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CIA let mullahs off hook

THE AUSTRALIAN

Greg Sheridan, Foreign editor | *December 13, 2007*

I DON'T think I have ever seen anything quite so foolishly irresponsible by an American administration in the field of diplomacy as last week's release of the US National Intelligence Estimate on Iran. There is a dismaying clumsiness and stupidity about it, a kind of reckless disregard of allies and consequences, which is both bewildering and bizarre.

There are times when even the Bush administration's best friends, and this column has been among them, shake their heads in simple disbelief.

Why am I so down on this report?

There are three elements. First is what the report said. Second is the way it said it. And third, the manner of its release.

On the first question, I don't necessarily disbelieve what the report said. Nor do I necessarily believe it. The report's most contentious finding was that Iran had given up its nuclear weaponisation program in 2003. The report, which represented the consensus view of 16 US intelligence agencies, concludes with "high confidence" that Iran gave this up in 2003 and did so as a result of international pressure.

It is worth noting that in 2003 the US-led coalition, of which Australia was part, invaded Iraq. Iran was scared of the Americans then and it is not inherently implausible that Tehran did suspend its specific weapons design program.

At the moment I am in Israel and it is fair to say that the Israelis don't believe this is true. I spoke this week to Israel's Security Affairs Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, and asked him whether he thought Iran today was pursuing nuclear weapons. His answer was straightforward: "Of course."

But leaving Israeli input aside entirely, the NIE report itself says it has only "moderate confidence" that Iran has not restarted the weaponisation program. It also assesses that at the very least Iran is working towards having the capacity to produce nuclear weapons, and on the current track should be able to do so by between 2010 and 2015.

How can this be so if Iran has abandoned its weaponisation program? It is so because to produce nuclear weapons you need three things: weapons grade nuclear material, either plutonium or enriched uranium; a delivery system, normally ballistic missiles; and an actual weapon or trigger.

Of the three, by far the easiest to produce is the weapon itself. By far the hardest is the weapons grade nuclear material. Iran is going flat out to produce as much of this weapons grade nuclear material as it can. It is enriching uranium at maximum speed. It is producing nuclear fuel even though it has no nuclear power stations. It is also developing ballistic missiles which have no strategic purpose other than to carry nuclear weapons.

Iran may possibly have suspended the weaponisation program in 2003, and may even still have it suspended, because that will be the easiest part of the process to complete once it has the weapons material and missiles.

Certainly I do not believe the US intelligence agencies are making this up or telling intentional lies. They have some human intelligence from one or more Iranian defectors they have encouraged in the past couple of years. There is always the chance that this is Iranian disinformation. And we can infer that the intelligence is very incomplete because the NIE only has moderate confidence that Iran has not recommenced its weaponisation program.

This brings us to the second consideration: how the report was written. Almost the first thing you learn in journalism is that the lead par, the intro, is the most important part of any piece you write. It would have been possible for the NIE to present exactly the same information as it did in this report, but to do so in a way which generated the opposite headlines to those which this report generated.

The headlines around the world were that Iran is no longer a nuclear threat. Yet that is the opposite of the NIE's lengthy consideration of Iran's uranium enrichment program or indeed of its missile efforts. And it ignores the report's only moderate confidence that Iran has not recommenced actual weaponisation.

Thus, in generating headlines the opposite of its overall conclusions, the report was either written with monumental incompetence, or, much more likely, with an overtly political purpose.

The CIA has been in semi-open revolt against the Bush administration for years now. I may be an old-fashioned sort of a fellow but it has always seemed to me that an American citizen had two alternatives in life. Either he could campaign publicly against the president, or he could be a secret intelligence officer. The CIA has apparently decided you can do both, simultaneously. Imagine the outcry if there were a liberal Democrat president and right-wing elements of the intelligence community were constantly leaking and briefing against the administration.

So here is the third question: why did the Bush team handle the report in such a fantastically incompetent fashion? Everyone was burned by the intelligence failure on Iraq. But this does not give the US intelligence community the right to run an insurrection against the civilian authority it reports to, nor to try to set foreign policy through tendentious and sensationalist wording of reports.

It seems no one in the White House was keeping a serious track of the report as it was being developed. Once the report was written and finalised it probably had to be released or it would have been leaked.

But it was only a matter of weeks ago that George W. Bush was saying Iran's nuclear ambitions could lead to World War III if the world did not take strong action to stop it. At the very least, Bush should have demanded that the NIE present the same information in a less sensationalist way, or in a different order. This is not so that information could be distorted, but rather that its public reception would reflect its real content.

Instead, Bush has been personally humiliated, exactly at a time when he has been regathering his international authority. Bush's humiliation may please many people, but the standing and credibility of the US president is a vital factor in global security.

Further, France's Nicolas Sarkozy and British and German leaders, who had worked to build international diplomatic pressure on Iran, are also humiliated.

Bush has once more hurt his friends and delighted his enemies. Russia and China, just about convinced of the need for sanctions on Iran to stop uranium enrichment, are now dancing away, entirely off the hook of responsibility.

Iran itself is delighted. Tehran has a long and well-documented history of cheating and lying on nuclear matters. But now half the world thinks that US intelligence has given Tehran a clean bill of health.

If Iran did suspend its weaponisation program in 2003, it did so because it was scared of US military action.

The ultimate possibility of US, or Israeli, military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities is a critical component of any effective diplomacy.

Yet the NIE report seemingly makes that impossible. This is altogether a very poor show from Washington.