, the ESPAS coordination process is effective.<sup>36</sup> With the second Ursula Von Der Leyen Commission, foresight does not seem a policy priority<sup>37</sup> and it is only present in the Commission's Missions Letters with particular reference to preparedness, defence, humanitarian crisis and for the new generations.

Finally, at the **United Nations level**, in 2023, the Executive Office of the Secretary-General established the UN Futures Lab to use futures thinking and strategic foresight in planning, policymaking, and decision-making. The UN Futures Lab is driven by a Global Hub which supports teams, provides tools, and builds capacity to help shape a more resilient and anticipatory UN.<sup>38</sup> Foresight is also a pillar of the so-called "Quintet of Change", a "UN 2.0" vision to modernise the UN system.

<sup>32</sup> [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development \(OECD\). \(n.d.\). Strategic foresight. Retrieved April 8, 2025.](#)

<sup>33</sup> Agency for Peacebuilding, *Research Interview*, December 2025.

<sup>34</sup> [Commission's 2020 Strategic Foresight Report.](#)

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> Agency for Peacebuilding, *Research Interview*, December 2024.

<sup>37</sup> Agency for Peacebuilding, *Research Interview*, December 2024.

<sup>38</sup> [United Nations Futures Lab. \(n.d.\). UN Futures Lab. Retrieved April 8, 2025.](#)



## IV. ITALY AND STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

**Strategic foresight is a recent concept for Italian public institutions.** Similar to other nations, bureaucratic cultural barriers to innovation and a lack of incentives for long-term planning and prevention are major roadblocks to accomplishing many of the success factors listed above.<sup>39</sup> For Italian institutions, programming means planning financial resources (e.g., financial law) and strategies are not considered a system of programming.<sup>40</sup> As described by Professor Roberto Poli of the University of Trento at different moments, Italy lives in the “cage of the present” with limited strategic programming toward the future.

In 2022, the **OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI)** launched a multi-country project to build up the internal capacity (demands and supports) of governments to make exploration and experimentation of future possibilities a normal matter of business. OPSI, with support from the European Commission, works with country-peers and experts of the governments of Lithuania, Italy, and Malta to test different ways of strengthening their anticipatory capacity – the ability to perceive, understand and act on the future as it emerges in the present. **Project ‘LiMinal’** – which refers to the concept of being at the threshold between two states, such as the present and the future – represents the transition from a reactive to an anticipatory governance approach to policy making. In other words, one that considers future developments and provokes action in the present. In doing so, Lithuania, Italy, and Malta aim to build more effective, reflective, and proactive institutions, equipped to respond to changing conditions and evolving needs,

including climate change, migration, and artificial intelligence.<sup>41</sup>

The foresight project is coordinated by the **National School of Administration (SNA)** and involves six ministries in this pilot phase: Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MFA), Defence, Economy and Finance (MEF), Environment and Energy Security and Civil Protection and Sea Policies. Overall, the Italian experience is still jeopardised, disconnected and without clear attention from the policy-makers. However, there are steps forward that can bring about an ecosystem of strategic foresight. Nonetheless, there are two main obstacles to the process of institutionalisation. Firstly, a lack of skills, competencies and dedicated resources within the institutions. The project ‘LiMinal’ has provided some skills, but it is still limited. Secondly, the cultural understanding of strategic foresight. The Ministry of Defence is the most active in the project, with foresight capacities in the NATO framework more developed than other ministries.<sup>42</sup> The MEF has developed a specific foresight unit, while the Ministry of Environment and Energy Security National Action Plan for Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PAN PCSD).<sup>43</sup> Overall, the training at the SNA helped all six ministries to develop some capacities on strategic foresight.<sup>44</sup>

In this framework, the Italian MFA is part of the project ‘LiMinal’ and the Unit for Policy Planning, Statistics and Historical Documentation (UAP), which is part of the Directorate General for Public and Cultural Diplomacy, is the unit dedicated to strategic foresight.

