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Costly Signals: Possible De-escalation Measures between Russia and Ukraine

Diplomatic efforts are being intensified to bring the war between Russia and Ukraine to an end. But who should make the first moves and how can the deep lack of trust between the two countries be overcome? Progress will require de-escalation measures and what has been described as 'costly signals'.

Dr Walter Kemp
Senior Strategy Adviser,
Geneva Centre for Security Policy

Intense diplomatic efforts are under way to de-escalate the intense war between Russia and Ukraine, and if possible move closer to a sustainable ceasefire and a lasting political settlement. However, there is a profound lack of trust between Ukraine and Russia and between Russia and the West. Furthermore, while there is discussion about a ceasefire, many attacks are being carried out far away from the front line through drone and missile strikes. In light of this, it is clear that, while dialogue takes place along several tracks, the parties should demonstrate goodwill and a bona fide intent to proceed to a negotiated diplomatic solution by exercising restraint and implementing de-escalation measures on issues of mutual interest. Because ultimately, while both sides have said that they are willing to engage in dialogue toward peace, actions speak louder than words.

Reciprocity

Confidence-building measures (CBMs) work on the basis of reciprocity. One side takes a step designed to induce trust, on the understanding that the other side will reciprocate in a positive way. This is the opposite of tit-for-tat escalation. The Black Sea grain deal is a good example of how both sides realised that cooperation in their own self-interest was the best option. So too are the exchanges of prisoners of war and war dead that have taken place over the past three years. A more recent example is the agreement by Russian and US negotiators in Riyadh to reduce 'bilateral irritants' and normalise diplomatic relations.

Such steps need to be prepared for and communicated effectively. If one side is surprised by the actions of the other – even if the latter is acting in good faith – there is a risk that signals may be misinterpreted and escalate rather than reduce tensions. Furthermore, a unilateral step that is not clearly signalled could be interpreted as a sign of weakness, and exploited by the other side.

Trust is not a prerequisite for initiating CBMs or de-escalation measures, which are essentially designed to *induce* trust.

That said, taking the first step can be risky. That is why CBMs are sometimes referred to as 'costly signals'. This expression has a double meaning. On the one hand, sending such signals can have a political cost for those initiating them, e.g. being criticised for appeasing the enemy. This is why, when announcing such a step, it is important to include an invitation for reciprocation and a clear message regarding the type of action that is expected in return. The second meaning is that the party that fails to reciprocate incurs a cost to its reputation, since it looks unreliable and untrustworthy. By reneging on the expected deal, the party that fails to reciprocate reduces the likelihood of a future compromise and undermines any potential benefit that it may have gained through cooperation. In other words, there is an opportunity cost for failing to respond positively.

CBMs or de-escalation measures are incremental and conditional. They are conditional in the sense that both sides need to get something out of the deal – no one wants to look like a sucker. In this

respect, while CBMs can be considered part of what Trump-friendly diplomats call 'transactional diplomacy', the transactions are not one-off deals. CBMs work best as part of an iterated process over time. As a result, failing to reciprocate to a CBM has a cost, since doing so shows bad faith and will reduce both the trust of the side offering the CBM and its willingness to try again in the future. When the mediator is a powerful actor like the United States, which can apply pressure to both sides, failure to reciprocate can also lead to costly repercussions for the recalcitrant country's relationship with the mediator. Conversely, the implementation of a CBM or de-escalation measure suggests that future commitments will be respected.

Possible measures

Recently, there have been calls – e.g. by the French president, Emmanuel Macron – for a one-month truce in attacks on air, sea and energy infrastructure. President Zelensky has also said that a first stage to end the war could be the release of prisoners and "truce in the sky — ban on missiles, long-ranged drones, bombs on energy and other civilian infrastructure — and truce in the sea immediately, if Russia will do the same." This would reduce the suffering of the people affected by the war and determine whether President Putin is interested in real peace negotiations and in good faith.

Other de-escalation and confidence-building measures could include:

- no attacks on port infrastructure or civilian ships in the Black Sea;
- no attacks on civilian nuclear power plants and other critical infrastructure;
- the resumption of the Black Sea grain deal;
- the re-opening of public airports in Kyiv and Lviv, with a promise by Ukraine not to attack Russian airports; and
- the resumption of diplomatic dialogue between Ukraine and Russia.

Such steps could open channels of communication and pave the way for the negotiation of a ceasefire and, eventually, a political settlement.

Initiating such steps does not require a formal truce. It takes one side to signal its intention to exercise restraint or some kind of exchange with a

degree of confidence that this move will be reciprocated. The chances of success can be increased through back-channel communications, a high-profile statement (that would create a high political cost for the other side to ignore) and/or pressure by a third party. Such a third party, such as the United States, could also make it clear that any improvement in its relationship with one side or the other will be contingent on each taking visible steps towards de-escalation.

To encourage momentum, it could be advisable to create a de-escalation mechanism that would facilitate dialogue and signalling between the opposing sides, enable discussion of any incidents and violations of the mechanism, and work out the technical details of implementing and following up on de-escalation and confidence-building measures.

Actions speak louder than words

While one step forward may be followed by two steps back, sending costly signals and undertaking de-escalation measures can break the cycle of tit-for-tat violence. Small, positive steps can be cumulative, creating the space, trust, and momentum for a more structured and ambitious agenda of, for example, agreeing on a sustainable ceasefire or negotiating a lasting political settlement. Conversely, failure to walk the walk should be called out and the party that fails to uphold its side of the deal should be clearly shown to be uncooperative.

If Russia and Ukraine are signalling that they are willing to talk, it is worth testing if these intentions are genuine. Confidence-building and de-escalation measures can create opportunities that could induce a degree of trust and nudge the parties toward peace. They are undoubtedly worth a try.