

The Madman Strategy 狂人戰略

C. Douglas Lummis

Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 10, Issue 54 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.

C. Douglas Lummis

A US Strategic Command document declassified a few years ago contains the following passage:

"While it is crucial to explicitly define and communicate the acts or damage that we would find unacceptable, we should not be too specific about our responses. Because of the value that comes from the ambiguity of what the US might do to an adversary if the acts we seek to deter are carried out, it hurts to portray ourselves as too fully rational and cool-headed. The fact that some elements may appear to be potentially "out of control" can be beneficial to creating and reinforcing fears and doubts within the minds of an adversary's decision makers. This essential sense of fear is the working force of deterrence. That the US may become irrational and vindictive if its vital interests are attacked should be a part of the national persona we project to all adversaries."

Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger called this the Madman Strategy. For nuclear weapons to serve as a deterrent, it's not enough simply to possess them. The problem is, it's difficult to believe that a person of ordinary human feeling or rationality would actually use them. A first strike would be a moral abomination, and would also mean abandoning the policy of deterrence; a second strike would mean that deterrence had failed, so that its only motive would be vengeance. For nuclear weapons to be an effective deterrent, it's best for a government to persuade adversaries that its leaders are crazy enough to use them - as the document says, "out of control", "irrational and vindictive".

Thus it's not a question of who is the US president. Whoever is president, the Madman Strategy is US policy. And it has succeeded, in that adversaries are persuaded that there are people in the US government mentally deranged enough to use the Bomb. I am also persuaded. After all, the US is the only country to prove itself capable of doing it by actually doing it. Twice. Thus when the US threatens a country with nuclear attack, which it often does, the threat is fully believable.

One country whose leaders surely believe in the reality of US nuclear threats is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. After all, during the Korean War General Douglas MacArthur contributed to the effectiveness of the Madman Strategy by openly advocating a

massive nuclear attack on the North. And for the six decades since then the DPRK has lived under the threat of US nuclear attack: the Republic of Korea and the surrounding seas are littered with probably thousands of nuclear devices aimed at the North.

And whether intentional or not, the government of the DPRK has also gotten pretty good at projecting the Madman national persona to its adversaries. As I write (12 April, 2013) the US and the DPRK are engaged in the most dangerous nuclear standoff since the Cuban missile crisis. DPRK representatives are saying they are ready to launch a nuclear attack. US representatives are saying they probably won't do it, because they are rational enough to understand that it would mean suicide. Of course the US itself would be the agent of that "suicide" by launching a vengeance attack.

During most of the six decades that the DPRK has been under threat of US nuclear attack it was without any nuclear deterrent capability of its own. Does such an experience improve one's rationality, or does it bring on a slow version of PTSD: paranoia, attacks of rage, sudden uncontrollable violence? That is, does it create a government capable of coolly acting out the Madman Strategy, or does it create a genuine madman?

In September 2000, as the ROK's Sunshine Policy was just getting started, a neoconservative US think tank called The Project for the New American Century, of which Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz were prominent members, published a paper titled "Rebuilding America's Defenses." It contained the sentence "...in any realistic post-unification scenario, U.S. forces are likely to have some role in stability operations in

North Korea."

In this view, "reunification of Korea" meant "US military occupation of the North." After George W. Bush was elected president two months later, this document pretty much became US defense policy.

Two years later, on 29 January, 2002, President Bush declared that Iraq, Iran, and North Korea formed an "axis of evil". Then the US began preparations to invade the first country on that list. Significantly, it invaded Iraq only after it was assured by the UN Weapons Inspection Team that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction: no "deterrent".

Surely the DPRK officials watched these developments closely. Presumably the lesson they drew from them was, countries on the "axis of evil" list that have no nuclear deterrent are going to get invaded by the US.

In January, 2003, when it had become clear that the US was going to invade Iraq (two months before it actually did so), the DPRK announced its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

"Axis of evil" was a George W. Bush slogan, but again it seems not to matter who is president. Last month the US military in the ROK staged a mock nuclear attack on the DPRK using B3 bombers, and carried out a war game on the scenario of invading that country. Pressuring the DPRK to the point of regime collapse, and then invading, is still the US model for reunification, and nuclear terror is still an

option. The response of the North is to adopt the strategy used by every country that possesses nuclear weapons: nuclear deterrence. Certainly they are making threats and taking risks that seem quite mad, but is this a dangerous overuse of the Madman Strategy, or have six decades of living under US nuclear threat driven them mad?

C. Douglas Lummis, a former US Marine stationed on Okinawa and a present resident of Okinawa, is the author of [Radical Democracy](#) and other books in Japanese and English. A Japan Focus associate, he formerly taught at Tsuda College.

This is an expanded version of an article published in Korean in the ROK newspaper Kyunghyang Shinmun.

Asia-Pacific Journal articles on related subjects:

Peter Hayes and Roger Cavazos, [North Korean and US Nuclear Threats: Discerning Signals from Noise](#)

Morton H. Halperin, [A New Approach to Security in Northeast Asia: Breaking the Gridlock](#)

Peter Hayes, Chung-in Moon and Scott Bruce, [Park Chung Hee, the US-ROK Strategic Relationship, and the Bomb](#)

Jeffrey Lewis, Peter Hayes and Scott Bruce, [Kim Jong Il's Nuclear Diplomacy and the US Opening: Slow Motion Six-Party Engagement](#)

Paik Nak-chung, [Reflections on Korea in 2010: Trials and prospects for recovery of common sense in 2011](#)

Anthony DeFilippo, [The Peace Deal Obama Should Make: Toward a U.S.-North Korea Peace Treaty](#)

Peter Hayes, [Extended Nuclear Deterrence, Global Abolition, and Korea](#)

Peter Hayes and Michael Hamel-Green, [The Path Not Taken, The Way Still Open: Denuclearizing The Korean Peninsula And Northeast Asia](#)