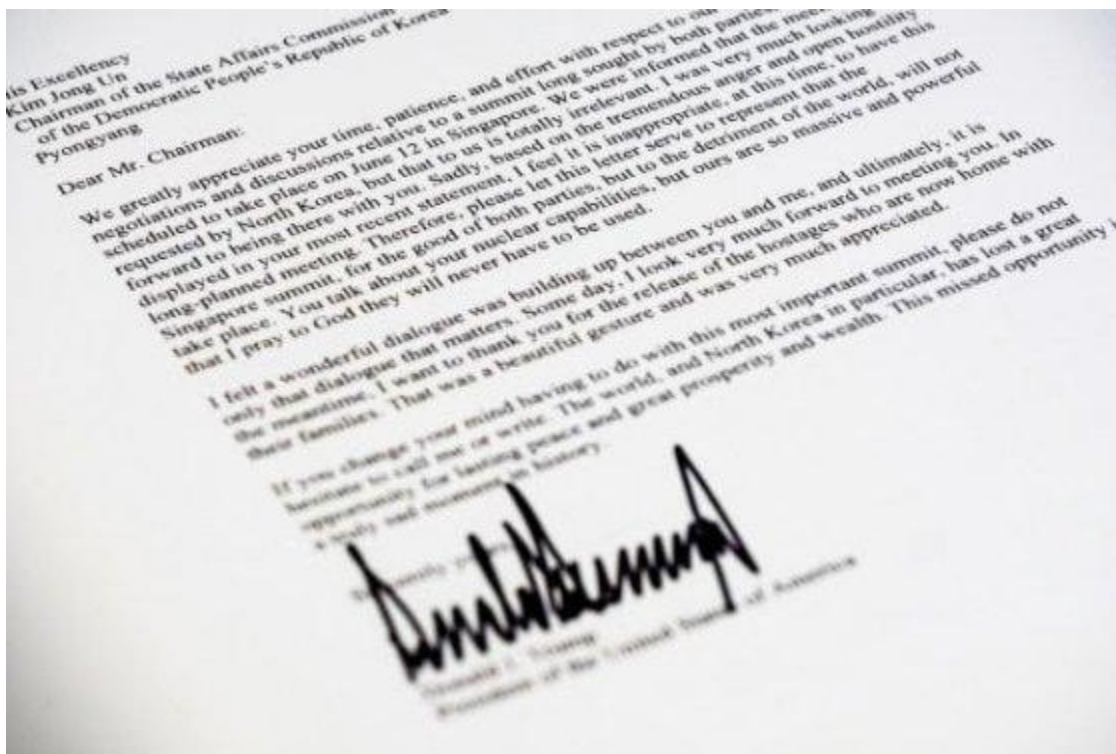


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It's not like before on the Korean Peninsula

by [Anne Applebaum](#)



A copy of the letter sent to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un from President Trump canceling their planned summit in Singapore. (J. David Ake/Associated Press)

It was mocked when it first appeared a few days ago. But now the White House commemorative coin — the one struck to mark the great peace summit between President Trump and “Supreme Leader” Kim Jong Un — will go down in history. Like the famous “[Inverted Jenny](#)” — a 1918 stamp with the image of an airplane printed upside down — the coin has already become a collectible. It pompously [marks an event](#) that isn’t going to happen, and its price will rise sharply as a result.

The other results of the canceled summit are less amusing. Remember, Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal [didn't automatically return](#) the Middle East to where it was before the pact was signed in 2015: It returned us to a worse place. We're now unable to reimpose sanctions on Iran because the coalition that enforced them is broken. Trump's withdrawal from the Kim summit doesn't return the Korean Peninsula to status quo ante either. Even if he returns to the negotiating table next month, we do not live in the same world that we lived in on March 7, the day before a plan for the now-canceled summit was [announced](#). Actions have consequences. Here's a list of them.

We don't have the credibility that we had before. This is the most important consequence of Trump's impulsive decisions, first to agree to a summit with no warning, and then to cancel the summit with no warning. The one "card" the United States has always held on the Korean Peninsula was its military presence, coupled with the presumption that, if provoked or attacked, U.S. forces would respond. Now that it's clear how eager Trump was for a summit, how much he wanted the Nobel Peace Prize that Fox News promised him, and how rapidly [he pivoted](#) from calling Kim "[Rocket Man](#)" and "[maniac](#)" to "[very open](#)" and "[very honorable](#)," any further bluster from the president will just sound ludicrous.

A U.S. president's ignorance has been on naked display. I was with apolitical Polish friends in Warsaw just after the summit cancellation was announced. Normally they don't pay much attention to North Korea, but this time they were filled with questions: Doesn't Trump have any advisers? Kim is a famously unpredictable leader from a famously unpredictable country; shouldn't someone have warned the president that Kim might start spouting threats again? It's easy to forget, inside the United States, that everyone else around the world is also watching the president, also following his thoughtless actions, and also drawing the conclusion that he's not listening to expert advice, or any advice. Other national leaders — in Russia, China, Europe — who may negotiate with the United States in the near future are also watching, and also drawing conclusions: This is a man who is easily tricked, easily swayed — and easily spooked into changing course.

The North Korean leader's prestige and legitimacy are enhanced. The bizarre language of [Trump's letter to Kim](#) is worth a few moments of analysis. "I was very much looking forward to being there with you," wrote the U.S. president to one of the bloodiest dictators on the planet. "I felt a wonderful dialogue was building up between you and me." He also thanked Kim for the [release of three American hostages](#) — "a beautiful gesture" — which ignores the fact that it was the North Korean police who brutally and illegally captured the hostages in the first place. Like all dictators, Kim is perennially insecure; now he has less reason to be so.

The maintenance of sanctions is now more difficult. Sanctions are a tricky diplomatic tool: They only stand a chance of succeeding if the sanctioned country believes that they will be imposed consistently, unanimously and over a long period. The United States has proven itself to be an inconsistent player; the president cannot be trusted to follow any course for a long time; he might abandon or reverse policy on the Korean Peninsula at any moment. As was the case with Iran, the whiplash changes in U.S. policy leave regional allies in an impossible position. He either forgot or didn't bother to tell the South Koreans that he was changing his mind. Why should South Korea, or indeed China, pay the economic price of sanctions if the United States might

drop the ball again at any moment? Everyone now has reasons to strike separate deals with North Korea, to cut out the United States and ignore our interests. Whatever happens, our Asian alliances are weakened.

The story might have other weird side effects. It could emerge that national security adviser John Bolton was trying to sabotage the summit through reckless commentary. Yes, there are always a lot of different voices on U.S. foreign policy; it's not unusual for Congress or state officials to strike different notes.

But in this administration, it isn't even clear that people in the Executive Office Building share the same strategy. Worse, it is not even clear that the president himself knows what the strategy is.

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