

# Korea Summitry

## Avoiding Catastrophic Failure and Catastrophic Success

May 25, 2018

Incoming U.S. presidents enjoy a good deal of discretion, but they have no choice when it comes to the problems they inherit. You cannot pick your inbox, only what to do about it.

It was inevitable that the 45th president of the United States was going to face a [North Korea](#) that had accumulated a small arsenal of nuclear weapons, along with ballistic missiles able to carry them long distances. In the first year of Donald Trump's presidency, Pyongyang made this reality abundantly clear by carrying out its sixth (and most powerful) nuclear test and a number of ballistic-missile launches. Trump reacted by criticizing his predecessors for allowing this perceived threat to develop; aiming tough (and at times insulting) talk at North Korea's young leader, [Kim Jong Un](#), while also expressing a willingness to meet with him directly; and organizing a successful push for United Nations-backed sanctions designed to bring North Korea either to the negotiating table or to its knees.

For a while, this effort appeared to be working. After a series of unprecedented diplomatic contacts involving the United States, North Korea, South Korea, and China, the White House announced that a summit between Trump and Kim was scheduled for June 12 in Singapore. North Korea instituted a freeze on nuclear and ballistic-missile tests, shut down a nuclear testing site, and released three American prisoners.

It all came to an abrupt halt on May 24, when Trump called off the summit. Although he attributed his decision to the "tremendous anger and open hostility" in North Korean official statements, the more likely explanation for

the about-face was that it had become increasingly apparent that the summit would fail, given that North Korea would not agree to completely dismantle its nuclear arsenal and capabilities.

For all the drama of the past months, little has changed. The United States still needs to do something to reduce or eliminate the threat posed by North Korea's growing ability to put nuclear warheads