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Crafting Intelligence: Iraq, North Korea and the Road to War

by Selig Harrison

The latest numbers out of Iraq are some 11,000 Americans wounded in action and some 1,500 dead. The most conservative estimate of non-combatant Iraqis killed is about 15,700. This is happening because the war was sold to the U.S. Congress on the basis of false and misleading intelligence. So it's important to keep these numbers in mind in coping with the barrage of intelligence leaks we are getting about North Korea, in particular about the suspected uranium enrichment program that we'll be focusing on today. The people who put out the intelligence on Iraq don't think of themselves as liars. They operate according to an ideological, black and white view of the world in which there are good guys and bad guys and with bad guys you have to assume the worst.

Condoleezza Rice defined this approach to intelligence very explicitly in an ABC news interview in October when she was asked to justify misleading Congress about WMD in Iraq. Here's what she said: "a policymaker cannot afford to be wrong on the short side, underestimating the ability of a tyrant like Saddam Hussein." In other words, it's O.K. to be wrong on the high side, overestimating Saddam or Kim Jong Il and starting a preemptive war on the basis of a hypothetical worst case scenario.

This way of thinking of course did not begin with the Bush administration. Listen to the words of General James Clapper. General Clapper was a sensible director of the defense intelligence agency during the 1994 North Korean nuclear crisis. After he retired he gave an interview to Leon Sigal for his book, *Disarming Strangers*, in which he explained how the DIA and CIA had arrived at their estimate in 1994 that North Korea had "one or two" nuclear weapons at that time. Here's what he said:

"Personally as opposed to institutionally, I was skeptical that they ever had a bomb. We didn't have smoking gun evidence either way. But you build a case for a range of possibilities. In a case like North Korea, you have to apply the most conservative approach, the worst-case scenario."

My message today is simple. It's reckless to base policy on worst case scenario intelligence driven by ideology. We should take a good hard look at the intelligence we're given on North Korea to make sure we're not conned again by our own government or, for that matter, by the North Koreans.

We should take a good hard look at the North Korean claim last week that they have already "manufactured" nuclear weapons. Until they conduct a test, we should reserve judgment on that claim. I think it may very well prove to be a bluff for bargaining purposes to bolster their position in negotiating a settlement. At the same time, we do know that they have the capability to have reprocessed some or all of the 8,000 fuel rods at Yongbyon. This plutonium may not yet be weaponized but it could be transferred to third parties. Our policy should give priority to getting that plutonium under control and out of North Korea.

Here's where we see the dangerous results of worst-case scenario intelligence. Instead of focusing on the clear and present threat posed by the North Korean plutonium program, the administration has tied our policy in knots by giving priority to a suspected uranium enrichment program about which we know little.

In October, 2002, the administration announced that North Korea had a program to enrich uranium to weapons-grade and might be capable of producing one or two uranium-based nuclear weapons per year by "mid-decade". Well, it's 2005, and we've heard nothing since then about those two weapons a year. In fact, the administration has presented no evidence at all to back up the claim that North Korea has a program in place to enrich uranium to weapons-grade. They're trying to finesse the issue without admitting that they exaggerated. I challenged the administration in the January issue of *Foreign Affairs* to present the evidence. The State Department spokesperson issued a formal reply on December 10th that carefully omitted the accusation of a military uranium program and referred only to a "uranium enrichment program." No reference to weapons-grade. That's finessing the issue because enrichment as such is not prohibited by the NPT.

Let me briefly summarize what I said in *Foreign Affairs*. North Korea has indeed explored the option of developing weapons-grade enrichment technology going back ten years. There is indeed credible intelligence that it has attempted to import the components and equipment needed for enrichment. What is in doubt is how much actually got to North Korea and especially how much they got from the A.Q. Khan network. On the day the Khan scandal broke the Pakistani government said he gave North Korea only discarded centrifuges to serve as prototypes plus some blueprints. Did he give them the thousands of centrifuges that would be needed to enrich to weapons-grade? Did he give them the large numbers of sophisticated components and equipment needed to make centrifuges?

We do know that the centrifuges Khan sold to Libya and Iran were made in a Malaysian factory. And we know that the Malaysian factory sent nothing to North Korea. Khan was out to make money, and his biggest deals were with the countries that had big money. So the United States will have to wait until General Musharraf provides access to A.Q. Khan. Period. If it turns out they did not give them thousands of ready-to-use centrifuges, that means that North Korea would have to scour the world for the special grade of steel needed to make the centrifuge rotors and go through a long process of trial and error to get the centrifuge cascades working. Unless and until we learn much more than we know now, it's a plausible hypothesis that North Korea has been forced to scale down its ambitions and settle for a pilot program or no coherent program at all, with lots of expensive equipment lying around unused.

