How Trump turned insults into tools of US diplomacy

written by Prof. Kobi Michael | 05.02.2026

Modern Western diplomacy has traditionally emphasized restraint, indirection, and the careful management of language. Diplomatic practice favored criticism of policies rather than personalities, avoidance of overt humiliation, and the cultivation of influence through legitimacy and attraction—what is commonly termed "soft power." Even in periods of acute disagreement, leaders generally sought to preserve decorum, recognizing that respect and predictability help sustain alliances and international stability. Political correctness and legalistic discourse in recent decades further reinforced these conventions.

Critics have long argued that excessive caution may weaken deterrence or obscure strategic "red lines." Yet even these critics rarely advocated abandoning civility altogether. The diplomatic style associated with President Donald Trump represents a far more radical rupture with these norms, replacing restraint with confrontation and calculated disrespect.

Historically, humiliation has often served as a political instrument. Ancient empires publicly degraded defeated enemies; sacred objects were seized, rulers paraded in chains, and ceremonies staged to symbolize submission. Modern history also contains examples of symbolic degradation designed to assert dominance. Yet these practices were usually reserved for wartime or its aftermath. Trump's innovation lies in integrating humiliation into routine peacetime diplomacy.

From the outset of his presidency, Trump adopted a public style characterized by blunt language, personal insults, exaggerations, and threats. Adversaries were labeled with derisive nicknames—"Rocket Man" for Kim Jong-un, for example—while entire regions were disparaged in coarse terms. More strikingly, such rhetoric was not confined to rivals. Allies were treated similarly. European leaders were publicly belittled for alleged weakness or dependence on the United States. NATO partners were accused of "free-riding," and long-standing security commitments were described as unfair burdens rather than shared responsibilities.

His treatment of France's president Emmanuel Macron illustrates this pattern. Trump repeatedly mocked Macron's domestic political difficulties, minimized France's military contributions, and implied that Paris depended entirely on American protection. At public events and on social media, he portrayed Macron not as a partner but as a subordinate. Comparable behavior was directed at Germany's Angela Merkel, Canada's Justin Trudeau, and other democratic leaders, often through personal jabs that blurred the line between diplomatic negotiation and public shaming. Such conduct signaled that even close allies were subject to coercive pressure and symbolic degradation.

This rhetorical strategy frequently relied on questionable or inflated claims. A notable example concerns Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system. Trump asserted that the system was essentially based on American technology and implied primary U.S. ownership of the achievement, despite the broad recognition that Iron Dome represents a distinctly Israeli innovation developed by Israel's defense industries, albeit with important American financial support. The statement reflected a broader tendency to appropriate allies' successes in order to reinforce narratives of American primacy.

Trump's speeches, including high-profile international forums, often amplified this approach. Instead of coded diplomatic language, he employed ridicule and intimidation to project dominance. These choices appear deliberate rather than impulsive. They form part of a coherent worldview that challenges the post-1945 liberal order. In this conception, international politics is hierarchical and transactional: legitimacy derives from power, not norms; alliances are conditional bargains; and respect is extracted through pressure rather than earned through cooperation.

Trump's diplomatic style therefore represents more than unconventional behavior or rhetorical excess. It reflects an attempt to normalize insult, humiliation, and coercion as legitimate tools of statecraft. Whether such tactics strengthen deterrence or instead erode trust, weaken alliances, and accelerate fragmentation of the international order remains uncertain. What is clear, however, is that this approach marks a substantive transformation in the language and practice of contemporary diplomacy.

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