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PeaceTech, Predictive Rationality and Legal Responsibility

PeaceTech, razionalità predittiva e responsabilità giuridica

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Abstract

This article analyses the use of algorithmic systems in conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding, showing how PeaceTech reshapes public action through an anticipatory lens. This raises legal and ethico political dilemmas concerning control, opacity, and responsibility, calling for a legality of anticipation based on *ex ante* accountability and meaningful human control.

Il contributo analizza l'uso di sistemi algoritmici nella prevenzione dei conflitti, nel peacekeeping e nel peacebuilding, mostrando come la PeaceTech riconfiguri l'azione pubblica in chiave anticipatoria. Ciò solleva dilemmi giuridici ed etico politici su controllo, opacità e responsabilità, imponendo una legalità dell'anticipazione fondata su accountability ex ante e controllo umano significativo.

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Contribution sur

Keywords: PeaceTech; artificial intelligence; conflict prevention; risk governance; accountability; fundamental rights

Summary: 1. Introduction: PeaceTech and AI for Good. – 2. The Dilemmas of PeaceTech. – 3. Technological Solutionism, Predictive Logics, and Preventive Risk Governance. – 4. Limits of Data-and Indicator-Based Peacebuilding. – 5. *Ex Ante* Accountability and Meaningful Human Control. – 6. Conclusion.

1. Introduction: PeaceTech and AI for Good.

At first glance, the idea of an "algorithm for peace" appears as an oxymoron. Peace has traditionally been associated with irreducibly human dimensions – relationships, recognition, memory, political compromise, justice, and conflict transformation – and is situated within a normative and symbolic horizon that seems to resist any attempt at computational formalization.

In an era of pervasive datafication, however, the question is no longer whether algorithms affect peace and conflict processes, but rather how they do so, and with what consequences for the legitimacy of public action and the protection of fundamental rights.

Digital tools have become an integral part of security governance: they analyse information flows, anticipate scenarios of instability, and identify patterns of violent escalation. They do not produce peace as an automatic output; rather, they contribute to redefining the epistemic conditions under which peace is conceived, promoted, and governed.

The term PeaceTech refers to the ensemble of digital tools, practices, and infrastructures employed in conflict prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding.[1] Positioned at the intersection of technological innovation and digital humanism, PeaceTech fuels expectations that artificial intelligence, big data, blockchain technologies, and mobile platforms may contribute to human security and social justice.[2]

Although the term gained prominence within the broader field of AI for Good initiatives, its origins predate the current expansion of artificial intelligence and can be traced back to earlier experiences in digital peacebuilding.

What is clear, however, is that a qualitative shift has occurred.

Techniques such as natural language processing for hate speech detection, social media analysis for conflict monitoring, blockchain-based verification systems, and immersive virtual reality environments for reconciliation have profoundly altered the epistemological foundations of peace work. They enable large-scale, real-time, and emotionally mediated forms of engagement.[3]

[1] L Schirch, *25 Spheres of Digital Peacebuilding and PeaceTech* (Toda Peace Institute, 2020).
[2] D Dajer, 'Cracking the Code of Tech for Peace: International Perspectives of Peacetech Research and Practice' C Wilson (ed), *Reflections on Building Inclusive and Sustainable Peace* (British Council, 2020) 70.
[3] F Hofmann, 'AI for peace' [2025] International Affairs 727.

Today, PeaceTech has taken shape as a comprehensive vision of peace in the digital age, in which advanced technologies are mobilized to prevent conflict, facilitate dialogue, and promote sustainable peace.[4]

Within this framework, at least four main functions can be identified.

First, technology operates as a data-processing tool, enabling the collection, aggregation, and analysis of information from distributed sources related to violent incidents, perceptions of insecurity, or early signals of escalation.

Second, it acts as a communication device, facilitating bidirectional information flows between local communities, civil society, international actors, and state institutions, reducing spatial and temporal barriers and expanding participation in decision-making processes.

A third function concerns the direct involvement of citizens in conflict management: digital tools do not merely transmit information but can enable forms of active citizenship.

Finally, a more innovative function emerges through games and simulations capable of fostering attitude change, enhancing understanding of conflict dynamics, and developing mediation and cooperation skills.

