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Conducting diplomacy with America's showman-in-chief



With a president for whom every room is a stage, negotiating effectively can mean picking battles and taking wins behind the scenes. | REUTERS

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The international community often finds itself perplexed by the diplomatic style of U.S. President Donald Trump. One day he denounces an ally in the harshest terms; the next he signs what he calls the “best deal ever” with them. This political whiplash, from fury to friendship, may appear random, but it follows a recognizable pattern.

To understand how to navigate this presidency, world leaders must recognize that they are not dealing with a traditional statesman but with a showman whose approach draws from a deeply ingrained playbook. Trump’s diplomacy can be viewed through three lenses: the ruthless mentorship of his lawyer Roy Cohn, his use of provocative language and the theatrical instincts honed during his years as a reality television star.

The foundation of Trump’s worldview owes much to Cohn, the infamous political fixer who became his lawyer and mentor. As Pulitzer Prize-winning author Kai Bird details in his recent biography, “American Scoundrel: Roy Cohn’s Dark Journey from Joe McCarthy to

Donald Trump,” Cohn was a master of ruthless tactics and media manipulation. Trump regularly sought his advice, absorbing not just his mannerisms but elements of his combative philosophy.

The central tenet of what might be called the “Cohn Doctrine” is brutally simple: Never admit defeat, never apologize and, under almost all circumstances, declare victory.

This philosophy, as Bird’s book illustrates, is less about achieving a conventional victory than about controlling the narrative. For Cohn, the court of public opinion could matter more than a court of law. Trump has carried a similar instinct into politics and diplomacy.

That means negotiations can become opportunities for personal triumph. Leaders dealing with Trump therefore have an incentive to give him room to present an agreement as a victory, even when both sides have made concessions.

We have seen variations of this approach around the world.

Consider Ukraine. In early 2026, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was subjected to a humiliating public dressing-down at the White House. Yet within months, Trump was again speaking warmly of him.

Zelenskyy managed the reversal with patience. Rather than escalating the public feud, he worked through partners and diplomatic channels to repair the relationship. He gave Trump room to pivot without forcing him to acknowledge that his position had changed.

For Zelenskyy, the objective was not winning an argument with Trump. It was preserving the American support crucial to Ukraine's survival. He understood that accommodating the showman's need for a dramatic arc could serve his country's interests. He also knows he may have to repeat the exercise.

Japan, under both Shinzo Abe and Sanae Takaichi, offers another example of managing Trumpian diplomacy. Trump has repeatedly criticized Japan over trade and defense, and has even invoked Pearl Harbor while discussing the alliance.

Japanese leaders have generally responded with strategic deference rather than public confrontation. Abe famously cultivated a close personal relationship with Trump, while Tokyo emphasized investments, defense spending and economic cooperation that could be presented as advancing American interests.

Takaichi has followed a similar course. When confronted with provocations such as Trump's Pearl Harbor remark, she declined to

turn the comment into a public dispute. The objective was not to answer every rhetorical provocation but to preserve access and channel the relationship toward Japan's strategic priorities.

Japan's approach recognizes a distinction that is essential when dealing with Trump: His rhetoric does not always translate directly into policy. Reacting publicly to every insult risks elevating the rhetoric while making substantive negotiation more difficult.

Canada illustrates the risks of a more confrontational approach.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and members of his government repeatedly pushed back publicly against Trump. After visiting Trump at Mar-a-Lago following the 2024 U.S. election, Trudeau subsequently lamented Kamala Harris' defeat as a "setback" for women's progress. Whatever the merits of the sentiment, it was unlikely to improve his relationship with the incoming president.

His successor, Prime Minister Mark Carney, initially adopted a more disciplined approach but has increasingly responded publicly to Trump amid deteriorating relations between Ottawa and Washington.

At Davos, Carney declared a "rupture" in the international order. More recently, speaking in Quebec after Canada-U.S. trade negotiations

broke down, he questioned Washington's reliability, saying Canada was finding dependable partners "everywhere in the world, except in the United States. Except in the United States. And Russia."

Two days earlier, when a reporter suggested Canada appeared to be entering a trade war, Carney replied: "You're at war when you get attacked. We got attacked."

Such rhetoric creates precisely the kind of public confrontation in which Trump thrives. Insults, counterinsults and displays of defiance can transform a substantive disagreement over tariffs or security into a personal contest played before domestic audiences.

That does not mean allies should simply surrender to Trump's demands. Zelenskyy, Abe and Takaichi demonstrate something subtler: A government can protect its interests while avoiding a public battle over who has prevailed.

Three principles follow.

First, understand the importance Trump places on victory. Leaders need not concede their substantive interests, but they can frame agreements in ways that allow Trump to describe the result as

strengthening the United States. The packaging of an agreement can sometimes be separated from its substance.

Second, distinguish provocation from policy. Trump's rhetoric is often aimed at a domestic audience and designed to attract attention.

Publicly rebutting every taunt can amplify it and turn a manageable dispute into a test of wills. Quiet diplomacy, backchannels and private negotiation may accomplish more.

Finally, be proactive. Rather than waiting for Trump to make demands, governments can present initiatives in defense, trade or technology that advance their own interests while also fitting his political priorities. In effect, they can help construct the victory Trump will inevitably want to announce.

The lesson is one of strategic realism. Trying to force a conventional diplomatic framework onto an unconventional presidency is unlikely to work. Nor does effective diplomacy require foreign leaders to admire Trump or accept every demand.

It requires understanding how he operates.

The most successful leaders will not necessarily be those who defeat the showman in public. They will be those who let him take his bow