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Washingtonpost.com
October 16, 2007

Gates: United Front Needed On Iran Nukes

By Robert Burns, Associated Press

WASHINGTON -- The United State alone cannot force Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Monday. Gates called Iran as "an ambitious and fanatical theocracy," and said he has yet to find "the elusive Iranian moderate," according to remarks prepared for delivery at the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs.

"With a government of that nature, only a united front of nations will be able to exert enough pressure to make Iran abandon its nuclear aspirations _ a source of great anxiety and instability in the region," Gates said.

Iran denies it is pursuing nuclear weapons. It says its nuclear program is strictly for civilian energy development.

"Our allies must work together on robust, far-reaching and strongly enforced economic sanctions," Gates said. "We must exert pressure in the diplomatic and political arenas as well. And, as President Bush has said, with this regime we must also keep all options on the table." The term "all options" is a veiled reference to possible military action. Gates said Iran seems increasingly willing to act contrary to its own interests.

"We should have no illusions about the nature of this regime or its leaders _ about their designs for their nuclear program, their willingness to live up to their rhetoric, their intentions for Iraq, or their ambitions in the Gulf region," he said in his prepared remarks, copies of which were made available before he spoke.

Gates also expressed a measure of doubt about the gains thus far in the administration's global war on terrorism.

"Despite many tactical successes, overall strategic success against violent extremism has been elusive," he said.

"With the extent of the jihadist movement, with its breadth and numbers, even the most effective counterterrorism tactics can only reduce the number and lethality of attacks. Total elimination is infinitely more complex, part of an ideological struggle between the forces of moderation and extremism."

Gates spoke at a Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs dinner where he received the Henry M. Jackson Distinguished Service Award for leaders deemed to have honored the tradition of the late Senator from Washington state who was a leading voice in Congress on national security issues.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/16/AR2007101600162.html>

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Philadelphia Inquirer

October 16, 2007

U.N. Agency Seeks Data On Alleged Syria Reactor

By Associated Press

VIENNA, Austria - The U.N. nuclear watchdog agency said yesterday that it had no information to support a recent media report that Syria may be building a nuclear reactor, but it said it expected any country that had details to share them with the agency.

"We would obviously investigate any relevant information coming our way," said Melissa Fleming, spokeswoman for the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency.

In what appeared to be an indirect rebuke to the United States, Fleming said in a statement that the nuclear agency "expects any country having information about nuclear-related activities in another country to provide that information to the IAEA."

The New York Times, citing U.S. and foreign officials, reported Sunday that an Israeli air strike on Syria last month targeted a partially built nuclear reactor that was years from completion.

It said the reactor was modeled on one North Korea had used to create its stockpile of nuclear-weapons fuel, though the role of any North Korean assistance in building it remained unclear. North Korea has denied involvement in any such activities in Syria.

Satellite photos detected the partly constructed Syrian reactor earlier this year, the Times said, citing U.S. officials.

The Syrian reactor was years from being able to produce spent nuclear fuel that could be reprocessed into weapons-grade plutonium, the newspaper said.

Fleming said the IAEA was in contact with Syrian authorities to verify the authenticity of the report.

Syria's nuclear program has long been considered minimal, and the country is known to have only a small research reactor.

http://www.philly.com/inquirer/world_us/20071016_U_N_agency_seeks_data_on_alleged_Syria_reactor.html

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New York Times

October 16, 2007

Putin Plans To Go To Iran Even As Plot Is Reported

By Judy Dempsey

WIESBADEN, Germany, Oct. 15 — President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia said Monday that he would travel to Tehran for a meeting of Caspian Sea nations despite a report of a possible assassination plot against him there that was immediately dismissed by Iran.

During a news conference after talks here with Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, Mr. Putin said he would go ahead with the trip to Tehran on Tuesday, a visit that is also likely to focus on Iran's disputed nuclear program.

“Of course I am going to Iran,” he said. “If I always listened to all the various threats and the recommendations of the special services I would never leave home.” Mr. Putin is the first Kremlin leader to travel to Iran since 1943, when Stalin attended a wartime summit meeting with Churchill and Roosevelt.

On Sunday evening, the Interfax news agency in Moscow reported that Mr. Putin had received a warning from the Russian special services that his life would be in danger during his trip to Iran this week. Interfax cited a single security person as its source whom it did not name. This person talked of potential groups of suicide bombers. Other news agencies sent out similar reports on Monday but without details or evidence.

A spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry, Mohammad Ali Hosseini, dismissed the assassination report as disinformation intended to spoil Russian-Iranian relations. “Reports published by some media are totally baseless,” he said. “They are in line with the psychological war launched by enemies who want to harm Iran and Russia’s relationship.”

During his visit to Iran, Mr. Putin is to meet President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and attend a meeting of Caspian Sea nations, which Mr. Putin stressed had been the original aim of his visit.

