Opinion **US foreign policy**

Kushner and Witkoff’s blind amateurism

The misguided belief that dangling potential postwar profits can lead to peace has hampered US diplomacy from Ukraine to Gaza and Iran

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There is a reason why Marco Rubio runs from the sound of gunfire. Though he is America’s secretary of state and national security adviser — the first to combine those roles since Henry Kissinger — Rubio can sense a losing bet or three. Whether that is trying to broker a deal between Russia and Ukraine, nuclear talks with Iran or fixing Gaza, he lacks the real estate background that President Donald Trump wants in his negotiators. Politicians typically crave the limelight. That Rubio is unbothered by being out of it tells us quite a lot.

Jared Kushner and Steve Witkoff do know real estate — and they are both billionaires who mix business with politics. This gives them credibility in speaking for Trump. That is partly why both Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy treated them with such respect on their fruitless trip to Moscow and Kyiv last weekend. They come with tote bags of promised "win-win" investment booms that will flow from any deal. But their eyes might be bigger than their stomachs. Hammering out a deal that will stick is hard enough. If their true goal is dessert, however, they are likely to mess up the main course.

The core Kushner-Witkoff tactic is to seduce their interlocutors with the lure of postwar bonanzas. Why should Ukrainians and Russians keep killing each other when they could be partnering with the US to dig up critical minerals and build AI data centres? This misreads both men. Though estimates vary, Putin is worth a lot more than either of Trump's envoys, as well as Trump himself. Putin wants something that imagined post-ceasefire deals cannot buy, which is to reabsorb Ukraine into his cherished Russian motherland, in full or in part. Dessert is also not at the forefront of Zelenskyy's mind. His job is to defend Ukraine from Russia. In practice, business prospects keep Trump and his envoys in the game, not the other way round. Fixation on downstream benefits pushes them further from El Dorado.

A business reading of Russia-Ukraine tells you Russia matters more because it is bigger and has more natural resources. A war reading tells you that Ukraine has the edge as the defender. Ukraine is more innovative because it has to be. As the saying goes: "If Russia stops fighting, the war ends. If Ukraine stops fighting, Ukraine ends."

Having visited Russia seven and three times, respectively, in the past 18 months, Witkoff and Kushner should have made Kyiv the first stop on their recent shuttle. But they went first to Moscow. Then they presented Zelenskyy with a reportedly even tougher Putin offer than he had previously rejected. If the new terms looked like they were cooked up in the Kremlin, it was because they were.

The same applied to the sloppily translated 28-point Ukraine peace plan that Putin crafted for Witkoff last November. One of its points was that the US would mediate any dispute between Nato and Russia. This overlooked the fact that the US is still a Nato member. Even a novice would spot that trick. But Witkoff and Kushner seem as unburdened with geopolitical detail as they are knowledgeable about leveraged property deals. Subject-matter experts do not typically accompany them to negotiations.

Misplaced confidence in their grasp of the nuclear fuel cycle at the US-Iran Geneva meeting in late February contributed to Trump's decision to launch Operation Epic Fury two days later. Observers from Oman and the UK thought that Iran had opened with a workable gambit. Witkoff and Kushner did not see it that way. But a deal equal to or better than Barack Obama's was considered reachable if given time. It took 20 months for Obama to negotiate the 2015 US-Iran nuclear deal. US nuclear experts were involved at every stage. None joined Witkoff and Kushner in Geneva. If Trump could get today what Iran was offering earlier this year — diluting most of its fissile material under supervision — he would leap at it. Which is another way of saying that Kushner and Witkoff are not giving him much value for money.

The same applies to Gaza, which both men have depicted as an enticing waterfront. Kushner says Gaza "could be very valuable". Again, the president's son-in-law is distracted by money. He has suggested moving Gaza's population out of the strip in phases while it is rebuilt. Last week Kushner said Gaza was "basically built by NGOs and terrorists". In his view, property developers should take over. Like Witkoff, Kushner has renounced any personal business interests in the supposed coming Gaza boom. The White House reminds us that each is working without pay tirelessly for the US public.

Their conflict-of-interest pledge is nevertheless welcome. Kushner's overseas business record is not stellar. He has helped bring Albania to the brink of a colour revolution with his deal to build up to 10,000 luxury villas in a protected area of its coastline. The mass protests have adopted the flamingo, which can be found along the coast, as their mascot. "If it were not Jared Kushner . . . nobody would give a shit about flamingos," Albania's embattled prime minister, Edi Rama, told the FT. Kushner recently pulled out of a Trump Tower deal in Serbia in part due to a comparable backlash. "Albania is not for sale," says the normally pro-American Albanian street. If Trump's envoys would listen, other parts of the world are trying to tell them the same thing.

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