

Intelligent Intelligence

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The need to curb Iran's ambitions remains as strong as ever

The National Intelligence Estimate, a consensus view of 16 American agencies, that Iran appears to have halted its drive to acquire nuclear weapons has wrongfooted politicians in both the West and the Middle East. Many of those trying to halt Iran's efforts to build a bomb have been dismayed by what they see as a judgment that may lessen the pressure on Tehran. President Bush insisted that Iran remained a danger but said the US was counting on diplomacy to resolve the standoff. Britain called for continued EU and United Nations pressure, which it said had been shown to be effective by the US report. And commentators in Israel, which has been pressing for action to disable Iran's nuclear programme, admitted that its campaign could be damaged.

However awkward the NIE report may be, coming only weeks after Mr Bush's warning that a nuclear-armed Iran could start a third world war, its publication has real merit. First, it demolishes the argument by some Administration opponents that the White House ignores or suppresses intelligence assessments that run contrary to its views. Secondly, it guards against future accusations that policy towards Iran would be based on faulty assessments similar to those which concluded that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. And thirdly, it undermines claims by hardliners in Iran that the West is bent on military action and that the views of pragmatists can be ignored. Indeed, the report raises the question whether President Ahmadinejad, like Saddam Hussein, has deliberately encouraged Western suspicions of Iran's intentions to bolster his position at home. Like Saddam, he may have known that Iran had reacted to earlier Western warnings, but concealed this in order to harness Persian nationalism to his hardline stance.

The danger of the NIE report, however, is that it will be misused. In America, Democrats will seize on it to try to ridicule warnings of the threat posed by Iran. That would be a serious misreading of the report which suggests that the nuclear programme has been delayed, not abandoned and ignores the widespread concerns among Iran's Gulf neighbours at its aggressively nationalist policies. At the United Nations, China and Russia, which have vetoed proposals for tougher sanctions, will argue that the report has undermined the West's case. On the contrary, it has made plain how international pressure can influence policy in Tehran. It is therefore no time to relax that pressure. And in Tehran itself it will embolden the hardliners, who may insist that the West has lost its appetite for confrontation and so further restraint is now needed.

Mr Bush was right to insist yesterday that diplomacy will remain the priority. In truth, the likelihood of a US military strike was always slim, given Iran's ability to sabotage peace in Iraq. In recent months there has been a drop in Iran's sponsorship of terrorist activity there, and Washington is unlikely to jeopardise this welcome change at a pivotal moment. That does not hold true of Iran's backing for Hamas and Hezbollah. Israel still sees Iran as a mortal threat. It should not conclude from the report, though, that it must now act alone to deal with Tehran's ambitions. The NIE has upset many assumptions. What it has not done is diminish the international need to hold Iran to its commitments on nuclear proliferation and regional peace.

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