

Iranian nukes: When bullying is not enough, try disinformation

By [Siddharth Varadarajan](#)

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The serendipitous discovery of an Iranian laptop full of incriminating details about a nuclear warhead will eventually take its place in the same intel hall of BS as the yellowcake from Niger, Saddam's aluminium tubes and those funny vials Colin Powell held up before the Security Council in January 2003. But that didn't stop India and a bunch of other governments from being taken for a ride by dodgy U.S. intelligence before the last IAEA meeting in September. The IAEA meets again on November 24. Will the world realise what's happening this time?

In the run-up to the crucial November 24 International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governors meeting in Vienna, the Bush administration has pulled out all the stops in its efforts to cajole, bully and scare the world into believing Iran is on the verge of acquiring a nuclear weapons capability. The purpose of the drama is to convince not just a majority of Board members to back a resolution referring Iran to the U.N. Security Council but, more crucially, to ensure Russia also comes on board this time. China is unlikely to revise its vote and the support of India, which disqualified itself as a serious player in the negotiation process by siding with the U.S. in September, is today being taken for granted in Washington.

Relying on clever "news" leaks and tendentious opinions conveniently attributed to "diplomats close to the IAEA," (how come nobody talks of 'Western diplomats' anymore?) the U.S. has even managed to render sinister a significant act of transparency by the Iranians. The 'confidential' report of the Director of the International Atomic Energy Agency for the November 24 Board meeting (Click here for the full text of the report at my electronic archive) notes that Iran — in seeking to answer the agency's questions about the completeness of its declarations — has handed over a number of documents relating to its work on the P-1 centrifuge design obtained from the A.Q. Khan-run clandestine network. The Iranians also provided IAEA inspectors with a one-page document supplied by the network in 1987, which shows how to cast "enriched, natural and depleted uranium metal into hemispherical forms." The IAEA's report makes no comment on the significance of this document but the Associated Press on November 18 quoted "diplomats close to the agency" as saying that "it appeared to be a design for the core of a nuclear warhead." Who are these diplomats? AP says they "requested anonymity in exchange for discussing the [IAEA's] confidential report." How convenient.

Now, most reasonable people would conclude that if Iran voluntarily handed over a document whose existence the IAEA never really suspected — and clarified that it neither solicited the information contained nor acted upon it — it is highly unlikely that the Iranians would be running a secret nuclear weapons programme. After all, if one has committed a

crime, the last thing one will do is present the world with the smoking gun. But then the American approach is far from reasonable. Washington's top diplomat at the IAEA, Gregory L. Schulte, promptly declared the document (which he dishonestly claimed the IAEA had "unearthed") opened "new concerns about weaponization." And thereby hangs a tale.

Curious coincidence

Five days earlier, by a curious coincidence, the New York Times had recycled an old Bush administration story about the existence of Iranian computer files allegedly dealing with Teheran's plans to build — you guessed it — a nuclear warhead atop a Shahab missile.

In the light of the 1987 document, the NYT story seems highly significant, even alarming. So alarming, in fact, that one suspects the same "diplomats close to the agency" — who would have had access to Dr. el-Baradei's draft report and known about the documents Iran had handed over — realised it would be a jolly good idea to "sex up" the Iranians' naïve display of transparency as proof of imminent weaponisation by planting, in advance, the dodgy story about warhead designs.

The Iranian warhead design story — an intelligence lemon of the Niger yellowcake or nuclear-capable Iraqi aluminium tubes variety — was first aired by Colin Powell last November and widely discredited. In March this year, The Wall Street Journal resurrected the story and in August — in the run-up to the controversial September 24 IAEA vote that declared Iran to be in "non-compliance" with its safeguards obligations — the WSJ ran it again, as did the Washington Post.

Even if the American media hasn't learned its lessons from the Bush administration's war drive to Iraq, sections of the arms control and intelligence community definitely have. In a letter to the NYT, David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) and a former weapons inspector for the IAEA, pointed out what he said was a "deep and misleading flaw" in the newspaper's story: the Farsi-language computer files in question dealt with plans for a re-entry vehicle and not a nuclear warhead. Having had access to the files, he noted that they did not carry any words such as "nuclear" or "nuclear warhead." Accordingly, he said, the NYT had an obligation to print a correction.

The correction, however, never appeared. What ensued, instead, was the exchange of emails between Dr. Albright and the NYT reporter and, finally, the investigations editor of the newspaper, who declared that the original story was correct and offered the hapless Dr. Albright a cup of coffee as compensation for his efforts. (You can read the entire correspondence [here](#)).

In his follow-up email, Dr. Albright made additional points, which are worth quoting in detail: "There is a significant difference between a reentry vehicle and a nuclear warhead, particularly as discussed in these documents," he told the NYT reporters. "The documents are almost exclusively about a reentry vehicle. It is not as you say that most people refer to everything on the pointy end of the missile as the warhead ... Based on information I have collected on these documents over the last year, the documents do not discuss a nuclear core, the design of high explosives lenses, a neutron initiator, or other key parts of a nuclear weapon. The documents do discuss that inside the reentry vehicle is a spherical object involving high explosives and detonated by electrical bridge wires. That is a far cry from a nuclear warhead design or the development of a nuclear warhead. Although these

documents do discuss the best positioning of a heavy spherical object, there is no mention of nuclear fuel, as you speculate.”

Dr. Albright then made a wider point about the responsibility of the media. “We can assess or infer that the object inside the reentry vehicle is likely a nuclear warhead, but the documents do not discuss its design or even mention that it is a nuclear warhead. This distinction is critical to make to the readers and the public. The first reason is to be accurate about such an important and sensitive issue. I do not have to tell you or your colleagues at the NYT that the media has a serious responsibility to present the evidence as accurately as possible. The media needs to be especially careful not to exaggerate any nuclear threat. I am afraid that your article, whether inadvertently or intentionally, has done just that. The words selected to describe or summarize information do matter.”

If Dr. Albright is correct — and assuming the computer files and purloined laptop from which they were obtained are genuine — it is not just the NYT’s reporters who were taken for a ride by their Bush administration sources. So were a number of countries, including India.

The warhead design files formed the centerpiece of a “highly classified” briefing given by U.S. officials to key IAEA Board members in the run-up to the September 24 vote against Iran. Among the countries briefed was India.

The Manmohan Singh government, which presumably was flattered by the American decision to put it into the “picture,” has said repeatedly that it does not want another nuclear weapon state in the neighbourhood and that New Delhi’s decision to vote against Teheran in September was largely motivated by its realisation that “proliferation” by Iran was a very real and immediate danger. Unfortunately, this realisation was based on flawed intelligence.

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