

## CIA blunder ‘prompted Korean nuclear race’

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The United States appears to have made a major intelligence blunder over North Korea’s nuclear weapons programme, one that may have exacerbated tensions with Pyongyang over the past four years and goaded Kim Jong-Il into pressing ahead with last October’s live nuclear test, intelligence and Bush administration officials have said.

The blunder does not concern the plutonium-based bomb technology that North Korea used in its test and has clearly been developing for decades. Rather it concerns the assessment, in a Central Intelligence Agency report to Congress in November 2002, that North Korea was also pursuing a parallel uranium enrichment programme capable of providing the raw material for two or more nuclear weapons a year, starting “mid-decade”.

That prompted the US to cut off oil supplies to Pyongyang, to which North Korea responded by throwing out international weapons inspectors and ratcheting up its plutonium bomb programme.

But now many intelligence officials doubt whether the North Koreans have a viable uranium enrichment programme, and administration officials have begun wondering if they could not have handled the North Korean crisis much more smartly if they had been in less of a hurry to get confrontational.

On Tuesday, a veteran intelligence official called Joseph DeTrani told a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing that the government’s certainty about the programme’s existence was only at “the mid-confidence level”, agency-speak meaning the information is not fully corroborated and some officials hold other views.

On Wednesday, the Director of National Intelligence declassified a report on North Korea which stated: “The degree of progress towards producing enriched uranium remains unknown.”

Non-government weapons experts including David Kay and David Albright – both veterans of the Iraq intelligence fiasco – see such statements as the beginning of a full retraction and an admission that the CIA and other agencies jumped to conclusions based on insufficient evidence.

“The evidence doesn’t support the extrapolation,” Mr Albright, now president of the private Institute for Science and International Security in Washington, told The New York Times. “The extrapolation went too far.”

The extrapolation was based, principally, on seemingly solid evidence that North Korea

obtained about 20 centrifuges for the production of enriched uranium from Abdul Qadeer Khan, the “father” of Pakistan’s atom bomb, in 2000. When it transpired that North Korea was also buying aluminium tubes – not unlike the aluminium tubes so widely mentioned in connection with Iraq’s (non-existent) nuclear programme – the CIA and the Bush administration saw a “smoking gun” that convinced them the enriched uranium programme was up and running.

Mr Albright said the aluminium tubes were relatively weak and were not suitable for mass-producing centrifuges for a bomb programme as the US government suspected. The tubes the North Koreans bought were “very easy to get and not controlled” by global export agencies because they were regarded as largely harmless.

So the best assessment now seems to be that the North Koreans were stalled in their ambitions for lack of raw materials. “The administration appears to have made a very costly decision that has resulted in a fourfold increase in the nuclear weapons of North Korea,” Senator Jack Reed of Rhode Island, a members of the Armed Services Committee, said. “If that was based in part on mixing up North Korea’s ambitions with their accomplishments, it’s important.”

The apparent blunder is likely to renew questions about the reliability and the political slanting of US intelligence that emerged after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the failure to find any sort of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons programmes the Bush administration talked about in justifying its pre-emptive war.

A similar debate about weapons intelligence and politics is raging over Iran, as the Bush administration ratchets up its rhetoric against Tehran, and the Democrat-controlled Congress worries that he is planning another war in the Middle East.

The North Korean case is different, not least because it is the administration itself which seems to be doing the back-peddalling. That may be linked to North Korea’s agreement to readmit weapons inspectors. The Bush administration may prefer to sow doubts about its assessments now rather than face greater embarrassment later.

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