Privately, people in the administration say they will eventually put forward what they know, but that they can't tell all they know without jeopardizing methods and sources, like telephone intercepts and moles inside the A.Q. Khan network. I would welcome an administration white paper putting forward credible evidence of a weapons-grade program. That would help to break the present stalemate in the six-party negotiations, putting North Korea on the defensive. China, South Korea, Japan and Russia have been openly skeptical of the weapons-grade accusation and critical of a U.S. diplomatic strategy that conditions the start of negotiations on resolving this issue. Putting forward credible evidence would lead to a united diplomatic front in confronting Pyongyang that the administration has so far been unable to mobilize. Alternatively, if, as I hypothesize, there is not enough evidence to justify accusations of a weapons-grade program, the United States should give priority to getting any plutonium so far reprocessed by North Korea out of the country, while providing for the elimination of any uranium enrichment facilities at a later stage of a step-by-step denuclearization process.

Now there's a basic premise underlying what I'm saying, namely, that the ideological camp in the Bush administration exaggerated the intelligence relating to North Korean uranium capabilities with a broader agenda in mind: namely, reversing the Clinton policy of engagement with North Korea and, more particularly, abrogating the 1994 Agreed Framework. So I'm going to run through some brief history to show how we got to where we are now and to put the present situation in an accurate perspective that we don't get in media stereotypes.

In 1994 North Korea had an expanding plutonium-based nuclear program with a potential of 30 nuclear weapons a year. They agreed in 1994 to freeze that program under inspection, and they honored that agreement until December 2002 when the Bush administration abrogated it. We got up front what we wanted -- an end to plutonium production. They got promises. In article two, we promised to end sanctions and normalize relations. In article three, we promised to make a formal pledge "not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against North Korea." We promised to build two civilian nuclear reactors for electricity by

2003 and to supply 500,000 tons of oil per year.

We did supply oil, but we didn't live up to our other promises. Why? Mainly, U.S. politics. The agreement was signed on October 21, 1994, and a month later the Republicans won big in the congressional election. They bitterly criticized the agreement and Clinton wanted to save his political capital for other battles. Six years later, in June 2000, Clinton did finally begin to move toward ending sanctions and normalizing relations. But during those six years, the political situation inside North Korea did not stand still. The pro-nuclear hawks in Pyongyang kept telling Kim Jong Il that he had been conned, that the U.S. was not prepared for friendship, that we only understand force and they should resume making nuclear weapons and missiles. So when Pakistan offered uranium enrichment technology to pay for missiles, they grabbed it.

Kim Jong Il followed a two-track policy to keep both his hawks and his doves happy. The uranium program was a hedge in case we refused to normalize relations. It was also a violation of the 1991 North-South denuclearization agreement and of the 1994 agreement. But at the same time, North Korea did continue to honor the operative provisions of the 1994 agreement barring plutonium production.

The Clinton administration knew that North Korea was pursuing uranium enrichment, but they wanted to deal with the problem through quiet diplomacy. They wanted to avoid a confrontation with Pyongyang that would jeopardize the gains made in controlling the plutonium danger under the freeze agreement. By contrast, President Bush openly expressed his desire for regime change in Pyongyang soon after taking office. So his most influential advisors were looking from the start for an excuse to abrogate the 1994 accord. They were -- and are -- ideologically opposed to providing material incentives that would help to sustain the Kim Jong Il regime in exchange for denuclearization.

The result was a paralysis of U.S. Korea policy until the summer of 2002. At that point new intelligence on North Korean enrichment efforts provided a basis for accusing North Korea of cheating and, thus, a rationale for abrogating the Agreed Framework. We don't know what the content of the new intelligence was, but we do know that the administration threw the baby out with the bathwater when it stopped the oil shipments to North Korea in December 2002. Pyongyang predictably retaliated by resuming the reprocessing of plutonium and ousting the international inspectors.

A lot was happening during 2002 that led to the October 4th mission of Assistant Secretary James Kelly to Pyongyang. That's when Kelly confronted the North Koreans with the accusation of a weapons-grade program. In the summer of 2002, South Korea was stepping up its rapprochement with the North, and Prime Minister Koizumi of Japan went to Pyongyang on September 17th despite U.S. objections. The ideologues in the administration wanted to use the uranium issue to rein in Seoul and Tokyo and to put Pyongyang on the defensive. I don't think that Jack Pritchard and other professionals in the State Department and the White House had ulterior political motives in mind. This is clear when you look at how the story about the uranium accusation leaked to USA Today on October 11th. The White House and the State Department didn't want it to leak for several reasons. One, the Iraq resolution was coming up in Congress, and two they hadn't figured out what to do next. USA Today got the story from someone who was privy to the cable traffic from Kelly and wanted to leak it. Barbara Slavin of USA Today, who wrote the story, tells me it was someone opposed to the Agreed Framework who favors a much tougher position towards Pyongyang.

