

Trump, Cynicism and the Deal

di Walter Russell Mead

The great [Iran](#) deal is here, President Trump has declared.

Big if true, as they say on the internet. The agreement was announced and, according to Vice President JD Vance, “digitally” signed on Sunday, but the formal signing is scheduled for Friday. The text hasn’t been released, and Iranian and American officials describe its contents differently. The underlying issue—Iran’s drive for regional hegemony and the American determination to block it—remains unresolved. If anything Tehran appears more eager than before to assert control over its neighbors and the flow of oil from the Middle East. Moreover, Israel, which has its own war proceeding in Lebanon, wasn’t part of the negotiations.

The fate of Mr. Trump’s latest attempt to contain the political and economic fallout from the Iran war without openly abandoning his key objectives will become clear with time. In the short term, Mr. Trump has agitated and distressed the pro-Israel, hawkish wing of his political coalition, while reassuring his isolationist and anti-Israel supporters by demonstrating some distance between Washington and Jerusalem. With the Group of Seven summit under way, the president has calmed financial markets, talked down the oil price and given the leaders of allied countries reason to hope for a quick peace.

Mr. Trump has also preserved his freedom of action. The unusual interval between the dramatic announcement of a deal and its scheduled formal signing gives the president the option of walking away from the agreement if political blowback is too severe. Meanwhile, he has again seized center stage in global politics as virtually every government and every private business in the world hangs on his every word.

The memorandum of understanding is, in other words, a thoroughly typical example of Mr. Trump’s second-term diplomacy. He is driving world events with an agreement

that hasn't been formally signed, whose specifics are unknown and whose prospects are at best murky.

Viewed from that angle, this deal exemplifies both the strengths and the weaknesses of Mr. Trump's foreign policy. He is a master of political theater, producing, directing and starring in the greatest and most compelling spectacle of our time. Yet faced with opposition from serious and determined opponents, he often fails to achieve the kind of concrete results that mark the difference between a P.T. Barnum and an Otto von Bismarck.

Mr. Trump's greatest strength is also his greatest weakness. The president is a cynic. Unencumbered by deep convictions and free from the constraints imposed by conventional morality or codes of honor, he can alter his tactics to the exigencies of the moment without hesitation or scruple. Cynicism has its uses. No statesman can succeed without a healthy dose of it. But like most potent drugs, it works best in small doses.

Mr. Trump comes by his cynicism honestly—his career in New York real estate, casinos and reality television led naturally to a dark view of human nature. As his political power grew and so many early critics and opponents swallowed their principles to kiss his ring, Mr. Trump's intuitive belief that ideas and ideals don't matter was powerfully reinforced.

But cynicism has limits. A cynic would have predicted that Britain would throw in the towel in 1940. Adolf Hitler held more cards than Winston Churchill did. But Churchill rejected Hitler's peace offers and fought on to the end.

Mr. Trump's disregard for ideas, ideals and people who claim to believe in them leads him to underestimate the strength and determination of people who mean what they say. His failure to understand the power of nationalism blinded him both to the resilience Ukraine has demonstrated in its conflict with Russia and to Vladimir Putin's determination to pursue the struggle regardless of cost. Mr. Trump's peacemaking efforts as a result have fallen flat.

Ideas matter in the Middle East as well. However perverse and depraved the ideas that animate the Islamic Republic and Hezbollah, they inspire the kind of conviction

that motivates people to fight grimly on against the odds. In the end, Mr. Trump underestimated Iran's determination and resilience and launched a war that is proving much costlier and harder to end than he'd expected.

Mr. Trump's apparent contempt for ideals like democracy and the rule of law also costs him. Threats to conquer Greenland reduced his ability to call on allies in the Iran crisis. And the American failure to work more closely and effectively with pro-democracy Iranians gives the regime one less problem to worry about. Additionally, Mr. Trump's penchant for aggressively unpredictable course changes weakens the confidence of allies and bolsters cohesion among his opponents.

Mr. Trump is a supreme and often supremely successful opportunist. But that quality alone won't see him through the tests that lie ahead.