Winston Churchill once said that Russia is "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." That's in many ways still true. However, Russia is a complete open book compared to the Hermit Kingdom.

The latest development in the ongoing saga of North Korea is Kim Jong-Un's threat to attack Guam. If he was capable of that (and he very well might be), would he actually do it?

That sort of question is the domain of intelligence analysts and others who engage in psychological profiling. One public source of information on this is the Unit for the Study of Personality in Politics [2], a research project directed by psychology professor Aubrey Immelman. The unit has a page dedicated to Kim Jong-Un [3], which has been updated sporadically as more information has become available.

The team's initial assessment, published in April 2013, was that Mr. Kim is a congenial-cooperative leader, displaying traits such as agreeableness, charm, and a need for external approval. The team concluded that Mr. Kim's personality was inconsistent with North Korea's continued belligerence, which made the profilers wonder if somebody else was actually running the country.

This was a perfectly decent psychological profile, but it certainly seems to be wrong. In August 2012, a writer for Foreign Policy warned [4], "The North Korean regime will not change because Little Kim studied in Switzerland, likes Mickey Mouse, and has a hot wife." Indeed, North Korea's aggression has only increased in the years since.
Kim Jong-Un: An Updated Psychological Profile

In April of this year, Prof. Immelman's team updated Mr. Kim's profile with another detailed assessment. Once again, they found that the dictator's personal psychological profile is rather benign and similar to that of recent U.S. presidents, specifically in areas such as aggressiveness and cooperativeness. In fact, the authors conclude that “at worst, [he has] only a moderate predisposition to aggressive behavior.”

This is difficult to believe, however, given that Mr. Kim murdered his half-brother, Kim Jong-Nam, with VX nerve agent\(^5\) in February. But the profilers would likely warn us that it is very easy to conflate an individual leader’s psychological profile with the actions of the regime. It is possible, for instance, that Mr. Kim's advisors told him to murder his half-brother, and he did so. Without access to classified information -- which the authors do not have -- trying to decipher the behavior of such an enigmatic figure is like reading tea leaves.

Would Kim Jong-Un Attack Guam?

What can a psychological profile tell us about whether Mr. Kim would attack Guam? Not much, it seems. Even if it is true that Mr. Kim is not personally aggressive, it has become clear that he has allowed his regime to behave that way. North Korea is armed to the teeth, and it may even possess a biological weapons program\(^6\).

When a person with big guns and bombs makes threats, we should take him seriously. We don't need a psychological profile to reach that conclusion.

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