

Trump Team Undermines Climate for Summit and Negotiated Solution

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(Washington, D.C.)—Even before Thursday’s announcement by President Donald Trump to cancel the planned Singapore Summit with North Korea’s Kim Jong Un, there was ample reason to believe that the two sides were not on the same page about the pace, scope, and sequencing of steps to denuclearize the Korean peninsula and create a peace regime in the region.

It was also clear that the Trump administration itself was not on the same page about the goals of the meeting, nevertheless, the summit would have been a critical opportunity to test the waters, de-escalate tensions, and launch a sustained, serious diplomatic process on denuclearization.

Whether by accident or by design, Trump’s top advisors contributed to creating a hostile environment around the summit. It is unsurprising that loose talk from National Security Advisor John Bolton and Vice President Mike Pence about “the Libya model” for denuclearization and recent comments from Pence threatening war if North Korea does not agree to a deal triggered a strong reaction from Pyongyang.

The tone of North Korea’s reaction was clearly unhelpful, but it is not surprising.

Unfortunately, Trump got spooked when he should have stayed calm and carried on.

His strongly worded letter to Kim canceling the summit was irresponsible and risks the opportunity for future negotiations with North Korea. His language comparing nuclear weapon sizes only increases the likelihood that the United States and North Korea will return to a tit-for-tat escalation that characterized 2017 and increase the risk of war.

North Korea has long maintained that its nuclear weapons are a deterrent against U.S. "hostile policy." Threatening "total decimation" if Pyongyang does not give up its arsenal only reinforces that belief.

Comprehensive, verifiable denuclearization of North Korea and establishment of a peace regime on the peninsula remains the proper long-term goal. But achieving genuine progress requires a negotiating framework and agreement on the details of phased, reciprocal steps rather than U.S. economic rewards only after full denuclearization is achieved. Such a process requires time and patience and persistence.

Successful diplomatic nonproliferation outcomes do not come easily or quickly.

In the coming days, Trump must resist the urge to abandon diplomacy and make irresponsible threats, which will only reinforce North Korea's incentive to further improve its nuclear and missile activities and greatly increase the likelihood of a catastrophic confrontation. There is no viable military solution to the North Korean challenge.

We urge Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in coordination with our allies and partners in the region, to continue engaging with his North Korean counterparts to advance efforts to halt and reverse the DPRK’s nuclear and missile programs and to reduce tensions with Pyongyang, including by supporting the inter-Korean dialogue.

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