



Testing the Madman Theory: Do Leaders Perceived as Mentally Unstable Do Better in Conflict Bargaining?

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Background

President Nixon coined the term “Madman Theory” to describe his belief that being viewed as mentally unstable is an asset in coercive bargaining (Haldeman and DiMona 1987). Nixon’s belief was in keeping with views expressed by scholars such as Thomas Schelling, who wrote, “Many of the attributes of rationality...are strategic disabilities in conflict situations. It may be perfectly rational to wish oneself not altogether rational” (1960, 18). However, Nixon’s madman strategy did not help him win in Vietnam (Sechser and Furhmann 2017), and perceived madness has been used as justification for preventive attacks against leaders such as Saddam Hussein. Since President Trump’s election, there has been increased interest in the Madman Theory, but it remains poorly conceptualized and has never been empirically tested.

Defining Madness

In order to more systematically theorize about the impact of perceived madness, I consider how madness can be defined in rationalist terms. My general definition is deviation from typical preferences and behavior. Within this definition, I consider three possible types of madness:

- **Abnormally belligerent preferences** – Very low cost of war, high tolerance for risk, or high value for the issue at stake.
- **Random decision-making** – Making the decision to launch an attack at random.
- **Irrational aggression** – Always attacking, regardless of the situation. Differs from the first type of madness in that there is no instrumental rationality.

Impact of Perceived Madness

In general, perceived madness might be expected to increase a leader’s success at peaceful coercion if it increases the expected probability that the leader will follow through by attacking a country that does not comply with its deterrent or compellent threat. However, perceived madness might also increase the expected probability that a leader will attack even if the country **does** comply with the leader’s deterrent or compellent threat. This would undermine deterrence and compellence.

Based on this general logic, I develop the following predictions:

| Type of Perceived Madness | Effect on Deterrence | Effect on Compellence |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Abnormally Belligerent Preferences | Ambiguous, likely harmful at the highest levels | Ambiguous, likely harmful at the highest levels |
| Random Decision-Making | Harmful in most scenarios | Purely harmful |
| Irrational Aggression | Purely harmful | Purely harmful |

The predictions about the impact of perceived madness are primarily negative, but some uncertainty remains. There is ambiguity within some boxes in the table, and due to imprecise use of the term madness in public dialogue, there is also uncertainty about exactly which boxes are most crucial for evaluating the Madman Theory. Given this remaining ambiguity, it is particularly important to test the Madman Theory empirically as well.

Measurement

For my empirical analysis, I measure perceived madness based on perceptions reflected in the press. I used Lexis-Nexis to identify all instances in which national leaders were described using a synonym for madness (crazy, insane, or irrational) between 1986 and 2010. I tally the uses of these adjectives by leader-year and normalize by expected news reports. The leaders with the highest average perceived madness scores are:

- Bucaram Ortiz (Ecuador)
- P.W. Botha (South Africa)
- Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Iran)
- Saddam Hussein (Iraq)
- Itamar Franco (Brazil)
- Jamil Mahuad (Ecuador)
- Kim Campbell (Canada)
- Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe)
- Kim Il-sung (North Korea)
- Kim Jong-il (North Korea)
- Pratap Singh (India)
- Thabo Mbeki (South Africa)
- Muammar Qaddafi (Libya)
- Hugo Chavez (Venezuela)

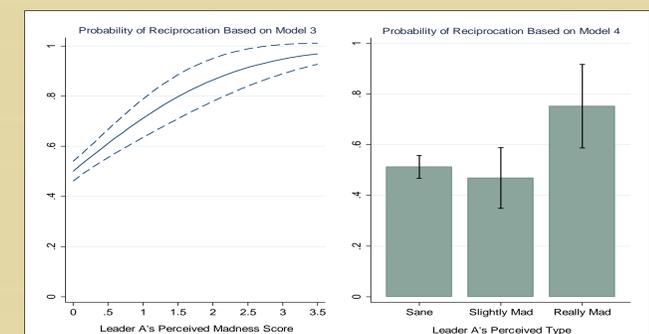
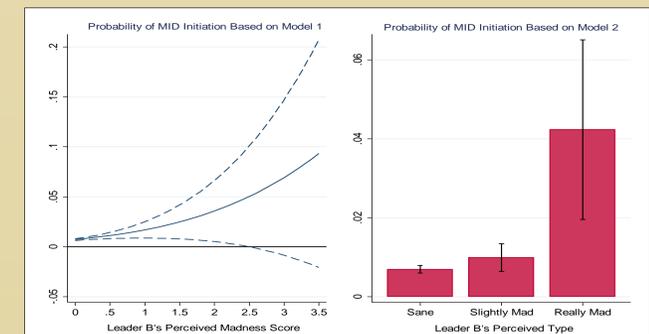
Research Design

I study the impact of perceived madness on deterrence success by analyzing the effect of the measure above on the probability of MID initiation (Palmer et al. 2015) in a dataset of directed dyad-leader-years (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009). I study the impact of perceived madness on compellence success by analyzing the effect of the measure above on the probability of MID reciprocation in a dataset of dyadic MID.

I use a continuous perceived madness measure in some regressions and dummies for “really mad” and “slightly mad” leaders in others. The madness variables are lagged.

Results

Leaders with higher perceived madness are significantly more likely to be targeted in MID (i.e., more likely to fail at deterrence) and significantly more likely to have the MID they initiate reciprocated (i.e., more likely to fail at compellence). Both results are robust to a variety of tests, including controlling for other leader characteristics and matching. However, the compellence result is less robust to dropping outliers.



Conclusion

There is no evidence in support of the Madman Theory. Rather than improving success at deterrence and compellence, perceived madness appears to be harmful. My results suggest that sane leaders who achieve conflict bargaining success by pretending to be mad are rare, at best.