

NEWS ANALYSIS

Trump Bets on Diplomacy Without Diplomats

President Trump's most trusted envoys, Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, are at the center of the Iran and Ukraine negotiations.



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By David E. Sanger and Anton Troianovski

David E. Sanger reported from Berlin, and Anton Troianovski from Washington.

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Over the past year, the Trump administration has engaged in unconventional diplomacy, gunboat diplomacy and, in the most sensitive crises, diplomacy without diplomats.

On Tuesday, the administration tried all three tactics at once. In Geneva, President Trump's most trusted envoys — his real estate friend Steve Witkoff and his son-in-law Jared Kushner — engaged the Iranians in the morning, then the Russians and the Ukrainians in the afternoon.

It was a stark example of Mr. Trump's conviction that the State Department and the National Security Council, the two institutions that have coordinated negotiations over global crises for nearly 80 years, are best left on the sidelines. And so, the Witkoff-Kushner duo has been at the center of recent efforts to end a nuclear crisis in Iran that has stretched over two decades, and a war in Ukraine that is days away from entering its fifth year.

By all accounts, Mr. Trump has confidence in their approach, reinforced by their negotiations last year to win a cease-fire in Gaza and the return of all Israeli hostages held by Hamas. And countries like Russia, Turkey and the Gulf Arab

states have welcomed the arrival of the two men, with their transactional approach born of New York property negotiations, especially given the greater flexibility offered by Mr. Witkoff and Mr. Kushner.

They talk the language of deal makers, and do not spend much time lecturing on human rights or democracy building. And not infrequently, their interlocutors on diplomatic issues are closely linked to the business deals that the Trump and Witkoff families are negotiating.

“Some countries really welcome this informal structure at the Trump White House,” said Asli Aydintasbas, a fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington. But, she added, “I have not seen anyone hugely impressed with the diplomatic skills of the current team.”

One person close to the Kremlin said that Russian officials appreciated Mr. Witkoff’s warmth and enthusiasm for the negotiations, even as they sometimes doubted his reliability as a messenger. But he was clearly new to the issues dividing Washington and Moscow, and at first brought no other American experts into his negotiations.

More recently, the Russians have been happy to have Mr. Kushner’s involvement, the person said, because of his more organized and structured approach.

Some Russians have taken to calling the duo “Witkoff and Zyatkoff,” because “zyat” is Russian for son-in-law. The Iranians also have a nickname for Mr. Kushner, using the Persian word for son-in-law: Damad Trump, again defining Mr. Kushner’s influence by virtue of his marriage to the president’s daughter, Ivanka.

Iranian media have dedicated coverage and columns to Mr. Kushner’s participation. Ahmad Zeidabadi, a prominent political analyst and columnist, wrote in Asr Iran newspaper that Mr. Kushner’s participation in talks was something “positive.”

“He represents the pragmatic and softer side of Trump,” he said.

Mr. Kushner, in an interview last October, said that his and Mr. Witkoff's approach to diplomacy relied on being "deal guys" who "have to understand people." Mr. Witkoff was known in real estate circles for major transactions, including buying the Woolworth Building, once New York's tallest skyscraper, in 1998. Mr. Kushner followed his father, the real estate developer Charles Kushner, into the business and later expanded into private equity.

Mr. Kushner holds no official government title, and gets no government salary, while Mr. Witkoff is a U.S. "special envoy."

In Mr. Trump's first term, Mr. Kushner spearheaded the Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and several Arab countries — though his hopes of bringing Saudi Arabia aboard have not yet come to fruition. Last year, his efforts negotiating the cease-fire in Gaza drew praise even from some Democrats, for pushing closer to ending a war that President Joseph R. Biden Jr. could not.

Supporters of the administration see Mr. Witkoff and Mr. Kushner as ideal negotiators in part because their personal wealth, they say, makes them more resistant to corrupting influences. But both men face questions over apparent conflicts of interest.

Mr. Witkoff's son Zach is the chief executive of World Liberty Financial, the Trump family's cryptocurrency company. An investment firm tied to the United Arab Emirates purchased nearly half the company last year for \$500 million.

Mr. Kushner raised several billion dollars before Mr. Trump's second term from overseas investors, including government wealth funds in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, countries he had worked with when he served as a senior White House adviser during Mr. Trump's first term.

Yet as they engage with Mr. Witkoff and Mr. Kushner, the Russians and the Iranians share a strategy: delay.

At the Munich Security Conference last weekend, several participants on the edges of the negotiations over Ukraine, which Russia invaded four years ago next Tuesday, said repeatedly that Russia had every reason to engage in the

negotiations and little compelling reason to sign an agreement.

President Vladimir V. Putin believes he is winning, military and intelligence officials from several Western countries said in recent days. And he is convinced that even if it takes 18 months to two years to complete his hold on the Donbas region, each day of fighting and each night of Russian missiles and drones raining down on energy infrastructure and apartment buildings secure him more leverage.

For the Iranians, delay is the regime's last strategy for survival. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who was in Slovakia and Hungary early this week but is not participating in either of the Geneva negotiations, made the case for pessimism.

"It's going to be hard," he told reporters. "It's been very difficult for anyone to do real deals with Iran, because we're dealing with radical Shia clerics who are making theological decisions, not geopolitical ones."

But the commonalities end there. In the Iranian case, Mr. Trump is backing up his diplomacy with a threat of fairly imminent military action if there is no progress — maybe in days, perhaps in weeks. In the Russia-Ukraine case, he has slowed down the military pressure, halting the direct provision of arms to Ukraine that took place — with strong congressional support — in the Biden years.

The president has also cracked down on the Russian "shadow fleet" selling oil, exacerbating Mr. Putin's deepening economic troubles, even while the Trump administration floats ideas about U.S. investment in Russia if a deal, almost any deal, can be announced.

Given those dynamics, some analysts predicted that Mr. Putin could still make a deal to stop the fighting in Ukraine, especially if he secured a far-reaching rapprochement with the United States and a withdrawal of Ukrainian forces from the rest of the Donbas.

The negotiations with Iran are overshadowed by the size of the U.S. naval force — a "great armada" in Mr. Trump's telling — that is being assembled in the Red Sea, clearly positioned to strike if the president so decides. But the Iranians are hardly

de-escalating. They have temporarily closed the Strait of Hormuz because of Iranian live fire exercises, a not-so-gentle reminder of the country's ability to throw energy markets into chaos.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, did not contribute much to the spirit of finding a nonmilitary solution when he was asked about the presence of one U.S. carrier group and the arrival in a week or so of a second — a huge massing of firepower.

“An aircraft carrier is a dangerous machine, but even more dangerous than that is the weapon capable of sending it to the bottom of the sea,” he said as he commemorated the 1978 uprising that toppled the pro-American Shah of Iran. (The Shah's son, Reza Pahlavi, was in Munich over the weekend, at one of many large protests around the world that echoed his calls for the Iranian government's overthrow.)

Mr. Trump, meanwhile, has episodically complained that he is being “dangled” by Mr. Putin, and over the past year has at various points blamed the Ukrainians, then the Russians, then the Ukrainians again for being too inflexible in the talks.

He is now back to blaming Ukraine and its leader, suggesting they failed to recognize that Russia is the larger, and nuclear-armed, nation.

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