

Opinion **Donald Trump**

## Trump's waning sway over the world

The habitual trolling that serves him at home is sapping his potency on the global stage

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“Tweets don’t overturn signed agreements,” said a Saudi official last week. Amid America’s broiling ocean of surrealism, being instructed by a dynastic autocracy on the sanctity of the contract stands out.

Donald Trump had claimed to amend a US-Saudi nuclear deal on his Truth Social site the day after it was signed. That the deal was controversial is one thing. That he thought he could change it without asking the Saudis was another. Trump keeps making fantasy announcements. His grip on power is suffering as a result.

That might seem paradoxical for a US president who has done more than any other to create an all-powerful presidency. But power is the ability to shape the world to your advantage. This should not be confused with constantly declaring how powerful you are.

Force is one of many means to an end, not the end in itself. Sometimes, as with Iran, military action creates the opposite end to the one you desire. Trump's idea of power has led directly to his loss of ability to shape events in the Gulf.

That credibility drain is most visible in the markets. Early in Operation Epic Fury, Trump's words triggered big market swings. The promise of death and destruction in Iran or a pledge to talk to its regime would produce wild gyrations. The more Trump declares things that are obviously untrue — by repeating, for example, that Iran has agreed to all his terms — the fewer people believe him. My colleague Robert Armstrong's Taco motto (Trump always chickens out) has given way to a Wall Street shoulder shrug.

Like a drug addict upping the dose to regain that elusive high, Trump's response is to make his rhetoric even more outlandish. Weaning himself off that habit would be the product of taking stock, seeking better advice and sticking to decisions that would yield long-term outcomes. His words would gradually regain weight. Since Trump's learning curve is sloping downwards, we can assume he will do none of those things. The outlook for the rest of his term is thus tragicomic.

The comic bit is easier to foresee. In this moment of revived interest in Greek classics, Trump is like Icarus flying so close to the sun that his wings melted. History will record Trump's Icarus moment as February 28, the day the military campaign against Iran was launched.

That was when his bluster met reality. Others see that as the moment Trump betrayed his MAGA base by embarking on a forever war. But that was not at all what Trump had in mind. He thought he was starting a short war that he would easily win and which would once and for all fix the Middle East. Israel's leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, had assured him of that.

Having failed to bomb Iran into submission, Trump is trying to tweet the world into his own reality. Far from fixing the Middle East, he has globalised its pathologies. In this worsening context, fabulist postings are as hazardous to Trump's power as trying to win a war by air power alone. The rational step would be to talk to Iran privately, not to make announcements on social media. Like the Saudis last week, however, Trump talks to Iran through public bluster, which decreases the chances they will trust any deal they negotiate with him.

Trump's words are thus once again pushing what he wants beyond reach, which is a deal with Iran. Many have been tempted to declare Trump irrational and possibly crazy. The popular quote defining insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result is being cited even more than usual. Measured by diplomatic means and ends, Trump's actions are irrational. But that is not necessarily his yardstick. He continues to make big bucks from his presidency and to dominate public attention. Those two goals are always uppermost.

Trump's Saudi deal points to what to expect from the rest of his time in office. The agreement allows Saudi Arabia to develop a full-blown civil nuclear industry without international safeguards, including the right to enrich uranium at home.

By any geopolitical measure, this is nuts. Other countries will be encouraged to go nuclear and the UN inspection regime that has kept a lid on proliferation would go the way of the World Trade Organization and other former bulwarks of the "liberal international order". More importantly, it will increase Iran's temptation to dash for the nuclear bomb.

Yet, in Trump's terms, it makes sense. The Saudis keep directing business to Trump and his family. Plus their nuclear sector would be built by US companies, not the Russians, Chinese or French.

Trump's post-deal addendum was to say that Saudi Arabia must normalise relations with Israel. They could not possibly agree to this while Netanyahu opposes a Palestinian peace process. So in theory the US-Saudi deal is dead. A glance at Trump's motives tells us that he will find a way of letting it go ahead.

Here, in capsule form, is what to expect from a president intent on destroying his geopolitical credibility. The habitual trolling that serves him at home is sapping his potency on the world stage. But that will not prevent him from making bilateral deals. Quite the reverse.

Serious agreements that outlast Trump can be discounted. The hasty ones may prove bad for the US national interest but will routinely boost Trump's bottom line.

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