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Short of a Ceasefire: Managing, Restricting, and Stopping Violence between Russia and Ukraine

A ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine remains elusive. But there are ways of managing and reducing violence short of a ceasefire.

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Recent weeks have seen a flurry of shuttle diplomacy to stop the fighting in Ukraine. While the position of the United States has shifted away from demanding a ceasefire before talking about peace, at some point there will have to be a formal cessation of hostilities. Until that day comes, there are steps short of a ceasefire that could help to reduce violence and de-escalate tensions, at least in certain sectors and at certain times of the day or in key periods of the year, or that can protect civilians and critical infrastructure. This In Focus looks at a range of options that could be broadly categorised as a cessation of hostilities, or as ways to manage and restrict violence.

Talking while shooting

Ukraine and its allies have argued that there can be no negotiations until Russia stops shooting. Russia has said it is willing to have negotiations without preconditions, but shows no interest in stopping the fighting. Under such conditions, a logical approach would be to negotiate a ceasefire and a political framework at the same time – simultaneously, but separately – ultimately leading to a political settlement. Experiences in other parts of the world, such as between India and Pakistan, show that it is possible to shoot and talk at the same time.

Violence reduction measures

While negotiating a temporary or permanent ceasefire, there are steps that the warring parties could take to reduce violence. These include:

- "windows of silence" to repair critical infrastructure or collect and/or exchange dead and wounded;

- agreement not to attack certain types of critical infrastructure, such as nuclear power facilities (as has been attempted at the Zaporizhzhia power plant);

- agreement on specific safe zones, e.g. (a) maritime safety zones to enable the safe passage of shipping (such as the Black Sea Grain Deal); (b) evacuation routes to enable civilians to be safely evacuated; or (c) time-bound or geographic pauses when there would be a cessation of hostilities at specific times or in specific locations;

- temporary ceasefires or truces, e.g. calendar-linked (such as during holidays, harvest times, or back-to-school periods) or event-linked (prisoner exchanges or infrastructure repairs); and

- agreement not to use certain types of weapons or ammunition, such as multiple launch rocket systems in the vicinity of populated areas or cluster bombs.

Reciprocity and restraint

Such agreements short of ceasefires can be called many things, including de-escalation measures, "windows of silence" or truces. Not calling them ceasefires cuts both ways: on the one hand, there is a low political cost for entering into such violence reduction measures; on the other hand, exiting from such arrangements also has a lower political cost, yet it can harm the fragile "live-and-let-live" system of restraint.

Restraint may arise relatively spontaneously, and in response to certain local needs and conditions, or shared interests of the parties. For example, where

the parties are entrenched in close proximity over extended periods, they may realise the self-interest of mutual restraint rather than mutual punishment. Drone or artillery strikes will trigger a reciprocal response from the other side, whereas restraint could increase the chances of survival. The same logic applies to exercising restraint regarding long-range missile strikes that could provoke tit-for-tat responses. In other words, even in the hot phase of conflict, parties may seek to break an escalatory cycle of violence if there is a credible threat of reprisals. This harm-reduction logic can help to de-escalate tensions, at least in specific circumstances or locations, and create the conditions for a preliminary ceasefire. Reciprocal measures of restraint may also help to rebuild a minimal degree of trust and create a political environment more conducive to a sustainable ceasefire and settlement negotiations.

Stopping violence over the longer term

A temporary cessation of hostilities usually has the effect of containing rather than stopping violence. To be durable, violence-reduction measures usually need to be codified, and require a minimum degree of communication, predictability, and reciprocity between the parties. This includes written agreements, discipline along the chain of command (between local commanders and more senior officials), and an incident response mechanism to investigate breaches of the peace and reduce the likelihood of recurrence. The very process of negotiating such steps can open channels of communication between the parties, build a basis of common understanding and open possibilities for a more sustainable ceasefire. Due to a lack of trust, it may be necessary to involve third parties to act as facilitators and go-betweens, at least until the parties are willing to engage in direct communications/negotiations.

De-escalation for self-preservation

At the moment, it looks as though the fighting in Ukraine will only stop when both sides believe that the costs outweigh the benefits. The pressure of external actors seems insufficient. In the meantime, thousands of people are being killed every month, both soldiers and civilians. As described in this In Focus, there are ways of reducing this level of death and destruction short of a ceasefire. Such steps can also create conditions that could make a temporary ceasefire more likely. Therefore, it is vital to take steps to break rather than escalate the cycle of violence.