Behind this aspirational narrative, however, lies a field marked by conceptual ambiguities, ethical tensions, and structural contradictions.

The literature highlights a persistent ambivalence: while digital technologies present significant potential for peacebuilding, they also play a notable role in the perpetuation of conflict and may negatively affect peace efforts.[5]

This ambivalence is often described through metaphors of "dual use" or the technology's "Janus-faced" character.

Tools portrayed as emancipatory may be repurposed as instruments of surveillance; platforms designed to foster inclusion often reproduce digital inequalities; and data infrastructures intended to support informed decision-making risk reinforcing forms of epistemic violence.

Digital technologies are not neutral instruments: they embody normative choices, models of rationality, and power relations, actively shaping the social world.

Labels such as PeaceTech or AI for Good do more than describe solutions: they shape expectations, legitimize certain interventions, and define desirable futures. Interrogating them means asking not only how technologies are used, but also how they could be differently designed and governed.

This leads to a first basic point: PeaceTech is not inherently peaceful. Peacefulness is not an intrinsic quality of technology, but a function of context, application, and the intentionality guiding its use.

Digital technologies increasingly function as cognitive and decision-making infrastructures for international action, redefining what is seen, known, and decided.

[4] A Kahl, H Puig Larrauri, 'Technology for Peacebuilding' [2013] Stability-International Journal of Security and Development.

[5] AT Hirblinger and others, 'Digital Peacebuilding: A Framework for Critical–Reflexive Engagement' [2023] International Studies Perspectives 265.

The central issue therefore concerns not abstract technological potential, but control, conditions of use, and the political-institutional purposes shaping deployment.[6]

Treating PeaceTech as neutral or purely technical ultimately obscures its political dimension.

2. The Dilemmas of PeaceTech.

PeaceTech is highly attractive due to its promise of radically expanding participation in peace processes, overcoming traditional negotiation formats through digital tools and artificial intelligence capable of including previously excluded voices and providing real-time situational awareness. Yet technological empowerment does not automatically translate into inclusion: social and gender inequalities tend to be reproduced within digital spaces, reflecting pre-existing power structures.[7]

Alongside bottom-up uses, PeaceTech has increasingly been adopted by international organizations and institutional actors engaged in peacebuilding.

United Nations agencies and cooperation bodies have integrated ICTs, blockchain technologies, and aerial surveillance systems into their missions, aiming to improve civilian protection, aid distribution, and territorial monitoring. These top-down deployments, however, reveal persistent tensions between innovation and control. Organizations traditionally oriented toward hierarchical and state-centric models tend to employ technologies as tools of management and oversight rather than as levers for genuine participation, risking the reabsorption of potentially decentralizing solutions into securitized logics of domination.[8]

The use of technologies such as blockchain and drones is emblematic of this ambivalence: while offering opportunities for traceability, transparency, and protection, they raise crucial questions about data ownership, infrastructural durability, accountability, and compliance with the do no harm principle.

An additional paradox emerges: despite innovation rhetoric evoking rupture and discontinuity, PeaceTech develops within peacebuilding institutions that are slow, bureaucratic, and risk-averse. Technological integration remains fragmented and often superficial, producing forms of “cosmetic innovation” that are reabsorbed into traditional liberal peacebuilding paradigms.[9]

A further critical issue concerns the gap between knowledge and action.

Despite offering advanced tools for prediction, monitoring, and atrocity documentation, the growing availability of data does not automatically translate into effective conflict prevention. On the contrary, informational abundance may fuel inaction, allowing institutions to observe and manage

[6] P Diehl, ‘The Political Implications of Using New Technologies in Peace Operations’ [2002] International Peacekeeping 1.
[7] M Wählisch, F Kufus, ‘Structural dilemmas of PeaceTech: AI, power, and peacebuilding in the digital age’ [2026] Peacebuilding 4.
[8] J Cruz, ‘Colonial Power and Decolonial Peace’ [2021] Peacebuilding 274.
[9] OP Richmond, I Tellidis, ‘Analogue Crisis, Digital Renewal? Current Dilemmas of Peacebuilding’ [2020] Globalizations 935.

