

Trump's Crony Diplomacy

di Federico Fubini

Under President Donald Trump, entrusting inexperienced loyalists to handle issues of national and global concern has become the norm, and personal enrichment the through line of US foreign policy. The result is the Ukraine "peace deal" Trump's cronies cooked up.

MILAN – The most shocking feature of US President Donald Trump's [28-point peace plan](#) for Ukraine is not its explicit and extreme bias toward Russia, exemplified by the recognition of Russian sovereignty over occupied (and even unoccupied) Ukrainian territory and the diktat to downsize Ukraine's military radically. Rather, it is that the plan was devised by three operatives – two American, one Russian – whose experience lies in business, not diplomacy, and whose main qualification appears to be their close personal and financial connections to their respective countries' leaders.

On the US side, the plan's main author was special envoy Steve Witkoff – a billionaire real-estate developer, cryptocurrency mogul, and longtime Trump crony, who has emerged as the president's go-to adviser on sensitive global issues. Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner was reportedly also involved in the plan's creation, albeit to a lesser extent. Despite lacking any formal government authority, Kushner has regularly been enlisted by Trump to work on matters of war and peace.

Russia's main representative, Kirill Dmitriev, similarly lacks any official foreign-policy authority or diplomatic credentials, but is a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Dmitriev is not your typical Putin crony. The head of Russia's sovereign wealth fund, he got his start not in the KGB, but as a 14-year-old exchange student in the United States during the hopeful years of [Mikhail Gorbachev](#). He went on to study at

Stanford and Harvard, graduating to positions at McKinsey and Goldman Sachs. But his most important “qualification” is not listed on his résumé: his marriage to television presenter Natalia Popova, a close friend and business partner of Putin’s daughter, Katerina Tikhonova.

Witkoff, Kushner, and Dmitriev are what the social anthropologist [Janine R. Wedel](#) calls “transactors”: players who [operate](#) on both flanks of the public-private divide and advance, in collusion with players from the opposite side, personal agendas that supersede their countries’ interests or objectives. Their lack of formal credentials is not a bug but a feature, as it allows them to shift roles easily and act in nimble and unconventional ways.

The crony-style machinations behind the Ukraine peace plan are apparent in [leaked transcripts](#) of a phone call in which Witkoff appears to be advising a Russian official on how Putin should pitch a deal to Trump. In another call, Dmitriev is heard advising the same official to present “maximum” demands, an approach that is clearly reflected in the 28-point plan Dmitriev later drafted with Witkoff and Kushner in Miami.

For the US, this crony diplomacy is more than a departure from tradition; it is a renunciation of it. The US has highly experienced and meticulously structured diplomatic and intelligence services. Yet, under Trump, entrusting the leader’s family and friends to handle issues of national concern – with no accountability or transparency – has become the norm. The problem with this approach is apparent from the outcomes: never before have US negotiators acquiesced to such brazen demands, with such weighty consequences, as Kushner and Witkoff have.

Of course, previous US presidents have embraced informal diplomacy. In the run-up to World War I, President Woodrow Wilson had his friend Colonel Edward House act as his “agent” in talks with European leaders. In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton’s administration effectively outsourced its economic policy toward Russia to a small group of Harvard economists who enjoyed the trust of then-Treasury Deputy Secretary [Larry Summers](#).

But the shortcomings of this approach were apparent even then. Some of those handpicked Harvard economists violated ethics guidelines by investing in Russian securities while they advised Boris Yeltsin's government on privatization. (The university later paid a large settlement to the Department of Justice.) In the Trump administration's case, Secretary of State Marco Rubio had to be called in to reassure Ukrainian and European leaders, who were outraged by the Dmitriev-Witkoff draft "peace" plan.

But Trump is not about to second-guess his embrace of crony diplomacy. Throughout his political career, and especially since his return to the White House in January, Trump has overtly disdained ethics, accountability, and reliability, viewing his office as a tool to expand his personal wealth. While the details of Trump's business dealings remain opaque, self-enrichment may well be the through line of Trump's foreign policy – a pattern that authoritarian leaders around the world have undoubtedly noticed.

In April, Pakistan's government signed a controversial [investment deal](#) with World Liberty Financial, a cryptocurrency firm majority-owned by the Trump family, whose CEO is Witkoff's son, Zach. Around the same time, Trump introduced his "reciprocal tariffs," under which Pakistan received better treatment than many others, including India. In July, the Trump administration [announced](#) that it had reached a trade agreement with Pakistan.

In Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, as well as in Vietnam, the Trump Organization has cut deals worth billions of dollars with sovereign wealth funds and private local investors. Moreover, Kushner's Miami-based investment fund received billions of dollars from the Qatari and Saudi sovereign wealth funds, and from a prominent member of Abu Dhabi's ruling Al-Nahyan family. (Kushner went on to play a prominent role in the Gaza ceasefire negotiations.)

It is impossible to know what kinds of business deals Trump and his cronies will strike following a Ukraine peace deal, but the Dmitriev-Witkoff pact – which stipulates that the US will lead "efforts to rebuild and invest in Ukraine" – suggests that they will be lucrative. Trump-linked US firms may already be making deals in Russia.

While Trump's quest for enrichment is undeniable, it would be simplistic to say that this is the only reason he prefers informal operators and unconventional approaches. It is in the nature of personalist regimes to eschew experienced officials and established state institutions, in favor of "outsiders" who are loyal to the leader above all. The longer this goes on, the weaker America's democratic infrastructure will become, and the more unhinged its foreign policy will become.