There's a dispute, as you know, about what the North Koreans said in Pyongyang on October 4th. According to Kelly and Jack Pritchard, North Korea admitted to having such a program. Professor John Lewis of Stanford went to Pyongyang and later wrote in the Washington Post that there might have been an interpreting problem. I wasn't there, but I did question them extensively last April and my impression is that their intention was to be ambiguous. Don't forget the context. For two years the Bush administration had conducted policy review after policy review on North Korea, but was unable to come up with a policy. The North Koreans expected Kelly to open a new chapter. Instead, they thought he was overbearing, arrogant and threatening. So they reacted in the way that North Korea will always react when it feels it is being pressured. They felt compelled to talk tough. The generals who have the last word there thought it would be helpful to keep the U.S. guessing. General Ri Chan Bok told me in so many words that the uranium issue is useful because "it strengthens our deterrent to keep you guessing."

The North Korean nuclear problem could eventually be resolved if President Bush would utter two little words -- "peaceful coexistence." We have to say explicitly that we are prepared to coexist with them regardless of differences in our systems. If we do that we can negotiate a step-by-step denuclearization agreement that will enable us to find out the truth about the uranium mystery. We can open up North Korea, let in the winds of freedom, and liberalize the totalitarian system there over a period of years as we are doing in China. Congressman Tom Lantos of California voted for the North Korean Freedom Act, but he said in a speech Monday that he favors engagement. I'll end with his words: "As the French say, c'est la tone qui fait la musique" -- it is the tone which makes the music."

Addendum: March 15, 2005: The Chinese position

State Department officials have been carrying on a disinformation campaign for more than a year to make it appear that China endorses the CIA assessment (in a report to Congress on November 19, 2002) that North Korea is building a weapons-grade uranium enrichment facility that might be able to produce "one or more" uranium-based nuclear weapons per year by "mid-decade."

China first questioned this assessment in early January, 2004, when Fu Ying, director of the Asian division of the Foreign Ministry, told South Korean and Japanese officials in a Seoul meeting that the U.S. intelligence shared with China "has not convinced us that North Korea has a weapons-grade uranium enrichment program." (Washington Post, January 7, 2004).

Then came the statement by Deputy Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong to The New York Times on June 7th, 2004, that "so far, the United States has not presented convincing evidence for the uranium program. We don't know whether it exists."

Finally on March 6th, 2005, Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing made his press conference statement that "I definitely don't know any more that you do" in response to a question about the program. Another statement at the press conference suggesting that China felt the six-nation talks should be replaced by bilateral U.S.-Korea talks was subsequently retracted, but not the Foreign Minister's response to the uranium question.

Each time that China has expressed its doubts, U.S. officials have told U.S. and foreign journalists that China actually accepts the U.S. position, but must express doubt publicly to preserve its ties with North Korea. Actually, based on my own extensive meetings with Chinese officials and specialists, all three Foreign Ministry statements on the uranium issue have been softened to avoid upsetting the United States. It is surprising that an Asahi reporter swallowed the U.S. disinformation uncritically in a February 28th article. Instead of attributing his story clearly to U.S. sources, the reporter said flatly that China "now agrees with U.S. assessments that North Korea has a uranium program to develop nuclear weapons."

China's assessment is essentially the same as the one I have expressed in Foreign Affairs (January, 2005): that North Korea has attempted to import the components necessary to make the thousands of centrifuges that would be necessary for weapons-grade uranium enrichment, but has not been able to do so and has, thus, not gone beyond a pilot or experimental program. This view was also explicitly expressed by the Director of South Korea's National Intelligence Service, Ko Young Koo, in testimony before the National Assembly Intelligence Committee on February 24th, 2005. "We judge that North Korea does not have an enrichment plant," he said, due to its inability to obtain "key components."

Michael Green gave President Hu Jin Tao evidence designed to show that North Korea had exported uranium hexafluoride gas (UF6) to Libya, thus suggesting that it had an enrichment plant. What the Chinese think of this, specifically, I don't know from my own sources. But the U.S. case is weak because there is no isotopic evidence connecting North Korea to the UF6 found in Libya. Since the isotopic fingerprint in the gas could not be matched up with that of any other country, the U.S. has assumed, by the process of elimination, that the gas came from North Korea, even though the U.S. does not know the North Korean uranium isotope. As a prominent scientist said, "it is as if archaeologists were digging in the ruins of ancient Rome, and when they

couldn't find wires, they concluded that the Romans had wireless."

Selig Harrison contributed this article to Japan Focus. It originated as a talk at the Korea Society in New York on February 16, 2005. Selig S. Harrison is director of the Asia program at the Center for International Policy. Harrison is the author of numerous books including [Korea Endgame: A Strategy for Korean Unification and U.S. Disengagement](#). He has visited North Korea eight times. Updated at Japan Focus, March 15, 2005.

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