crises at a distance without undertaking difficult political decisions. In this context, dashboards and visualizations risk aestheticizing suffering and transforming atrocities into objects of informational consumption, generating what has been described as a "data hybris".[10]

Particularly relevant is the persistent dissociation between early warning and early action. The idea that technology can contribute to conflict forecasting developed alongside institutionalized visions of international security grounded in early warning systems. Yet it is now widely recognized that greater predictive capacity does not guarantee timely intervention, due to political and institutional obstacles that limit the effectiveness of sociotechnical systems oriented toward prevention.[11]

From a legal perspective, this raises a problem of institutional responsibility: risk anticipation not followed by appropriate action can heighten civilian vulnerability and reinforce perceptions of international impotence. Technology, in this sense, cannot serve as an alibi for political non-decision.[12]

Moreover, PeaceTech increasingly depends on private digital infrastructures for crucial peace and humanitarian functions. Essential services such as cloud computing, connectivity, and data analytics platforms are controlled by profit-oriented corporations rather than public accountability mechanisms. The Starlink case in Ukraine illustrates the risks of such dependency, showing how decisive infrastructures may be unilaterally restricted or withdrawn. Simultaneously, many technologies designed in the Global North are deployed in Global South contexts without meaningful local engagement, fueling concerns about digital colonialism. [13] If these structural tensions remain unaddressed, PeaceTech risks reinforcing rather than reducing global asymmetries.[14]

3. Technological Solutionism, Predictive Logics, and Preventive Risk Governance.

Like other technological interventions addressing complex social problems, PeaceTech is often criticized for its inclination toward technological solutionism – namely, the implicit belief that political violence and social divisions can be "solved" through technical solutions.

By reframing peace as a matter of prediction, detection, or optimization, this approach tends to reduce conflict to a data-management problem, marginalizing relational and cultural dimensions that resist quantification.

Algorithms used in conflict prevention operate according to a predictive rationality: they integrate large volumes of heterogeneous data in order to

[10] R Read, B Taithe, R Mac Ginty, 'Data hubris? Humanitarian information systems and the mirage of technology' [2016] Third World Quarterly 1314.
[11] OC Meyer, 'Recasting the Warning-Response Problem: Persuasion and Preventive Policy' [2010] International Studies Review 556.
[12] Wählisch, Kufus (n 7) 8.
[13] R Mac Ginty, 'Against Stabilization' [2012] Stability-International Journal of Security and Development 20.
[14] L Taylor, D Broeders, 'In the Name of Development: Power, Profit and the Datafication of the Global South' [2015] Geoforum 229.

identify correlations and weak signals of instability. Their output is not a decision, but a risk estimate.

This shift from fact to probability marks a paradigmatic transformation, insofar as preventive action is no longer based on legally ascertainable events, but on plausible future scenarios. The future thus becomes an object of governance in the present.

At the epistemological level, this implies that conflict is known through simplifying models that select certain variables while rendering non-measurable dimensions invisible. Algorithmic prevention is therefore not neutral: it constructs a specific representation of conflict, shaping political priorities and intervention possibilities.[15]

From a legal perspective, this rationality places substantive legality under strain. Risk does not constitute a legal fact, but an epistemic construction. When it becomes the basis for public intervention, law risks being transformed from a limit on power into a merely procedural framework for technically grounded yet normatively opaque decisions. Discretion does not disappear; rather, it is displaced upstream, in model design, and downstream, in the interpretation of outputs, complicating the attribution of responsibility and weakening democratic contestability.

Added to this are risks of anticipatory infringements of fundamental rights. The classification of individuals or territories as "at risk" may justify invasive measures before unlawful conduct occurs, while algorithmic biases tend to project past inequalities into the future.

Moreover, the digital invisibility of less-connected populations structurally limits the effectiveness of data-driven approaches, risking the orientation of peace policies toward what is measurable rather than what is most urgent.[16]

4. Limits of Data-and Indicator-Based Peacebuilding.

Over the past two decades, international peacebuilding has progressively adopted logics typical of evidence-based governance: quantitative indicators, predictive models, and digital infrastructures are employed to support decisions presented as politically neutral and technically rational.

