

## Missed opportunity: on cancellation of Trump-Kim summit

American President Donald Trump's abrupt decision to call off his planned June 12 meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore has not only dashed hopes of a breakthrough but also heightened risks of a confrontation on the Korean peninsula. It brings a very unusual spell of diplomacy full circle. Unlike the standard practice of announcing landmark summits after working out an understanding on the agenda through quiet diplomacy, Mr. Trump accepted Mr. Kim's invitation in March and let it be known to the public immediately. That was surprising given the acrimony in both Mr. Trump's and Mr. Kim's public utterances over the past year. Once Mr. Trump had cleared the summit proposal, North Korea also moved fast, making a series of gestures meant to smoothen the path for the meeting. In end-April, there was a summit between Mr. Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-in at a border village in the demilitarised zone. The North pledged to halt nuclear and missile tests, and released three Korean-Americans. And, hours before Mr. Trump cancelled the summit on Thursday, it dismantled its Punggye-ri nuclear test site — critics say it was already inoperable, but that was a symbolic gesture nonetheless.

The United States should have taken into account these steps by the North rather than harp on the rhetoric. It could also have made some goodwill gestures to lighten the air, such as cancelling a joint military exercise with South Korea. But it went ahead with the military drill, with Pyongyang slamming both Washington and Seoul even as preparations for the summit were under way. Besides, Mr. Trump's new National Security Adviser, John Bolton, angered the North Koreans by suggesting that Mr. Kim could follow the 2003 Libyan disarmament model. This was followed by Vice President Mike Pence's threat that Mr. Kim could meet the same fate as Muammar Qadhafi — who was killed by rebels after a NATO-led invasion in 2011 — if he failed to reach a deal with the U.S. This triggered the unravelling of the summit, with the North once again warning the U.S. of a nuclear showdown. Despite the setback, hopes for an eventual one-to-one meeting still exist. In a letter to Mr. Kim, Mr. Trump said the North was welcome to return to talks if it changed its attitude towards the U.S. Pyongyang also issued a conciliatory response, saying that it hoped the U.S. President would reconsider his decision to "unilaterally" cancel the summit. Both Mr. Trump and Mr. Kim should keep in mind the larger goal of de-escalation of tension, if not outright denuclearisation, on the peninsula and work to reschedule the summit. The only sound way to address the Korean nuclear crisis is diplomacy.

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