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Flags and portraits of fallen Ukrainian soldiers and volunteer fighters from foreign countries at a makeshift memorial in Kyiv on March 1. The manner in which US President Donald Trump has gone about his pursuit of peace in Ukraine has doubtless left much to be desired. Yet the arid reality is that his version of "diplomacy by shock therapy", as distasteful as it has been, did set things in motion, says the writer.
PHOTO: NICOLE TUNG/NYTIMES

# *What price peace? The Trump-Nobel poser*

Distasteful as his version of 'diplomacy by shock therapy' has been, the US President has kick-started action on resolving two major conflicts.

**Joseph Chinyong Liow**

As the world continues to adjust to the disruptive effects of the return of Mr Donald Trump to the Oval Office – and mind you, it has been barely two months since his inauguration – a letter has been submitted to the Norwegian Nobel Committee nominating the 47th President of the United States for the Nobel Peace Prize.

The nomination was made by Mr Darrell Issa, a Republican Congressman from California, and the basis for it is, in short: "Not since Ronald Reagan has an American president better represented the national resolve of peace through strength or the fundamental case for a world without war."

This is not Mr Trump's first nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. In fact, it is his fifth nomination since 2018. As for the man himself, the sitting American president clearly believes that he deserves the prize, and he has made that patently clear on numerous occasions. Particularly annoying for him is the fact that his predecessor during his first term, Mr Barack Obama, won the award in 2009 on the back of little more than a year in office and nothing by way of concrete global achievements up to that point, apart from eloquent speeches.

Is there a case for Mr Trump?

Parking aside his scorched-earth approach to global trade for the moment, Mr Trump's major foreign policy priority at this point is to bring an end to the two ongoing conflicts that have seized global attention, in Ukraine and Gaza, which he intends to accomplish "through strength". Clearly, those who had argued Mr Trump will be an isolationist president have been proven dead wrong.

At any rate, what does "peace through strength" mean?

## BIG STICK TO STOP BULLETS FLYING

Well, quite simply, it means that while desirous of peace, the US President is not averse to brandishing a stick in order to achieve it. Hence, his threat to Hamas of there being "hell to pay" if hostages are not released, and warning that the US "could do very bad things for Russia" by way of sanctions and financial pressure if it did not support the ceasefire deal with Ukraine that he has endorsed.

Furthermore, President Trump has commanded attention for how he is brandishing the proverbial stick in rather unconventional ways. On the Russian invasion of Ukraine, he had famously declared on the campaign trail that he would resolve the issue in a day. Well, it certainly has been more than a day, yet the war rages on. Suffice to say, the statement was, on the face of it, a gross exaggeration even for someone like Mr Trump who is given to hyperbole. But that is not the point.

The thing is, it was an unambiguous statement that his priority as US President will be to stop the bullets flying and to bring an end to the war; and he intended to do it, foremost, by parlaying his personal rapport with Russian President Vladimir Putin. In the meantime, he would certainly not pass on an opportunity to show up Mr Joe Biden, the man who he still believes stole the presidency from him in 2020, and who he has cast as weak for failing to stop the Russia-Ukraine war from breaking out in the first place.

Of course, the manner in which Mr Trump has gone about his pursuit of peace in Ukraine has doubtless left much to be desired. The public excoriation of his Ukrainian counterpart, Mr Volodymyr Zelensky, was unbecoming of a US president. The subsequent suspension of military assistance and intelligence sharing added to the impression of a US unbothered by the means it uses to achieve its goal, even if it meant throwing Ukraine under the bus. Friends and allies of America have surely taken note.

Yet the arid reality is that his version of "diplomacy by shock therapy", as distasteful as it has been, did set things in motion. President Zelensky has been forced to stand down on his bravado in order to seek a path back to the White House, which he has done by sending Mr Trump a conciliatory letter and accepting a US proposal for a 30-day ceasefire.

Meanwhile, progress towards a deal that would give Washington ownership of a considerable chunk of critical minerals has resumed, and in all likelihood will eventually be completed and signed. But the ceasefire proposal in no way ends the war (indeed, it is but the first step in what will likely be a pretty long process), and it still requires Russian acceptance, which is currently not forthcoming as President Putin seeks to revise the terms.

## TRUMP GAZA JOLT FOR ARAB LEADERS

And then, there is Gaza. On the occasion of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to the US on Feb 4, Mr Trump raised eyebrows with his vision for the resolution of the Gaza crisis. True to his New York real estate developer instincts, his idea was for Gaza to be developed into a luxurious "Riviera of the Middle East". What was mind-boggling about his plan was the astonishing assertion that the US would "take over the Gaza Strip" and relocate its two million Palestinian residents while the massive reconstruction effort, to the tune of more than US$50 billion (S$66.7 billion) paid for by "neighbouring countries of great wealth," kicks in.