This paradigm rests on a conceptual reduction of conflict to an observable and modelable phenomenon.[17]

Such reduction privileges what can be measured – violent events, information flows, recurring patterns – over what remains qualitative, symbolic, or relational.

What emerges is a form of technical certainty that does not necessarily correspond to a genuine understanding of peace processes, yet exerts a powerful performative effect on political decision-making.

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[15] P Firchow, C Martin-Shields, R Mac Ginty, 'PeaceTech: The Liminal Spaces of Digital Technology in Peacebuilding' [2017] International Studies Perspectives 4.

[16] I Tellidis, S Kappler, 'Information and Communication Technologies in Peacebuilding: Implications, Opportunities and Challenges' [2016] Cooperation and Conflict 75.

[17] P Yerrapureddy, A Nanda, 'The Paradox of PeaceTech: Agency or Alienation?' [2025] TechPolicy.Press.

Digital technologies introduce new criteria of relevance: what is traceable, classifiable, and computable acquires decisional centrality. Yet this epistemic selectivity implies a hierarchy of knowledge in which local, contextual, and tacit forms of understanding risk being marginalized.[18]

Uncertainty does not disappear; it is shifted from the level of data to that of interpretation.

The growing integration of digital technologies into contemporary peace processes is often presented as a rational response to one of conflict management's most persistent challenges: uncertainty.

From algorithmic early warning to escalation forecasting, from satellite monitoring of ceasefires to social media analysis for violence prevention, the underlying promise is that greater data availability and analytical capacity will render conflicts more legible and therefore more governable.

This promise, however, has been widely contested.

The adoption of digital technologies does not simply reduce uncertainty; it transforms it, producing new epistemic, ontological, and normative configurations of peace action.[19]

Uncertainty is not a mere informational void, but a structural component that technologies do not eliminate, but rather reorganize – and this reorganization is never neutral. Embracing uncertainty allows one to move beyond binary approaches and to recognize that peace processes constantly oscillate between moments of stabilization and phases of radical indeterminacy.

The literature provides multiple examples.

a) Big data–based early warning systems.

Many international organizations and NGOs have adopted early warning systems based on automated analysis of violent events, information flows, and digital signals (e.g., social media data, satellite reporting, or incident databases). In such contexts, technology appears to reduce uncertainty by providing timely indicators of potential escalation. Yet uncertainty persists: a statistically significant increase in hostile online messages may signal imminent radicalization or merely represent discursive expression without material effects. Intervention decisions thus remain dependent on human judgment and contextual interpretation, which data cannot replace. Technology produces numerical certainty, while interpretive uncertainty continues to shape political decisions.[20]

b) Digital mediation and negotiated ambiguity.

In some mediation processes, digital tools are used to share documents, map negotiating positions, or simulate compromise scenarios. While such solutions facilitate coordination and increase formal transparency, the reduction of ambiguity – often regarded as a technical advantage – may become a political constraint. In mediation practice, deliberate linguistic imprecision and the

[18] OP Richmond, G Visoka, I Tellidis, *Peace in Digital International Relations: Prospects and Limitations* (Cambridge University Press 2023).

[19] AT Hirblinger and others, 'Forum: Making Peacewith Un-Certainty: Reflections on the Role of Digital Technology in Peace Processes beyond the Data Hype' [2023] International Studies Perspectives 185.

[20] Hirblinger and others (n 19).

ability to suspend the meaning of formulations are crucial resources for compromise. Excessive digitalization may rigidify positions and reduce space for creative and informal solutions, transforming uncertainty from a resource into a constraint.[21]

c) Satellite imagery and digital sensors in ceasefire monitoring.

Monitoring ceasefires through satellite technologies or digital verification tools is often presented as a confidence-building measure. Greater visibility of violations should, in principle, reduce unfounded accusations. Yet these tools generate new power asymmetries. Actors controlling data access, interpretation criteria, or certification of reliability occupy central political positions. Moreover, what is not detected or is technically unobservable remains excluded from assessment, generating new blind spots and forms of ontological uncertainty. Technical transparency does not equate to political neutrality and may displace conflict onto disputes over data interpretation.[22]

d) Online platforms for dialogue and participation.