In mid-December 2022, UAP organised the international conference “Managing Uncertainty in a World in Transition. Strategic Foresight and Early Warning at the Service of Foreign Policy” at the Farnesina. The conference saw the participation of several ministerial experts (Germany and the Netherlands), international organisations (EEAS, OECD, UNDP), and non-governmental entities such as the Global Public Policy Institute and the

<sup>39</sup> Bressan, S., & Korb, S. (2024). Foresight success factors: Insights from science, practice and innovation. Geneva Science-Policy Interface (GSPi).

<sup>40</sup> Agency for Peacebuilding, *Research Interview*, February 2025.

<sup>41</sup> The project is funded by the European Union via the Technical Support Instrument, and implemented by the OECD, in cooperation with the European Commission. [For more information visit the website: oecd-opsi.org/blog/project-liminal](https://oecd-opsi.org/blog/project-liminal).

<sup>42</sup> Agency for Peacebuilding, *Research Interview*, February 2025.

<sup>43</sup> Since October 2024, Italy is also part of the project Building Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development with Austria, Italy, The Slovak Republic and funded by the European Commission - DG REFORM, within the Technical Support Instrument - TSI (2024) programme and with the scientific support of the OECD. [For more information visit the website: mase.gov.it/pagina/tsi-2024-project-pcsd-foresight-and-impact-assessment-localizing-sdgs](https://mase.gov.it/pagina/tsi-2024-project-pcsd-foresight-and-impact-assessment-localizing-sdgs).

<sup>44</sup> Agency for Peacebuilding, *Research Interview*, February 2025.

International Crisis Group. The concept of the event recalled a key point: “Lately, and especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the use of predictive techniques such as strategic foresight, forecasting and early warning has spread widely among foreign policy institutions”. The conference produced several stimulating analyses of the most recent trends in strategic foresight and early warning. Strategic foresight, for example, is already used by several international organisations such as the OECD and the United Nations as an application field for making decisions.

During 2023, the Italian MFA organised three internal exercises focused on a Country in the Middle East, a Middle-power State in Asia and a region in Africa. The exercises were led by forecasting experts and introduced by experts on the countries. The exercise produced three reports on possible scenarios for internal use. As discussed during the research interviews, the geographic focus in foresight exercises is rather common for MFAs.<sup>45</sup>

In 2024 there were no dedicated resources and the Ministry only attended events of the project ‘LIMinal’ or others at the international level. Overall, the MFA has no internal forecasting tools and struggles to give continuity to this work and it also needs to develop its vision.<sup>46</sup> Beyond UAP, the foresight is still not widely perceived as relevant in the MFA. Furthermore, the MFA’s attention on strategic foresight is more projected toward the international level (OCSE, EU Commission) and has more limited synergies at the national level. On the one hand, this is due to the peculiarities of diplomatic work; at the same time, it can represent a constraint for the national development of strategic foresight.

Overall, the Italian experience is jeopardised and disconnected from the policy level. These limitations are due to two specific reasons. On the one hand, a lack of a strategic foresight ecosystem; on the other, limited knowledge and skills and a lack of a common interpretation of strategic foresight.<sup>47</sup> One strategic path could be to have a unit to support the executive, then ideally add specific units to support individual ministries. The executive unit provides general support directions that are then specified at the level of individual ministries.<sup>48</sup>

This means that to date, Italy does not yet have the conditions for an institutionalisation of strategic foresight. However, progressive growth from the bottom is possible, firstly from the individual administrations, investing in internal capabilities and giving visibility to the theme. This means both training specific units in the ministries and working with the whole personnel to make it more future-aware.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, political institutions still have limited connections and synergies with academia and non-governmental organisations. This is because the universities and think tanks have limited capacities for strategic foresight, except the University of Trento, Skopia<sup>50</sup> and the Italian Institute for the Future.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, the ministries usually do not involve non-institutional partners of individuals in their exercises.

<sup>45</sup> Agency for Peacebuilding, Research Interview, February 2025.

<sup>46</sup> Agency for Peacebuilding, Research Interview, December 2024.

<sup>47</sup> Agency for Peacebuilding, Research Interview, February 2025.

<sup>48</sup> Agency for Peacebuilding, Research Interview, February 2025.

<sup>49</sup> Agency for Peacebuilding, Research Interview, February 2025.