The Trump proposal was met with expressions of concern from Arab states, no doubt worried that they would be forced to take in the exodus from Gaza. In response, they scrambled to cobble together a counterproposal, drafted by Egypt, which was unveiled at the Arab League Summit in Cairo on March 4. Among other things, the proposal mapped out the financing of reconstruction of Gaza, building of interim living facilities for residents (instead of relocating them), (post-Hamas) administration of the territory, and arguably the thorniest of them all, the future of Palestinian statehood.

**Whether anything substantive will come from Mr Trump's diplomatic activity in the Middle East or in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, we do not yet know. After all, it is still not certain at this point if his proposals in both scenarios will see the light of day. Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that his recent actions have forced all those with skin in the game to rethink their positions – positions which had hitherto risked hardening.**

Without buy-in from the US however, any peace plan in the Middle East would be dead in the water. And so it was: the plan was rejected by Washington (and Israel) in favour of "Trump Gaza". Arab states are now scrambling again, this time to recalibrate the plan in ways that are acceptable to the Trump Middle East team, led by Mr Steve Witkoff.

According to Mr Trump, his plan for Gaza derives from both a desire for peace and disgust at the grimly inhospitable conditions that now prevail in the territory. Shorn of its contrived glamour – caricatured to great visual effect by the bizarre AI-generated video of "Gaza Riviera" complete with a golden statue of the US President – the plan will surely face substantial obstacles.

Beyond its hefty price tag, the removal of Hamas from the administration of a new Gaza – to say nothing of keeping Hamas entirely out of the new Gaza, which is well-nigh impossible – will pose a considerable challenge. Meanwhile, the idea of relocating Gazan residents remains controversial to say the least. For Palestinians, no word elicits a more emotive response than "displacement".

For Arab states, none will be prepared to bear the burden of absorbing them, even in the face of threats to withhold aid, as Mr Trump had initially made to Egypt and Jordan. Indeed, it is perhaps with the realisation of how impractical such a move would be that Mr Trump appears to have walked back from this aspect of his plan. But again, the larger point is that President Trump has compelled Arab states to take greater ownership of the Palestinian problem in ways that no recent US president has managed to.

As it stands, whether Ukraine or Gaza, the path to peace is undoubtedly a tangled web of complexities with many moving parts, each with its own complications and contradictions. These conflicts certainly do not lend to straightforward solutions by any stretch of the imagination, and indeed, will test every ounce of President Trump's self-proclaimed deal-making "prowess".

## A FORCED RETHINK

But the fact of the matter is that things are going in the right direction, where stakeholders are indicating their readiness to do more than they had done before.

Let me be clear. I am not a fan of how Mr Trump is going about the business of diplomacy and the conduct of foreign policy. His weaponisation of global trade and interdependence will in fact undermine the interests of the American voter in the long run, erode the trust of its friends, allies and partners, and damage the standing of the US in the world. The manner in which he is conducting diplomacy is also disagreeable.

Whether anything substantive will come from Mr Trump's diplomatic activity in the Middle East or in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, we do not yet know. After all, it is still not certain at this point if his proposals in both scenarios will see the light of day.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that his recent actions have forced all those with skin in the game to rethink their positions – positions which had hitherto risked hardening.

## PEACE PRIZE PARADOX

This brings us back to Mr Trump's nomination for a Nobel Peace Prize. According to the will of Swedish industrialist Alfred Nobel, it should go to the person "who has done the most or best to advance fellowship among nations, the abolition or reduction of standing armies, and the establishment and promotion of peace congresses".

Paradox is built into the nature of the prize, started by the inventor of dynamite and castigated in his day as a merchant of death. It has been awarded 105 times between 1901 and 2024. Its winners have included non-controversial ones such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (three times) and Doctors without Borders, as well as others who have raised eyebrows if not outright condemnation.

These have included President Obama in 2009 (no record to speak of), human rights activist Liu Xiaobo in 2010 (a decision which Beijing criticised as a Western political attack on China) and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Israeli prime ministers Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin in 1994 "for their efforts to create peace in the Middle East", a decision which triggered protests, particularly over the choice of Mr Arafat, given his terrorist past.

Mr Trump clearly has more to do to "advance fellowship among nations" but given its record, the Nobel panel of judges have in the past also exercised a fair amount of elasticity in the idea of promotion of peace.

So does Mr Trump deserve the Nobel Peace Prize? It certainly begs the question as to whether his efforts to resolve the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, should they come to pass, eclipse the unquestionably discordant effect he has had on the world.

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