Digital tools for community dialogue, feedback collection, and civic participation are frequently used in long-term peacebuilding phases. While formally inclusive, these tools structure participation around predefined categories and languages. This translation process may generate epistemic and normative uncertainty, as local knowledge is reformulated into standardized formats that alter its original meaning. What emerges as "data" may fail to reflect power relations, conflict memories, or community expectations. Technology renders peace measurable, but risks making it less intelligible.[23]

e) Algorithmic scoring for intervention priorities.

In some contexts, algorithmic tools are used to establish intervention priorities, resource allocation, or risk levels. When such systems influence operational decisions, a grey zone of responsibility emerges: it is often unclear whether outcomes depend on the model, the data, or human interpretation. In the absence of clear accountability frameworks, technology may weaken rather than strengthen decision-making transparency. Automation does not eliminate political uncertainty; it may obscure it. This opacity represents one of the most problematic forms of uncertainty, especially where decision errors may have severe consequences for security and human rights.[24]

Taken together, these examples show that:

- digital technologies do not reduce uncertainty, but redistribute it;
- the illusion of data-driven control may generate new decision-making vulnerabilities;
- uncertainty is a structural condition of digitalized peace processes.

If uncertainty cannot be eliminated, it can nevertheless be rendered intelligible and governable through critical reflection, learning, and adaptation.

Peace in the digital age cannot be reduced to a problem of informational optimization. Uncertainty is not an anomaly to be eliminated through data and algorithms, but a constitutive condition of peace processes.

To this end, one must "make peace" with uncertainty.

[21] Hirblinger and others (n 19) 211.
[22] Hirblinger and others (n 19) 207.
[23] Hirblinger and others (n 19) 214.
[24] Hirblinger and others (n 19) 194.

Making peace with uncertainty means recognizing the intrinsic limits of technological action and reaffirming the role of human judgment, political mediation, and ethical responsibility.

Technology is not rejected, but reframed as a tool requiring human mediation, political accountability, and awareness of its limitations. It also means accepting that digital technologies produce hybrid forms of knowledge and power, and that peacebuilding's task is not to control the future, but to act responsibly under conditions of structural indeterminacy.[25]

5. *Ex Ante* Accountability and Meaningful Human Control.

In light of these challenges, the need for a paradigm shift emerges: from *ex post* responsibility to *ex ante* accountability. Transparency, traceability, preventive risk assessment, and meaningful human control become conditions for the legitimacy of algorithmic use.

In the field of PeaceTech, accountability concerns not only individual systems, but the entire decision-making architecture enabling their deployment. Algorithms may support public action only insofar as they remain auxiliary instruments, subordinated to human judgment and politically responsible choices. It is therefore necessary to contain trajectories of digital peacebuilding that fail to do justice to bottom-up political claims for peace grounded in rights, justice, and sustainability.

It is essential to interrogate the type of peace emerging from digital peacebuilding agendas, in relation to their effects on the lives of populations living in conflict-affected contexts.

Material and immaterial effects of digital interventions are difficult to disentangle, particularly as embodied experiences of peace and conflict are increasingly mediated through social media platforms. New methods and more empirical research are therefore required to critically analyse both the connections and disconnections between digital and analogue social practices, and to better understand the forms of peace emerging within and through digital peacebuilding infrastructures.[26]

Ultimately, an "algorithm for peace" is possible only under one fundamental condition: that it not be conceived as a technical solution to a political and moral problem.

The true challenge of PeaceTech lies not in writing perfect code, but in deciding what – and who – we aim to optimize when speaking of peace.

As innovation for peace increasingly relies on big data, machine learning, predictive systems, and digital platforms, the central question concerns not only what technologies can do, but how they are designed, governed, and integrated into conflict contexts.

As repeatedly highlighted above, AI use in PeaceTech debates is often associated with early warning, predictive violence analysis, online social dynamics monitoring, and decision support for humanitarian and peacebuilding

[25] Hirblinger and others (n 19) 218.