But with the United States likely to demand tougher sanctions against Iran next month in the United Nations Security Council if Iran does not comply with international controls on its nuclear activities, Mr. Putin’s visit is seen by European diplomats as an attempt by Moscow to carve out some kind of diplomatic role on the nuclear issue.

The Security Council’s five permanent members — Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States — along with Germany, are giving Iran until November to show a positive response to questions about its nuclear program, or risk tougher sanctions.

All six countries agreed to two previous resolutions on sanctions, but Russia, China and Germany are reluctant to impose harsher measures.

Russia, which is helping Iran build a nuclear plant in the southern port of Bushehr, strongly warned Washington against imposing further sanctions and using force. Last week, Mr. Putin said he saw no “objective data” to prove Western claims that Iran was seeking nuclear weapons.

At the same time, Mr. Putin has urged Iran to comply with controls by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations’ nuclear watchdog. Moscow has also slowed down the completion of the nuclear plant.

Despite Russia’s delays, Iran is continuing its own enrichment program, insisting it wants to produce fuel for peaceful and civilian purposes. But the lack of transparency has only increased suspicions from several of the Security Council members that Iran is actually seeking to produce a nuclear bomb.

Nazila Fathi contributed reporting from Tehran, and David Rampe from Paris.

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/16/world/europe/16putin.html?_r=1&ref=world&oref=slogin

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Washington Times

October 16, 2007

Pg. 16

The Failed Moscow Talks

By Ariel Cohen

Last Friday and Saturday, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates visited Moscow. They met with President Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and First Deputy Prime Minister Sergey Ivanov, for what are known as the “2 + 2 talks.” These were agreed upon in Kennebunkport, Maine, between Presidents George W. Bush and Mr. Putin. The Moscow talks did not go well.

Before the talks started, Mr. Putin made Miss Rice and Mr. Gates wait for him for 40 minutes — a deliberate diplomatic slight. Greeting the two senior U.S. Cabinet members in front of TV cameras, Mr. Putin came out adamantly against deployment of the U.S. component of the global ballistic missile defense in Poland and the Czech Republic.

“The one thing on which I would like to focus attention is that in the process of these difficult negotiations we hope that you will not force through previous agreements with eastern European countries,” the ITAR-TASS news agency quoted Mr. Putin as saying.

As Miss Rice and Mr. Gates were visiting Moscow, the Russian capital was in the midst of two overlapping political games: the overt Duma and presidential election cycle of December 2007-March 2008, and the mostly covert power struggle between competing pro-Putin factions over the architecture of the next Russian regime.

In it, competing factions such as the Russian Federal Security Service and the Anti-Narcotics Committee — both headed by Mr. Putin’s loyalists — are lobbying op-eds at each other, but, more significantly, arresting each other’s senior officers and generals.

At stake is not just power, but control of tens of billions of dollars in property and state-owned enterprises, including oil, gas, other commodities, weapons, shipping, autos and aerospace industries.

Every move the Putin administration makes today is dictated by the desire to shape Russia's future internal power structure and to set the course for the country's foreign and security affairs in general, and its relationship with the United States in particular for years to come.

Keeping the relationship with Washington on the verge of a crisis and inventing an imaginary "American enemy" is creating much needed legitimacy for the current Russian leadership, which now has only Mr. Putin's personal popularity as its political base.

The image of Russia surrounded by enemies is absolutely necessary for today's Russian ruling class of senior secret police officers, as it positions them in the eyes of the people as the saviors and defenders of Mother Russia.

This approach has venerable roots in Russian history, harkening back to the Romanov police state of the 19th and early 20th centuries or even Ivan the Terrible's rule of the late 16th century.

By trying to prevent bilateral security arrangements between the United States and Poland and the Czech Republic, Russia is reasserting its veto power in its former Eastern European empire. "We are fighting American imperialism," Russian security expert Alexander Pikayev told this author during a BBC debate on Friday.

Mr. Putin has threatened to pull Russia out of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, signed by President Ronald Reagan and former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, that eliminated the Russian SS-20 missiles and U.S.

Pershing-2 missiles deployed in Europe.

This chilling rhetoric has quickly acquired specific military target sets. Before the June G-8 summit in Heiligendamm, Germany, Mr. Putin issued an unprecedented threat to retarget Russia's nuclear missiles at Europe in response to potential future deployment of missile defenses there.

Russia has also threatened to pull out of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, which limits its troop levels between the Baltic and the Black Seas. Russia claims NATO members do not abide by or did not ratify the CFE Treaty. Russia may also be reluctant to extend the START-2 and the accompanying Moscow Treaty past 2009, the two agreements which limit strategic nuclear weapons.

By destroying the European security treaties regime, Mr. Putin is returning to the Soviet strategic posture that predated the Reagan-Gorbachev era in which the Cold War was ended. He also undoes the achievements of U.S. Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, and Mr. Yeltsin's own predecessor, Boris Yeltsin.

But Russian ambitions go beyond missiles. At the St. Petersburg Economic Summit in June, Mr. Putin suddenly called for revising the global economic architecture, including the World Trade Organization (WTO). This unprecedented initiative reflects Moscow's current anti-status quo mindset.

The deteriorating trajectory of U.S.-Russian relations may allow the Kremlin to retaliate further. Russia — and possibly China — could bolster Iran's stalling tactics. The U.S.-European coalition has demanded, through the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the U.N. Security Council, intrusive verification and inspections of Iran's sprawling nuclear complex.

Russia may enable the Islamic Republic to acquire nuclear weapons and the platforms to deliver them, with far-reaching destabilizing consequences for Iraq, the Persian Gulf, Sunni-Shia relations and vital U.S. interests in the region as well as the security, including the survival, of Israel. The crisis with Russia may also lead to more Russian arms supplies to Syria, another principal Middle East adversary of the United States.

Finally, the Moscow fiasco occurred before the Annapolis conference on the Middle East peace, which will attempt to find a solution to the century-old conflict between Arabs and Israelis. Russia, a member of the Quartet, is a key player in the Middle East.

The United States is also concerned about destabilizing Russian arms sales to Iran and Syria. The Russians know how to play well the game of spoiler.

The old Soviet obsession — that Russia's fate, its cosmic goal, is to fight "American imperialism" — remains undiluted, even 15 years after the collapse of communism. This is tragic — for Russia, Europe and the world.

Ariel Cohen is senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071016/COMMENTARY/110160002>

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Washington Post

Nuclear Deal With India May Be Near Collapse

Premier Cites Internal Opposition To Agreement Pushed by Bush

By Robin Wright and Rama Lakshmi

Washington Post Staff Writers

Tuesday, October 16, 2007; A01

A controversial nuclear deal between the United States and India appears close to collapse after the Indian prime minister told President Bush yesterday that "certain difficulties" will prevent India from moving forward on the pact for the foreseeable future.

The main obstacle does not involve the specific terms of the agreement but rather India's internal politics, including fears from leftist parties that India is moving too close to the United States, according to officials and experts familiar with the deal. Besieged over the past two months by growing opposition to nuclear energy cooperation with the United States, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh indicated over the weekend that he would rather save his coalition government than the nuclear pact.

"What we have done with the U.S., it is an honorable deal, it is good for India, and it is good for the world," Singh said Saturday. "But we are in the realm of politics, and within our coalition, there are differing perceptions."

Neither government appeared eager to announce the setback to what had been billed as one of the Bush administration's biggest foreign policy achievements. India's only official pronouncement was tucked at the bottom of a seven-paragraph news release on the Indian Embassy Web site outlining a telephone conversation Monday between Singh and Bush.

"The Prime Minister also explained to President Bush that certain difficulties have arisen with respect to the operationalisation of the India-U.S. civil nuclear cooperation agreement," said the release, which focused largely on talks between the two leaders on trade issues and Burma.

The White House, for its part, did not announce that the conversation took place until asked about the Indian Embassy statement -- and then confirmed it in language almost identical to the Indian press release.

The reluctance to admit that the deal is faltering contrasts with the fanfare when it was announced in 2005. R. Nicholas Burns, undersecretary of state for political affairs, heralded the pact just three months ago as "perhaps the single most important initiative that India and the United States have agreed to in the 60 years of our relationship." U.S. officials acknowledged deep disappointment with the abrupt decision, which they described as unexpected. Burns and other senior administration officials scrambled over the weekend to try to revive the deal. Officials said many Indian officials still want the pact to move forward.

State Department spokesman Tom Casey told reporters yesterday that the administration still believes the deal is "a good one for the United States, for India and for the broader efforts at nonproliferation."

The agreement lays out a framework for peaceful nuclear cooperation that would eventually allow trade in nuclear reactors, technology and fuel between the two nations. It permits India to reprocess nuclear fuel and opens the way for the United States to become a "reliable" supplier for India's energy program.

"The administration sees India as part of its legacy and is loathe to see [the deal] go down the drain," said Robert Einhorn, a former Clinton administration nonproliferation official who is now at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "I would guess they want to low-key this in the hope that it's only a temporary setback. Probably the White House fears that giving it publicity will make it more difficult to get back on track later." Opponents of the pact in India include an alliance of communist parties that forms a minority bloc in Singh's coalition government and says the agreement brings India too close to the United States. The deal has also drawn fire from the country's largest opposition party, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, which initially supported it.

"It's not a strong coalition," said Michael Green, a former Bush National Security Council staff member who worked on the issue and is now at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The nuclear pact has also encountered resistance in the United States, where many in Congress considered it a sweetheart deal for India and threatened to try to scuttle it. Critics said the agreement sets a bad example because India would win access to U.S. technology without complying with the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which permits cooperation on nuclear energy only when countries pledge not to develop nuclear weapons.

U.S. experts differ on the prognosis. "I would not say the deal is dead. It's in the hospital in intensive care," said Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association. "The reason it's in intensive care is that there is a tight timeline that the U.S. and India have to keep to follow through on all the steps."

U.S. officials said India must take the steps required by early 2008, so the administration can begin moving the deal through Congress. Any setback would almost certainly trigger further delays on actions required by both governments to keep the agreement alive, Kimball said.

Others say the pact could be resurrected if Singh challenges opponents inside his coalition and in parliament. "If Singh went to the polls on this issue, he would win," Green said. "But he would have to run against members of his own coalition to do it. And there's a nervousness about having an election."

The communist alliance, which argues that the deal would erode India's sovereignty, has urged Singh not move forward on negotiations with the Nuclear Suppliers Group and the International Atomic Energy Agency. To assuage these forces, Singh set up a joint forum in September to discuss the pact and provide a platform for airing concerns.

Last week, Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee asked the communist parties to let the government talk with the IAEA, while assuring that the deal will not be final until there is political consensus in India. But the communists rejected the formula and said they would vote out the government if it even approaches the IAEA.

"If the deal does not come through, it will be disappointing," Singh said Saturday at a summit organized by the Hindustan Times. "But in life, one has to live with certain disappointments. . . . Ours is not a one-issue government." When asked whether Singh would call Bush to inform him of the decision, a senior Indian government official said: "I don't know if he will call. But if he does, it will be a sad conversation."

Lakshmi reported from New Delhi.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/15/AR2007101501856.html>

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Washington Post

October 18, 2007

Pg. 9

Tough Punishment Expected For Warhead Errors

Officers May Lose Commands After Nuclear Missiles Were Flown on Bomber

By Thomas E. Ricks and Joby Warrick, Washington Post Staff Writers

The Air Force has decided to relieve at least five of its officers of command and is considering filing criminal charges in connection with the Aug. 29 "Bent Spear" incident in which nuclear-armed cruise missiles were mistakenly flown from North Dakota to Louisiana, two senior Air Force officials said yesterday.

Although senior Defense Department officials have not been fully briefed on the results of an Air Force probe of the incident, the sources said that at least one colonel is expected to lose his position and that several enlisted personnel will also be punished as part disciplinary actions that could be among the toughest meted out by the Air Force in years.

The measures are expected to be formally announced tomorrow along with the detailed findings of an internal, six-week investigation into how a B-52 bomber crew mistakenly flew from one military air base to another with six nuclear warheads strapped to its wings. Air Force veterans have described the Aug. 29 incident as the one of the worst breaches in U.S. nuclear weapons security in decades.

A senior Air Force official familiar with the investigation said officers will be relieved at both installations involved in the incident: Minot Air Force Base, N.D., and Barksdale Air Force Base, La. A colonel commanding one of the Air Force wings is likely to be the highest-ranking officer to be relieved, the official said.

In addition, the official said, letters of reprimand will be issued to several enlisted service members. The personnel actions may be followed by criminal charges against one or more people, but that course of action is still being discussed at the highest levels of the Air Force, he added. The most likely such charge, he said, would be either dereliction of duty or willful disobedience of an order.

The anticipated personnel and disciplinary actions would be the most severe ever brought in the Air Force in connection with the handling of nuclear weapons, one of the officials said. The intention is to send the message that "the Air Force is getting back to the roots of accountability," the other official said. Both officials spoke on the condition of anonymity because the investigation remains active.

The August event triggered a rare "Bent Spear" nuclear incident alert that was sent to Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates and President Bush. Although some details are not yet publicly known, officials familiar with the investigation say the problem originated at Minot when a pylon carrying six nuclear-armed cruise missiles was mistaken for one carrying unarmed missiles. Minot had been in the midst of shipping unarmed cruise missiles to Barksdale for decommissioning.

That initial mistake was followed by many other failures, ultimately allowing six nuclear warheads to slip outside the Air Force's normal safeguards for more than 36 hours. The warheads were airborne for more than three hours and sat for long periods on runways at both air bases without a special guard. Air Force officials say there was little risk that the warheads could have been detonated, but the lapses could theoretically have led to warheads being stolen or damaged in a way that could have disseminated toxic nuclear materials.

One official noted yesterday that the service is determined to handle the case better than it did a 1994 incident in which two Air Force F-15C pilots shot down two Army UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters that were in northern Iraq's "no-fly" zone, killing 26. Few disciplinary actions resulted then, an outcome that some generals said should not be repeated.

Gen. John D.W. Corley, who on Oct. 2 became chief of the Air Combat Command, traveled to Washington this week to discuss his planned actions with senior Air Force officials. Gates is scheduled to be briefed on the Air Force moves tomorrow.

Officials cautioned, however, that an announcement could be delayed because of continuing discussions among top officials over whether the disciplinary action should go even higher up the command chain, perhaps to include some generals.

Both the 5th Bomb Wing, which is based at Minot, and the 2nd Bomb Wing, based at Barksdale, are part of the 8th Air Force, which is also based at Barksdale. The 5th Wing has been commanded since June of this year by Col. Bruce Emig, according to an Air Force Web site. The 2nd Wing is led by Col. Robert Wheeler, who took command in July. They are the Air Force's only two B-52 units.

The 8th Air Force, historically the service's main bomber force, is overseen by Lt. Gen. Robert J. Elder Jr., a veteran B-52 pilot.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/17/AR2007101702300.html>

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New York Times

October 18, 2007

Nuclear-Armed Iran Risks World War, Bush Says

By Sheryl Gay Stolberg

WASHINGTON, Oct. 17 — President Bush issued a stark warning on Iran on Wednesday, suggesting that if the country obtained nuclear arms, it could lead to “World War III.”

“We got a leader in Iran who has announced that he wants to destroy Israel,” Mr. Bush said at a White House news conference, referring to a remark by the Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, that Israel “will disappear soon.” Mr. Bush said he had “told people that if you’re interested in avoiding World War III, it seems like you ought to be interested in preventing them from having the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon.”

Mr. Bush has said in the past that he would never “tolerate” a nuclear-armed Iran. But the comment on Wednesday was another sign that he did not accept a view stated last month by Gen. John P. Abizaid, who retired this year as the top American commander in the Middle East. The general said that “there are ways to live with a nuclear Iran.”

Mr. Bush sought in the news conference to make clear that his pressure tactics, including economic sanctions, were aimed at persuading the Iranian people to find new leadership.

“The whole strategy is that, you know, at some point in time leaders or responsible folks inside of Iran may get tired of isolation and say, ‘This isn’t worth it,’ and to me it’s worth the effort to keep the pressure on this government,” Mr. Bush said.

He added, “My intent is to continue to rally the world, to send a focused signal to the Iranian government that we will continue to work to isolate you in the hopes that at some point somebody else shows up and says it’s not worth the isolation.”

The president was responding to a question about the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin, who visited Iran this week and warned the United States against military action there. Before that, in Moscow, Mr. Putin said he saw “no evidence” that Iran was trying to acquire nuclear weapons.

Mr. Bush insisted that he and Mr. Putin see eye to eye on the Iranian nuclear threat.

“We don’t agree on a lot of issues,” Mr. Bush said. “We do agree on some: Iran is one; nuclear proliferation is another.”

The president made his remarks on a day when Mr. Putin appeared in newspaper photographs standing side by side with Mr. Ahmadinejad. Mr. Bush dismissed any notion that the pictures reflected like-mindedness, saying,

“Generally, leaders don’t like to be photographed scowling at each other.”

Mr. Bush has never quite been able to ride out his oft-quoted remark that he had looked into Mr. Putin’s eyes and gotten “a sense of his soul.” On Wednesday, he defended his brand of personal diplomacy, even as he expressed a wariness about Mr. Putin’s commitment to democracy.

Under Russia’s Constitution, Mr. Putin is supposed to step down next year, but he has indicated that he may try to keep his power by becoming prime minister. At a recent meeting in Australia, Mr. Bush said, he asked Mr. Putin about his plans.

“I tried to, you know, get it out of him — who’s going to be his successor, what he intends to do,” Mr. Bush said.

“And he was wily. He wouldn’t tip his hand.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/18/washington/18prexy.html?ref=world>

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Washington Times
October 18, 2007
Pg. 12

White House Mum On Syrian Nukes

Won't let rumors derail six-party agreement

By Nicholas Kravev, Washington Times

Bush administration officials said yesterday that they are determined to prevent current and former hard-liners from using reports of North Korean nuclear-related transfers to Syria to derail negotiations with Pyongyang.

President Bush repeatedly refused at a press conference to disclose any information about the suspected exports to Syria or an Israeli air strike on a site thought to house those materials, saying any proliferation concerns that the United States has will be addressed in six-nation talks with the North.

Asked whether the American people have a right to know whether North Korea is secretly aiding the nuclear ambitions of a country hostile to the United States while negotiating the end of its own programs, Mr. Bush offered a terse answer.

“No,” he said. “You have a right to know this — that when it comes to the six-party talks, the issue of proliferation has equal importance with the issue of weaponry, and that North Korea has said that they will stop proliferating, just like they have said they will fully disclose and disable any weapons programs.”

Current and former hard-line members of Mr. Bush's administration, who drove North Korea policy during his first term but have since lost his ear, have expressed dismay that the White House is not making more of the Syria reports.

Those policy-makers to whom Mr. Bush listens now — Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Christopher R. Hill, the chief negotiator with the North — will not allow the hard-liners, who criticized the recent nuclear agreement even before the Syria mystery, to stall the negotiations, administration officials said.

“The president has decided that it's worth pursuing a deal with North Korea, and that's what matters,” one official said.

In February, Pyongyang agreed in principle to dismantle its nuclear programs, and to shut down its main reactor at Yongbyon as a first step, which it did in July. Earlier this month, it promised to disable Yongbyon's three main facilities and to produce a full declaration of its nuclear efforts and capabilities by year's end.

But critics of the deal — whose other parties are China, Japan, South Korea and Russia — said the text was too vague and left much room for interpretation.

Some of that vagueness became apparent yesterday, when Mr. Bush said the North Koreans had agreed to something that analysts said is not technically part of the deal.

“Step two will be full declaration of any plutonium that has been manufactured and/or the construction of bombs, along with a full declaration of any proliferation activities,” the president said.

The Oct. 3 document does say that the North “committed not to transfer nuclear materials, technology or know-how,” but when it comes to the declaration, it says it “will include all nuclear facilities, materials and programs.” There is no mention of documenting proliferation activities.

Nevertheless, such a disclosure “is implied in their commitment, and we intend to hold them to it,” said Gordon Johndroe, spokesman for the National Security Council at the White House.

The agreement is also vague on whether North Korea is required to list any nuclear weapons it has built. Kim Kye-gwan, the chief North Korean negotiator, was reported as saying two weeks ago: “We can't declare nuclear weapons this year, because if we do it at this stage, our nuclear-weapons technology level will be revealed.”

Bruce Klingner, senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation, said the “very vague document” demonstrates the need for “specific treaty language prohibiting further proliferation and requiring a full declaration” of past activities.

Congress is likely to ask questions about the Syria reports during Mr. Hill's next testimony on the deal, Mr. Klingner said.

“The administration needs to come clean on this story to the degree possible to garner more support for the negotiations,” he said.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/article/20071018/FOREIGN/110180044/1003>

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New York Times
October 18, 2007

Putin Is Said To Offer Idea On Standoff Over Iran

By Nazila Fathi

TEHRAN, Oct. 17 — Russia's president, Vladimir V. Putin, proposed a new way to help resolve the standoff over Iran's nuclear program during an extraordinary meeting with Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said the country's chief nuclear negotiator on Wednesday.

The negotiator, Ali Larijani, told reporters that Mr. Putin, who was granted an audience with Ayatollah Khamenei on Tuesday evening, "offered a special proposal." Neither the Iranians nor the Russians would disclose any details, but Mr. Larijani said the Iranian side was studying it.

"One of the issues he brought up was his view on the nuclear issue," Mr. Larijani said, according to the ISNA news agency. "We are reviewing it now."

State-run television and news agencies quoted Ayatollah Khamenei as telling Mr. Putin, "We will think about what you said and about your proposal," even as he added that Iran was "determined to provide our country's need for nuclear energy."

Mr. Putin's visit highlighted the fact that Russia seems to be increasingly distancing itself from the United States and the Europeans on a strategy to curb Iran's nuclear program. While those nations have sought to impose new Security Council sanctions on Iran, the governments of Russia and China have resisted, arguing that more time is needed.

Earlier, Moscow proposed to enrich uranium in Russia for use in Iranian reactors, assuring that Iran would not produce the highly enriched uranium needed for nuclear weapons. Tehran rejected the idea as an impingement on its sovereignty.

During his visit, which included a meeting with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Mr. Putin also warned the West against a military attack on Iran, stressing that Tehran had a right to peaceful nuclear energy. He also said that the Russian-built nuclear power plant at Bushehr, in southern Iran, where construction has been slowed by a dispute over payments, would be finished as scheduled.

Underscoring the friendly nature of the visit, a joint statement spoke of "the closeness of Russian and Iranian positions over the key world questions and the development of cooperation to establish a world order that is more just."

It also stressed the need to solve the nuclear issue as quickly as possible "through politics and diplomacy"; committed Russia to speed up discussions for the construction and sale of Tupolev 214 and Tupolev 334 airliners; and spoke of increased cooperation in energy and aerospace.

Russia is eager to deepen its diplomatic and economic relations with Iran. Iran's Fars news service reported that Mr. Putin said during his meeting with Ayatollah Khamenei that Russia was ready to "expand ties without limitations." As Iran's most senior official, the ayatollah has final word on state matters, and his decision to see Mr. Putin was regarded as significant in itself. Even Mohamed ElBaradei, the director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations nuclear watchdog, did not see Ayatollah Khamenei when he visited here last year.

Mr. Putin has recently met with Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Russia and China hold veto power on the Security Council, and Iran is relying on both countries, which have important trade ties with Iran, to oppose another round of sanctions. Moscow has already voted for two sets of milder sanctions. The United States and European countries have said that they will impose tougher sanctions on Iran if it refuses to suspend its sensitive uranium enrichment activities.

Mr. Larijani is scheduled to discuss Iran's nuclear case with Javier Solana, the European Union's foreign policy chief, in Rome next Tuesday.

An American official who was part of a delegation that visited the Kremlin last week suggested that Mr. Putin intimated in private that he had concerns about Iran's nuclear program as well.

"I will tell you that what we heard last week once the cameras left was not bad," said the official, who asked not to be identified because he was not authorized to speak on the record. "I cannot rule out that he delivered a message that we would like."

He also said that the construction delays at Bushehr were not coincidental and were part of Russia's strategy of proceeding slowly with aid to Iran.

In Jerusalem, Ms. Rice answered questions about Mr. Putin's visit to Iran by saying that Russia continued to back the diplomatic process to review the possibility of new sanctions following reports next month by Dr. ElBaradei and Mr. Solana. Russia, along with China, opposed a new round of sanctions at a meeting in New York last month.

Neither Mr. Solana nor Dr. ElBaradei was informed by the Russians about Mr. Putin's proposal, officials in both their offices said. Ms. Rice discussed Iran extensively during meetings in Moscow last week, including one with Mr. Putin, who she said supported the goal of preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons. "I saw no evidence that Russia intends to do anything but stay on that path we laid out," she said, appearing with Israel's foreign minister, Tzipi Livni.

But clearly Russia has emerged as at least a semi-independent broker in the nuclear crisis. Just hours after Mr. Putin left Iran, Israel announced that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert would visit Russia on Thursday for what one official described as a "last-minute, urgent meeting."

C. J. Chivers contributed reporting from Moscow, and Steven Lee Myers from Jerusalem.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/18/world/middleeast/18iran.html?ref=world>

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Washington Post

October 18, 2007

Pg. 20

Divisions In Europe May Thwart U.S. Objectives On Iran

By Robin Wright, Washington Post Staff Writer

European governments are deeply divided over how far and how fast to go in imposing new sanctions against Iran, in what could undermine a new U.S. effort to mobilize allies to act outside of the United Nations, according to European officials.

At a meeting in Brussels on Monday, European Union foreign ministers agreed to consider modest steps but not necessarily the kind of dramatic moves that Washington is now considering, the officials said. The session over what Europe should do to pressure Iran was described by officials as "fractious," "intense" and with "a bit of blood left on the carpet" from the debate.

Britain and France, which initiated the call for joint European action, back tough new multilateral sanctions outside the U.N. Security Council. But other countries, notably Italy and Austria, want significantly less serious steps.

Germany fell somewhere in between, said European and U.S. officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the debate is not public.

Squeezing Iran through diplomatic pressure and sanctions has become one of the Bush administration's top priorities because of questions about Tehran's nuclear objectives. "My intent is to continue to rally the world, to send a focused signal to the Iranian government that we will continue to work to isolate you in the hopes that at some point in time somebody else shows up and says it's not worth the isolation," President Bush said in a news conference yesterday.

But the Bush administration has been increasingly concerned about the international community losing momentum, since Russia and China -- which both wield vetoes on the Security Council -- have delayed a third U.N. resolution, originally expected to happen this summer, until the end of the year or early next year. Moscow and Beijing also oppose U.S. efforts to significantly increase pressure on Tehran after it failed to comply with two earlier resolutions demanding suspension of a uranium-enrichment program that can be used both for nuclear energy and to develop the world's deadliest bomb.

In response, Washington and Europe last month signaled their intent to organize a parallel process for tougher steps against Tehran. The Bush administration also hopes to bring in other major powers that do business with Iran, such as Japan, Australia and Canada.

But there are already cracks across the Atlantic. While the United States is considering a package of actions that will effectively punish Iran for its intervention in Iraq as well as for its suspected nuclear program, the Europeans do not want to "confuse" the two issues, said a well-placed European official familiar with the debate.

Bush administration officials, for example, want to designate Iran's elite Quds Force as a supporter of terrorism under a presidential executive order. But in European eyes, the Quds Force is linked mainly to arming, training and funding militant factions in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. "We want to keep our eyes on the nuclear file," said a second European official.

The 27-nation European Union is also unlikely to move with the speed preferred by the Bush administration, which fears time will work in Iran's favor if it is developing a nuclear weapons capability. The European Union will not even introduce proposals until its next meeting in mid-November and a vote may not happen this year, European sources added.

A senior administration official said yesterday that Washington was not trying to "foist" a specific formula. "We have not suggested that they emulate exactly what we may or may not do," he said.

A senior U.S. official in Europe said there is no U.S.-European split. "They're accepting our premise and just haggling over the details," he said, but he acknowledged differences over specific steps.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/17/AR2007101702211.html>

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Financial Times
October 18, 2007

US Offers Putin Deal Over Missile Shield

By Demetri Sevastopulo in Washington and James Blitz and Stephen Fidler in Brussels

The US has told Russia it would be willing to delay switching on a missile defence system in Europe until both sides agree there was a threat from Iran, according to US officials.

Robert Gates, US defence secretary, and Condoleezza Rice, secretary of state, made the offer to Russian President Vladimir Putin last week, in an attempt to allay Russian concerns about the Pentagon's plan to place 10 missile interceptors in Poland and a radar in the Czech Republic.