<sup>50</sup> [Skopia S.r.l. Anticipation Services. \(n.d.\). Deal with futures, lead the way. Retrieved April 8, 2025.](#)

<sup>51</sup> [Italian Institute for the Future. \(n.d.\). Per guardare più lontano. Retrieved April 8, 2025.](#)

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategic foresight and early warning have become indispensable components of effective foreign policy, enabling governments to anticipate, assess, and respond to emerging global challenges. The rapid pace of geopolitical, technological, and environmental change necessitates a shift from reactive decision-making to proactive governance. By embedding foresight mechanisms within foreign policy institutions, decision-makers can move beyond short-term crisis management and develop long-term strategies that enhance foreign policy and conflict prevention. Integrating strategic foresight also allows for a more coordinated approach across different policy areas, ensuring that governments are better prepared to handle complex, interconnected risks. The main challenge remains to build a strategic foresight ecosystem at the national level in synergy with international institutions and to connect it to medium-high-level policy-making.

Italy has traditionally been more focused on present-day political concerns rather than long-term

strategic foresight in its foreign policy. Yet, embracing strategic foresight represents both necessity and an opportunity. The Italian MFA is well-positioned to have the lead in fostering a culture of anticipation, provided there is a deliberate investment in capabilities, coordination, and internal demand for long-term thinking. Moving toward a more future-aware foreign policy requires strengthening internal analytical capacities, aligning foresight with strategic decision-making, and ensuring proximity to high-level leadership. It also entails cultivating a professional ethos that values scenario-based thinking, inter-ministerial dialogue, and inclusive engagement with diverse perspectives. For Italy to navigate future challenges effectively, it must move from episodic foresight exercises to a coherent and sustained foresight infrastructure, rooted in policy relevance, institutional ownership, and a clear strategic vision.

The following **recommendations** are offered to help guide future programming on strategic foresight and foreign policy in Italy.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

<b>Rec 1</b>	<p><b>Strengthen the MFA capacities on strategic foresight.</b></p> <p>The Italian MFA can continue to rely on international partners such as the OECD and the EU, and, at the same time, create internal knowledge and a sustained foresight infrastructure with a regular budget and dedicated staff both for coordination and within different ministries.</p>
<b>Rec 2</b>	<p><b>Support efforts at the national level.</b></p> <p>Despite the peculiarities of foreign policy, coordination at the Italian level remains paramount to coordinate, share visions and strategies and maximise the impact. The Presidency of the Council of Ministers should play a role in coordinating on foresight at the national level.</p>
<b>Rec 3</b>	<p><b>Position strategic foresight focal points or units close to decision-makers.</b></p> <p>Strategic foresight can be relevant if close enough to the decision-makers, in primis the minister's office. On the one hand, the foresight unit should work with a certain degree of scientific independence, while on the other hand, they should be well-connected to influence the minister and policy-makers. Figures of internal "senior negotiators" can help to navigate bureaucratic politics.</p>
<b>Rec 4</b>	<p><b>Build-up participatory processes.</b></p> <p>A participatory process that involves decision-makers and officials at different levels can help ensure buy-in and legitimacy. This can be done through networking and training to improve the awareness of strategic foresight. At the same time, internal awareness and participation at the MFA can help to increase awareness, effectiveness and impact.</p>
<b>Rec 5</b>	<p><b>Increase public awareness of strategic foresight.</b></p> <p>Foresight remains rather unknown to Italian institutions and stakeholders. Yet, wider participation and awareness of some processes can help to improve the quality of strategic foresight and to increase support. For example, The Finn Futures Barometer survey represents an engaging way to involve the population on future awareness.</p>
<b>Rec 6</b>	<p><b>Open to professional communities and stakeholders.</b></p> <p>Some strategic foresight consultation, exercises and training should be open to external actors such as key think-tanks, NGOs, universities and private businesses. A multi-stakeholder approach is preferable to a process that is exclusively centred on experts from within the government.</p>
<b>Rec 7</b>	<p><b>Invest in conflict prevention and early warning systems.</b></p> <p>This area is strategically connected to foresight, and it should receive specific attention and investment. The Italian MFA can do this in close coordination with the existing instrument at the EU level and adopt regular internal practices also in the short-medium horizon (1-3 years).</p>



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