



Tehran, Disconnected

By Mark Stout

Note: [this article](#) originally appeared in the 19 March 2009 edition of Air University's [The Wright Stuff](#).

In tribute to the continuing lack of credibility and efficacy of the national intelligence community (IC), the Obama administration has wisely discarded the critical judgment of the 15-month old 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). The administration--as epitomized by both President Obama and CIA Director Leon Panetta--have made it clear they think Iran is now pursuing nuclear weapons and the necessary missile systems for weapons delivery.

The 2007 NIE judged "with high confidence" that Iran had quit its nuclear weapons program in 2003. The 2007 assessment, released late that year, was a complete reversal of the intelligence communities' May 2005 assessment, which said "with high confidence that Iran currently is determined to develop nuclear weapons despite its international obligations and international pressure." While the authors of the 2007 NIE did say Tehran could restart their nuclear program quickly, that sort of hedge analysis falls into the "no kidding?" bin. U.S. leaders are looking for quality intelligence prognostications, but they're getting intellectual pap.

Adding to the confusion, portions of recent testimony from retired Navy Admiral Dennis Blair, the new Director of National Intelligence, are direct lifts from the 2007 NIE. Of course, these parts of the testimony contradict the CIA Director and the President on the topic. Fortunately, when the DNI's statements are carefully parsed out, the unstated conclusion is clear--Iran wants the bomb.

This conclusion is made clear because the DNI characterized Iran's goals as follows: to dominate the Gulf region; disrupt US operations and reinforcements; intimidate others to withhold support for US policy; and, to raise the costs of US/allied presence in the region. Given this context, if Iran possessed nuclear weapons, would their agenda be advanced or would it be diminished?

When the 2007 NIE was rolled-out, it had the policy impact of greatly inhibiting the Bush administration's ability to restrain Iran with additional diplomatic and economic sanctions, and effectively removed any plausible military action. As a result, one of the Bush administration's foreign policy cornerstones, to stop Iran's nuclear program, was greatly constrained. By dismissing the Iranian nuclear weapon program, the 2007 NIE removed the need for urgent or unified action against Iran by the world community. The impact was to concurrently embolden Iran's President Ahmadinejad, throw Iranian moderates under the bus, and limit US options with Iran.

Did President Obama consider the IC's body of recent, strategic-level analytical work when making his decision to discard the 2007 NIE? Chances are recent history at least crossed his mind: the WMD slam-dunk; 9/11; Pakistan's acquisition of nuclear weapons; Iraq's invasion of Kuwait; and, the collapse of the Soviet Union, to name several prominent examples. The technical aspects of the IC—its ability to take electro-optical and radar pictures, find and follow electronic signals, and to characterize things based on their different “signatures,” etc.—is magnificent. However, when all these “pixels” get rolled into what's supposed to be a coherent and useful strategic-level intelligence picture, something seems to go dreadfully wrong. While the IC is very good at assessing adversary capabilities, recent history has shown it is not nearly so good assessing adversary intent.

Can anything useful be done within the IC? Absolutely. First, the directors at the three-letter organizations (CIA, DIA, FBI, NSA, et al) and their people--the analysts, researchers, linguists, agents, operators, and the likes--absolutely have to work with the unity warranted by the urgency and criticality of their tasks. While unity is necessary, it is not sufficient. Unity has to be better codified, which can only come with Presidential-level direction, guidance, and leadership. This means the administration has to put IC reform on its agenda. The administration uses words like improve, partner, strengthen, and share, to describe its desired changes regarding intelligence. Again, this is good, but not sufficient. Stronger medicine, that is, reform, is what's really necessary.

Additionally, the media--operating as an effective watchdog--can make a difference. They could do this by objectively scrutinizing the IC's results and service instead of falling at the feet of its leakers. However, this is unlikely to happen, as the media most closely associated with intelligence issues depend on these very leakers for their stories. So while desirable, don't expect the media to analyze the IC in any way that benefits the nation.

Concerning Iran, actions that will directly benefit the US are more difficult to discern. Left unchanged, Iran is on-track to hold Europe and much of the Middle East, to include Israel, at nuclear risk, which will further missile defense needs. When Iran does go nuclear, it may also create a desire by other Middle Eastern nations to pursue their own nuclear options.

Even without a mature Iranian ICBM program, the U.S. remains at risk from a nuclear postured Iran. A clear intelligence assessment--and better intelligence products--will make significant improvements in U.S. national security.

Mark Stout is a researcher and analyst at Air University's [National Space Studies Center](#) and sometimes posts at the blog [Songs of Space and Nuclear War](#). The opinions expressed here are those of the author alone and may not reflect the views and policies of the US Air Force or the Department of Defense.