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The Perils of Mixing Masculinity and Missiles

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By Carol Cohn

President Trump makes the job of a feminist security analyst almost too easy. No subtle teasing out of subtexts required with this guy.

Something seemed to click for people across the political spectrum this week, even among those least inclined to see the world through a gendered lens: When Mr. Trump tweeted, “I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!” the nuclear saber-rattling at Kim Jong-un of North Korea sounded a lot like, well, penis-measuring.

Sad. But significant? From most commentators, the response has been an eye-rolling dismissal of Mr. Trump’s tweet as “juvenile” — yet one more impulsive, impolitic, dangerous and unpresidential act by a president like no other. But methinks not only that the president doth protest too much about his “Nuclear Button,” but also that many commentators are still missing the point. This is not simply a trivial, if embarrassing, sideshow.

Ideas about masculinity and femininity *matter* in international politics, in national security and in nuclear strategic thinking. Mr. Trump — with his fragile ego and his particularly obsessive concern with his

reputation for manliness — may have brought these dynamics to the surface, but they have been there all along, if in less crude and lurid ways.

I started thinking about this over three decades ago, when I was working among civilian nuclear strategists, war planners, weapons scientists and arms controllers. What struck me was how removed they were from the human realities behind the weapons they discussed. This distancing occurred in part through a professional discourse characterized by stunningly abstract and euphemistic language — and in part through a set of lively sexual metaphors.

The human bodies evoked were not those of the victims; instead, there were conversations about vertical erector launchers, thrust-to-weight ratios, soft lay downs, deep penetration and the comparative advantages of protracted versus spasm attacks — or what one military adviser to the National Security Council called "releasing 70 to 80 percent of our megatonnage in one orgasmic whump."

But it quickly became clear that the role of gender in national security discourse went deeper than not-so-subtle metaphors. Even more disturbing was how it shaped what could be said, or even thought, within the confines of these male-dominated spaces. "What are you, some kind of wimp?" was an insult readily lobbed at anyone who urged restraint in responding to a provocation or attack. Discussion of whether political leaders "had the stones for war" suggested that the desire to solve a conflict through nonmilitary measures would mean you were less than fully manly. During the Cuban missile crisis, when Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze disparaged some of President John F. Kennedy's more cautious decisions by calling him a "pantywaist," he made it clear that anyone who let himself be governed by fear of setting off a nuclear war was a sissy.

Overt impugning of masculinity is still only the most surface level at which ideas about gender play out in strategic thinking. They work in deeper, more subtle ways too. The culturally pervasive associations of masculinity with dispassion, distance, abstraction, toughness and risk-taking, and of femininity with emotion, empathy, bodily vulnerability, fear and caution, are embedded within the professional discourse.

And there they function to make some kinds of ideas seem self-evidently "realist," hard-nosed and rational, and others patently inadmissible, self-evidently inappropriate. (One white male physicist told me that he and colleagues were once modeling a limited nuclear attack when he suddenly voiced dismay that they were talking so casually about "only 30 million" immediate deaths. "It was awful — I felt like a woman," he said.)

In other words, embedded ideas about gender in nuclear strategic discourse go beyond questions of whether a button is more than just a button. They act as a deterrent to more holistic, and therefore truly realistic, thinking about nuclear weapons and the holocaust that would result from their use.

Mainstream national security analysts have been reluctant to think seriously — or at all — about the ways that ideas about gender shape national security. So if Mr. Trump's disparagement of Mr. Kim's manhood somehow does not wind up bringing us yet closer to war with North Korea, then perhaps he has in one sense done us a favor. He has made it glaringly evident that while the literal button or penis size of Mr. Trump or Mr. Kim matters not at all, their need for the world to believe that they are manly men does.

What we now need to remember is that Mr. Trump is, in this respect, not an exception. Yes, the fear of being perceived as unmanly may be closer to the surface in Mr. Trump. And it may drive his statements and actions in ways less leavened by cognitive capacity and attention span, or by empathy and the ability to imagine the impact of one's actions on others, or by intelligence or prudence.

But this is not about individual men or women. Ideas about masculinity and femininity already distort the ways we think about international politics and national security. And they matter. They mattered before Mr. Trump, they matter now, and they will matter after Mr. Trump, if he is somehow kept under control and there is an after. Most national security analysts, from the academy to the mass media to the executive branch, have ignored this reality for too long, to all of our peril.