

## Playing with fire?

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**W**e know that we must not say more than we know and can stand for. We must not repeat stories that are questionable or simply gossip. We must be trustworthy and honour our words, and more. Yes, we know all the good deeds that we should cultivate in everyday life as well as in professional life, indeed in leadership posts and politics.

Words can move mountains, we sometimes say, referring to the power of religious belief and prayer. The messages of speech can rally people for good causes. But words can also be used destructively and negative propaganda can nurture hatred in people's hearts and minds, and related actions. And then, if words and ideas are that powerful, we should be careful about what we say, what ideas we propagate and the way we formulate our thoughts and advice for action.

Sometimes, one wonders if politicians remember these simple principles. Of course, they do. But they don't practice what they learnt at home, at school, in neighbourhood, at church and in the mosque; they may feel above some rules, indeed during election campaigns, but also while in power.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is one loud and bullying politicians who uses language he'd better refrain from. Before the recent election, he said that he didn't want Palestinians to have their own state. And then, after the election was over, and he had done well, he changed his statement, saying he wanted the agreed 'two-state solution' after all, but adding that the Palestinians should not be a security threat to the Israelis. That was then just a way of saying that it was in Israel's hands to decide when and if there was any prospect for honouring the words he had spoken words, even written down in agreements.

Such politicians are neither honest nor trustworthy. Well, we should probably have realized for a long time that Netanyahu is not for the 'two-state solution', in spite of what he and other politicians may have said before and are saying now. President Obama drew a similar conclusion in a statement this week.

But my intention was not mainly to focus on this specific, substantive topic; I intended to draw attention to serious issues where words must be used with the greatest care. What we speak must not be different from reality, not twisted, turned and changed. It must be a true representation of reality. We must not play with fire; we must not incite to unrest and conflict.

In Europe today, I am worried about how inflammatory language is used today as pertains to security, indeed the West's relationship with the East, more specifically Russia. I wonder if the European politicians can possibly mean what they say; and if they do, how have they and their advisers read and considered the facts.

It was a former colleague, a senior Norwegian diplomat, Ingunn Klepsvik, who made me realize the seriousness in the reckless language many Western politicians use about Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, and other parts of the former Soviet Union. The language and propaganda affects Russia psychologically, and the sanctions do it in economically. True, Russia's relations with Ukraine and other neighbours must become more equal. Strong and big countries must not bully small countries and regions, even areas within countries. I believe the West should have continued the positive cooperation it had with Russia from the 1990s. The West is responsible for having pushed Russia into a defence-type behavior. The West

seems to forget that Russia is a coming superpower, too, with China, but it will take some time. The West seems to have forgotten that Russia is capitalist, modern, and ambitious. But to reduce corruption and develop democracy further will also take time. That would only be natural after its regime-change from within. With a less hostile approach from the West, it would have been less painful and happened faster.

When some Western politicians suggest that Russia may attack militarily the Baltic States, which are now EU and NATO members, that can only be seen as whipping up scare in Europe. Russia did 'let them go' and become Western soon after the fall of the Soviet Union. There is no reason at all to believe Russia would use military force 'to get them back'. The whole NATO machinery would retaliate immediately, remembering, too, that the annual military budget of all NATO countries is about 990 billion dollars and Russia's, only about 10% thereof. No match!

In a short article on 21 March 2015, Professor Jan Oberg, a Dane heading the Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research (TFF) in Sweden, wrote: "Unless one considers Putin being clinically insane or suicidal there is no risk for an attack of the Baltic States, Denmark or any other country that NATO feels responsibility towards."

In a TV programme last week, Henry Kissinger, the conservative former American secretary of state and security adviser, said that the Western leaders and politicians should measure their words, and analyze issues more thoroughly before speaking. Kissinger said that if the European politicians are not more careful, we may enter a new Cold War, adding that it would be very, very likely.

When an old statesman like Kissinger speaks, we all listen. We remember he was the man who went with President Nixon to China in 1972, leading to normalization of Sino-US relations and opening up that country to a brighter future. He pioneered the policy of détente between the West and the Soviet Union, and he was crucial in negotiating the US withdrawal from Vietnam, for which he, controversially, received the Noble Peace Prize in 1973. Kissinger's analytical mind was always admired, till this very day, now when he is 91 years of age. I remember one of my professors in Oslo in the mid-1970s claiming with pride that Kissinger had adopted a phrase from his works, in spite of the two being far apart on the politically. In other words, Kissinger was and is a respected for his clear and logical thinking and ways of arguing, something which is indeed essential in practical *Realpolitik*.

We need level-headed politicians in our world today, as always. We need to talk about issues in real and practical ways – to improve relations between Pakistan and India, Iran and USA, Cuba and USA, Israel and Palestine and the rest of Arab World, and other issues that go across borders: religion, terrorism, immigration, class, race, gender, economy, and more. Most problems would be solved amicably if we could all be more level-headed and practical, put ourselves in the shoes of others, and search for fair solutions together. Russia and the former Soviet Union are part of this world even if they do things differently, sometimes. What kind of virtual border is it that we see between Europe and Russia? And, there are many things in the West, in an aging capitalist system that should be changed to serve the people better.

Let us not play with fire. Let us be pragmatic and realistic, and indeed truthful and honest in all our acts.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid