

Trump's Diplomatic Model

by George Friedman - June 30, 2025

U.S. President Donald Trump has developed a clear model for exercising diplomacy. He begins by making demands of other nations, then calls for negotiations. If the negotiations do not take place or fail to produce some kind of accommodation, he takes punitive action. All the while, he alternatively issues threats meant to intensify the process or encourages action by praising his antagonist.

This model was on full display during the recent episode with Iran. Trump demanded that Iran abandon its nuclear weapons program, threatening consequences if it failed to do so. He then engaged in indirect negotiations with Iran, noting publicly that the negotiations showed promise. At a certain point, he set a date for the negotiations' completion, and when that date passed, he took dramatic military action.

A similar process is underway with regard to NATO. He began by saying NATO was not living up to its military obligations and that this failure shifted the primary burden to the United States. He made clear that this situation could not continue, implying that the U.S. could withdraw from the alliance if Europe didn't pay its way in the future. Extensive negotiations took place, punctuated by periodic warnings from Trump. At last week's NATO meeting, European countries agreed to increase their defense spending to 5 percent of gross domestic product. Trump praised his negotiating partners and made it clear that the U.S. remained committed to NATO.

In both cases, there was a radical demand followed by a period of negotiation and signals of willingness to take drastic action if talks failed, or to reconcile if talks succeeded. In Iran, this process resulted in airstrikes. With NATO, it resulted in accommodation.

A similar pattern developed in Trump's efforts to reshape the global trading system. First came the shock of imposing dramatically higher tariffs globally. He then showed an openness to engage in negotiations on a nation-by-nation basis.

Then there is the case of Russia and Ukraine. The negotiation process started with yet another shock – this time to Ukraine, when Washington said it was prepared to reduce, if not abandon, its support for Kyiv. Trump then sought to open negotiations with Russia with a stunning desire for a settlement at Ukraine's expense. The purpose of the shock was to ease Russia's anxieties over its performance in Ukraine and to indicate that the United States was not going to take advantage of

those anxieties. In fact, Washington wanted Moscow to know it was prepared to offer economic benefits to Russia. Trump demanded talks to end the war. Russian President Vladimir Putin learned three things from this initial volley: that the U.S. was indifferent to the future of Ukraine, that Putin's military failure in Ukraine was unacceptable, and that Trump's indifference to Ukraine's future (and his hostility toward NATO) gave Putin time to improve his position in Ukraine. In other words, Putin could not allow the war to end based on his meager successes. He regarded the U.S. stance on NATO (and Trump's eagerness to settle) as an opportunity.

Importantly, efforts to end the war in Ukraine dovetail with the changes happening in NATO. One of the dimensions to Trump's reconciliation with the alliance is fear – Moscow's fear that NATO could act against Russia, and fear among NATO members of Russian aggression. In this sense, Trump's reconciliation with NATO could easily change the dynamics of the Ukraine war, placing Russia in a position where it could face a united NATO intervention or massive and coordinated aid for its adversary. Putin's refusal to negotiate an end to the war (partly because of the fragmentation of NATO) has been replaced by the need to consider what NATO, now including the U.S., will do. With the recent NATO love fest, Putin might be forced into the negotiations Trump wanted.

These are only a few cases, but they are important ones. Conventional diplomacy works to build stable and predictable relations between nations and eschews surprises and threats, viewing them as disruptive. Trump's model of diplomacy turns these conventions on their head by introducing shock and uncertainty as a basis for diplomacy and includes explicit and implicit threats, both military and economic, as the foundation of diplomacy. The case of Russia and Ukraine is still uncertain, and the economic dimension is still in its early stages. But it can be said that a model of Trump's approach to diplomacy is emerging.

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