

'High Confidence' Games

Contributed by WSJ
Wednesday, 05 December 2007

In his press conference yesterday, President Bush went out of his way to praise the "good work" of the intelligence community, whose latest National Intelligence Estimate claims the mullahs of Iran abandoned their nuclear weapons program in 2003. "This is heartening news," Mr. Bush said. "To me, it's a way for us to rally our partners."

We wish we could be as sanguine, both about the quality of U.S. intelligence and its implications for U.S. diplomacy. For years, senior Administration officials, including Condoleezza Rice, have stressed to us how little the government knows about what goes on inside Iran. In 2005, the bipartisan Robb-Silberman report underscored that "Across the board, the Intelligence Community knows disturbingly little about the nuclear programs of many of the world's most dangerous actors." And as our liberal friends used to remind us, you can never trust the CIA. (Only later did they figure out the agency was usually on their side.)

* * *

As recently as 2005, the consensus estimate of our spooks was that "Iran currently is determined to develop nuclear weapons" and do so "despite its international obligations and international pressure." This was a "high confidence" judgment. The new NIE says Iran abandoned its nuclear program in 2003 "in response to increasing international scrutiny." This too is a "high confidence" conclusion. One of the two conclusions is wrong, and casts considerable doubt on the entire process by which these "estimates" -- the consensus of 16 intelligence bureaucracies -- are conducted and accorded gospel status.

Our own "confidence" is not heightened by the fact that the NIE's main authors include three former State Department officials with previous reputations as "hyper-partisan anti-Bush officials," according to an intelligence source. They are Tom Fingar, formerly of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research; Vann Van Diepen, the National Intelligence Officer for WMD; and Kenneth Brill, the former U.S. Ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

For a flavor of their political outlook, former Bush Administration antiproliferation official John Bolton recalls in his recent memoir that then-Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage "described Brill's efforts in Vienna, or lack thereof, as 'bull - -.'" Mr. Brill was "retired" from the State Department by Colin Powell before being rehired, over considerable internal and public protest, as head of the National Counter-Proliferation Center by then-National Intelligence Director John Negroponte.

No less odd is the NIE's conclusion that Iran abandoned its nuclear weapons program in 2003 in response to "international pressure." The only serious pressure we can recall from that year was the U.S. invasion of Iraq. At the time, an Iranian opposition group revealed the existence of a covert Iranian nuclear program to mill and enrich uranium and produce heavy water at sites previously unknown to U.S. intelligence. The Bush Administration's response was to punt the issue to the Europeans, who in 2003 were just beginning years of fruitless diplomacy before the matter was turned over to the U.N. Security Council.

Mr. Bush implied yesterday that the new estimate was based on "some new information," which remains classified. We can only hope so. But the indications that the Bush Administration was surprised by this NIE, and the way it scrambled yesterday to contain its diplomatic consequences, hardly inspire even "medium confidence" that our spooks have achieved some epic breakthrough. The truth could as easily be that the Administration in its waning days has simply lost any control of its bureaucracy -- not that it ever had much.

In any case, the real issue is not Iran's nuclear weapons program, but its nuclear program, period. As the NIE acknowledges, Iran continues to enrich uranium on an industrial scale -- that is, build the capability to make the fuel for a potential bomb. And it is doing so in open defiance of binding U.N. resolutions. No less a source than the IAEA recently confirmed that Iran already has blueprints to cast uranium in the shape of an atomic bomb core.

The U.S. also knows that Iran has extensive technical information on how to fit a warhead atop a ballistic missile. And there is considerable evidence that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps has been developing the detonation devices needed to set off a nuclear explosion at the weapons testing facility in Parchin. Even assuming that Iran is not seeking a bomb right now, it is hardly reassuring that they are developing technologies that could bring them within a screw's twist of one.

Mr. Bush's efforts to further sanction Iran at the U.N. were stalled even before the NIE's release. Those efforts will now be on life support. The NIE's judgments also complicate Treasury's efforts to persuade foreign companies to divest from

Iran. Why should they lose out on lucrative business opportunities when even U.S. intelligence absolves the Iranians of evil intent? Calls by Democrats and their media friends to negotiate with Tehran "without preconditions" will surely grow louder.

* * *

The larger worry here is how little we seem to have learned from our previous intelligence failures. Over the course of a decade, our intelligence services badly underestimated Saddam's nuclear ambitions, then overestimated them. Now they have done a 180-degree turn on Iran, and in such a way that will contribute to a complacency that will make it easier for Iran to build a weapon. Our intelligence services are supposed to inform the policies of elected officials, but increasingly their judgments seem to be setting policy. This is dangerous.

December 5, 2007; Page A24, Wall Street Journal

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB119682320187314033.html?mod=opinion_main_review_and_outlooks&apl=y&r=929653