

Intelligence Questions in North Korea

By Karin Lee and Adam Miles | April 29, 2004

As the United States continues to struggle with the intelligence failures that led to war in Iraq and preceded 9/11, the Bush Administration's politicized, inconsistent use of new intelligence coming out of Pakistan is complicating an already challenging assessment of North Korea's nuclear weapons.

The *New York Times* recently published CIA intelligence on North Korea's nuclear weapons based on the interrogation of Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan by Pakistani authorities. Khan admitted in February to supplying nuclear weapons technologies and materials to Iran, Libya, and North Korea. The intelligence reported in the *New York Times* will potentially affect the U.S. diplomatic position at the next round of six party talks in June.

On March 13, the *Times* reported that classified CIA intelligence "detailed for the first time the extent to which Pakistan's Khan Research Laboratories provided North Korea with all the equipment and technology necessary to produce uranium-based nuclear weapons." According to the *Times*, the CIA report concludes that North Korea received all of the necessary components for the enrichment of uranium into weapons grade material, including completed centrifuges and uranium hexafluoride, and one or more weapons designs. Unnamed American officials confirmed the information in the article.

At a recent House International Relations Committee hearing, Rep. Bill Delahunt (D-MA) cited the March 13 *Times* article. He focused on Dr. Khan's use of Pakistani military planes to supply North Korea with nuclear materials from 1998-2002. Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton was dismissive, stating, "I'm not going to comment on newspaper reports about intelligence assessments, particularly when the newspaper report is wrong."

Delahunt questioned Bolton further as to whether the U.S. has interrogated Khan directly. While Bolton acknowledged that the administration

expressed its concerns about Dr. Khan's activities to the Pakistani government, he admitted, "We have not asked for access to Mr. Khan, nor do we think we should."

On April 12, the *New York Times* published a story with more dramatic information from the interrogation of Khan. Reportedly, Khan told his interrogators that he was invited to view three nuclear devices on one of his trips to North Korea. This would be the first account of any foreigner inspecting a North Korean nuclear weapon.

Because the administration has not had access to Khan, the intelligence presented in the *Times* article is, at best, third-hand information: first passed from Khan to his Pakistani interrogators, then on to U.S. officials, and finally to the *New York Times*. Throughout this game of intelligence "telephone," the information could easily be subject to political interpretation and motives, not the least of which is Pakistani eagerness to deflect international proliferation concerns away from Khan. Further, U.S. officials acknowledge that Khan (a trained metallurgist, not a nuclear physicist) may not have the technical expertise to ascertain whether the bombs he saw were, in fact, nuclear weapons. Detailed tests would be necessary to conclude confidently either way. Stated simply, it is unlikely that Khan had the ability to determine exactly what he saw and the U.S. has no way of authenticating the information.

Despite this, the *Times* reported that during his recent trip to Asia, Vice President Cheney used the new intelligence to pressure China for "stronger actions" against North Korea. According to an April 15 *New York Times* article, "Cheney Presses Beijing



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on North Korea Nuclear Program,” the Vice President “brought to the attention’ of Chinese leaders a report in *The New York Times*. . . about the North’s nuclear program.” Juxtaposed with Mr. Bolton’s statements concerning the intelligence previously reported in the *Times*—not to mention the somewhat dubious claims of the latter report—Cheney’s rationale for “pressing” China is deeply troubling.

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The existence of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program presents an incontrovertible proliferation and security threat that the U.S. must address—and with more flexibility and urgency than the Bush administration has demonstrated thus far. However, what that program has actually produced remains an open question. It is extremely difficult to assess the extent of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, and therefore, determine the surest route to a peaceful, negotiated settlement of this crisis. Hundreds of thousands of lives are at stake, should the situation on the Peninsula deteriorate into a military confrontation. The Administration should seek only the highest quality intelligence to guide U.S. policy decisions vis-à-vis North Korea. As we have seen in Iraq, the price of miscalculation can be very high.

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Recommended citation:

Karin Lee and Adam Miles, “Intelligence Questions in North Korea,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, April 30, 2004).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0404iqnorthkorea.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Karin Lee and Adam Miles
Editor: John Gershman, IRC
Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

