

Nuclear deceptions

Contributed by Kenneth Timmerman for The Washington Times
 Saturday, 08 December 2007
 Last Updated Sunday, 09 December 2007

By Kenneth R. Timmerman - Somehow, this music is familiar. The Islamic Republic of Iran, once thought to be working on nuclear weapons, has seen the folly of its ways. Without saying a word to anyone, it has canceled clandestine work on the bomb, but our sharp intelligence warriors learned all about it and have now warned the White House and Democrats in Congress:

Iran is no longer a threat. The world can sleep soundly at night. Behold, it's Peace in Our Time.

The truth, of course, is far more nuanced. What the latest National Intelligence Estimate on Iran actually said for the first time in an official, United States government document released to the public, is that Iran was actively pursuing nuclear weapons in 2003.

The NIE also said Iran continues to enrich uranium and will have enough highly enriched material to make its first bomb by the end of 2009. Or by 2013. Or perhaps 2015. It all depends, we are told, on just how much progress the Iranians have made in this part of their program.

That uncertainty — which is absolutely critical — concerns the one part of Iran's nuclear programs that is open and has been declared (since 2003) to the International Atomic Energy Agency.

If the U.S. intelligence community can't give us a reliable estimate on the status of that declared program, how can they state with “high confidence” that Tehran halted a clandestine nuclear weapons effort in fall 2003? If Iran actually stopped something, we don't know what it is. Because, of course, what they stopped was covert and has never been declared or inspected.

But we do know quite a lot. We know, for example, that Iran announced last week the successful test of a new, multistage, solid-fuel missile, the Ashoura. This new missile is said to have a range of about 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles), and brings most of Europe into range of Iran.

Why is this new missile important? For one simple reason, according to Israeli missile expert, Uzi Rubin. “A solid-propellant, multistage missile is the big milestone on the way to developing an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile,” he said at a conference hosted Tuesday by the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs. If the Iranians can make the Ashoura fly, “they will have achieved the capability” of launching ICBMs at Europe or the United States.

Why would Iran want to develop an ICBM without a nuclear warhead? That question was not addressed in the National Intelligence Estimate, according to the declassified summary released Monday.

There are many additional questions raised by the NIE that should give us pause.

Here are just two:

(1) The information that Iran stopped some unspecified nuclear weapons work in autumn 2003 seems based on a single, unvetted source — an Iranian defector who provided information to a foreign intelligence service. What confidence do our intelligence analysts have in this defector? With the CIA's miserable track record in dealing with Iranian defectors, I suspect I know the answer.

(2) What about the possibility of strategic deception? We are told the National Intelligence Council considered this possibility, and ultimately rejected it. And yet, Iranian and Russian intelligence services have a deep, longstanding relationship. Let's not forget that the Soviets invented the entire art form of maskirovka as a means of gaining strategic surprise.

Iran's new nuclear “negotiator,” Saeed Jalali, recently told the European Union's Javier Solana that Iran now intended to “go back to Square One” in its nuclear negotiations with the West. This was before release of the NIE.

Was it just a coincidence that Mr. Jalali then flew to Moscow on Dec. 3, where he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin and top national security adviser, Valentin Sobolov? My Iranian sources tell me there was a great deal of gloating

behind those closed doors in Moscow about how the Iranians had managed to put one over on us.

President Bush had it just right at his press conference Tuesday. Setting aside the questions raised by the accuracy of the NIE, the one thing everyone agrees on is this: Iran continues to enrich uranium, and that gives Iran the capability to make weapons should they so choose. What we can't do today any better than we could two years ago — or ever — is read into their minds to discern intent.

And yet, this is precisely where the NIE falls down. It attempts to ascribe peaceful intentions to Iran's leaders — intentions that fly in the face of their words, their actions, and their proven capabilities.

Kenneth R. Timmerman is president of Middle East Data Project Inc. and author of “Countdown to Crisis: The Coming Nuclear Showdown with Iran.”

Published in the 12-07-2007 issue of The Washington Times

<http://washingtontimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071207/COMMENTARY/112070021/1012&template=printart>

<http://washingtontimes.com/article/20071207/COMMENTARY/112070021/1012>