[26] AT Hirblinger and others, 'Digital Peacebuilding: A Framework for Critical–Reflexive Engagement' [2023] International Studies Perspectives 272.

actors. Numerous studies, however, have shown that such applications risk producing counterproductive effects if not accompanied by adequate governance frameworks: data bias, decision opacity, automation of political assumptions about conflict, and displacement of responsibility from human actors onto technical systems.[27]

These considerations call for a shift in focus from mere technical effectiveness toward social and political legitimacy.

The emphasis on context-aware and conflict-sensitive innovation translates, in the AI field, into the need for situated algorithmic governance – one that recognizes that algorithms do not operate in abstraction, but intervene within contexts marked by power asymmetries, violence relations, and institutional fragility.

From a governance perspective, at least three levels of reflection are required.[28]

First, algorithmic design. AI systems used in peace processes incorporate implicit definitions of risk, security, and normality that must be made explicit and subjected to ethical and political scrutiny. Without such reflexivity, AI risks crystallizing external visions of conflict or reinforcing securitized practices incompatible with sustainable peace objectives.

Second, responsibility and accountability of actors involved. Models in which global platforms and technology providers concentrate control over algorithms and data – leaving local communities as passive information suppliers – must be rejected. Instead, governance mechanisms ensuring transparency, contestability, and above all human control over algorithmic decisions affecting peace and security processes are required.

Third, the translation of algorithmic outputs into political and social action. One of the most widely discussed limits of AI for peace concerns the so-called implementation gap: sophisticated systems generate analyses and alerts that fail to translate into effective, responsible, or legitimate interventions. The link between innovation, institutional capacity, and decision responsibility must therefore be strengthened. No algorithm can substitute for inclusive deliberative processes and relationships of trust in conflict settings.

Finally, one cannot avoid problematizing one of the most sensitive issues in the AI–PeaceTech debate: the risk of peace depoliticization through automation. [29] When conflict prevention is presented as the outcome of calculations, predictive models, or algorithmic optimization, the inherently political nature of peace is obscured, transforming it into a problem of technical management.

Peace is not an automatable output, but a legal and political project that technology can support only if it is subjected to rules, values, and forms of democratic oversight. Persons, communities, and human responsibility must remain firmly at the centre of decision-making processes, with AI used as a

[27] C Dworschak, 'Bias mitigation in empirical peace and conflict studies: A short primer on posttreatment variables' [2024] Journal of Peace Research 462.
[28] J Miklian, K Hoelscher, 'A new research approach for PeaceInnovation' [2018] Innovation and Development 189.
[29] AT Hirblinger, 'When the digits don't add up: Research strategies for post-digital peacebuilding' [2023] Cooperation and Conflict 425.

support tool rather than a substitute for political deliberation and relational justice.[30]

6. Conclusion.

The idea of an "algorithm for peace" is sustainable only as a critical figure capable of revealing a deeper transformation: the shift from peace as a politico-normative project to peace as an object of anticipatory governance of the future.

PeaceTech does not merely introduce new techniques; it restructures the way time itself is legally and politically organized. The future, in the form of risk, becomes the primary object of present intervention.

Within this horizon, risk assumes an eminently political function, operating as a technique for future selection. Algorithmic prediction does not eliminate uncertainty; it transforms it into calculable probability, exercising a strong performative effect on public decision-making. This introduces a discontinuity in the temporality of legality, shifting legal intervention toward events not yet occurred and potentially non-existent.

PeaceTech's promise to reduce uncertainty thus reveals its ambivalence: digital technologies redistribute uncertainty, rendering it less visible and less contestable. The language of probability and optimization risks obscuring peace's genuinely decision-oriented dimension, transforming contentious political choices into seemingly necessary responses to risk scenarios.

This leads to a central theoretical insight: peace is not a problem of risk management, but of responsible decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. The governance of PeaceTech must therefore be conceived as a matter of the legality of anticipation, grounded in *ex ante* accountability, meaningful human control, and a people-centric paradigm.

Only within such a normatively structured space can technology find a legitimate role – not as a substitute for politics, but as a tool subordinated to a constitutional order that continues to place the person, rights, and human responsibility at the centre of governing the possible.

[30] AT Hirblinger, FB Hofmann, K Lidén, 'Decentred dereliction in digital international relations: PeaceTech, ethics, and the cascading of moral responsibility' [2025] Review of International Studies 1.