A senior US defence official said Washington would continue negotiating with Poland and the Czech Republic towards building the missile defence installations. But he said the US was willing to leave the system switched off until the US and Russia had jointly validated that Iranian ballistic missiles posed a threat.

"It is our intention to proceed with the construction of missile defence in Europe," said Geoff Morrell, Pentagon spokesman. "But the pace at which it becomes operational could be adjusted to meet the threat."

The US wants to develop a missile defence shield in Europe to counter the future potential threat from Iranian long-range ballistic missiles, which US intelligence estimates could target Europe and the US by 2015. Russia believes Iran is much further away from developing missiles with that range.

The US hopes to convince Russia that its evaluation of the Iranian threat is inaccurate. Officials point out that Iran tends to deploy missiles much sooner after their initial flight tests than Russia, which they believe has lulled Moscow into a false sense of security.

In Moscow last weekend, the US and Russia agreed to work together to establish the criteria needed to measure Iranian capabilities. But at a joint press conference, Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, said the process would reaffirm its belief that Iran does not pose an imminent threat.

The US made several proposals on missile defence in Moscow which Mr Lavrov said were "interesting." But he stressed that Russia was adamantly opposed to placing the shield in Poland and the Czech Republic, which suggests that compromise will be difficult to reach.

The US hopes the proposal would also encourage Mr Putin, who visited Tehran for the first time this week, to persuade Iran to halt its uranium enrichment programme. The US made clear it was also concerned about Iranian chemical and biological weapons that could be delivered on long-range missiles.

Mr Putin said again this week that Russia did not take the view that Iran was seeking to build a nuclear weapon. The US said the threat posed by Tehran's nuclear and missiles programme is the main reason to build a Europe-based missile defence system.

President George W. Bush said of Iran on Wednesday: "If you're interested in avoiding World War III, it seems like you ought to be interested in preventing them from having the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon."

Dan Fried, US assistant secretary of state for Europe, in Brussels said the most immediate threat from Iran disappeared then there would be less urgency for such a defence system.

The US also presented Moscow officials with a new proposal on how Russia, the US and European nations could share early-warning information in a way that would, US officials said, diminish the missile threat to them all.

The proposal is to combine information from Russian radars in Azerbaijan and in southern Russia with information from ship-based radars and from US detectors in the Czech Republic, the UK and elsewhere. Interfax news agency quoting Yuri Baluyevsky, Russian chief of staff, said there was "nothing novel" in the proposals.

US officials said the sharing of early-warning information would still leave decisions on whether to fire missile interceptors with respective national capitals. They said while the Russians gave no ground on their earlier objections to the system, they did agree to study the proposal.

Russia has conditioned any co-operation on the US stopping talks with Poland and the Czech Republic. It has also put forward its own proposal to integrate the Garbala radar in Azerbaijan into the US missile defence system instead of the Czech radar. But the US says the radars are different types, and says Garbala can only complement, not replace, the X-band tracking radar in the Czech Republic.

Meanwhile, Ali Larijani, Iran's top security official, on Wednesday told state TV that Mr Putin had given Iranian authorities a "special idea" which was "being looked into". He refused to give details.

Dmitry Peskov, a spokesman for Mr Putin, declined to confirm whether a new proposal had been made.

Other people familiar with the Tehran talks suggested they had provided the Russian president with an opportunity to deliver the message that Iran had to comply with demands to suspend uranium enrichment.

http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/e0b22658-7ce8-11dc-ae2-0000779fd2ac.dwp_uuid=be75219e-940a-11da-82ea-0000779e2340.html?nclink_check=1

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Portents Of A Nuclear Al-Qaeda

By David Ignatius

Rolf Mowatt-Larssen is paid to think about the unthinkable. As the Energy Department's director of intelligence, he's responsible for gathering information about the threat that a terrorist group will attack America with a nuclear weapon.

With his shock of white hair and piercing eyes, Mowatt-Larssen looks like a man who has seen a ghost. And when you listen to a version of the briefing he has been giving recently to President Bush and other top officials, you begin to understand why. He is convinced that al-Qaeda is trying to acquire a nuclear bomb that will leave the ultimate terrorist signature -- a mushroom cloud.

We've all had enough fear-mongering to last a lifetime. Indeed, we have become so frightened of terrorism since Sept. 11, 2001, that we have begun doing the terrorists' job for them by undermining the legal framework of our democracy. And truly, I wish I could dismiss Mowatt-Larssen's analysis as the work of an overwrought former CIA officer with too many years in the trenches.

But it's worth listening to his warnings -- not because they induce more numbing paralysis but because they might stir sensible people to take actions that could detect and stop an attack. That's why his boss, Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman, is encouraging him to speak out. Mowatt-Larssen doesn't want to anguish later that he didn't sound the alarm in time.

Mowatt-Larssen has been gathering this evidence since a few weeks after Sept. 11, when then-CIA Director George Tenet asked him to create a new branch on weapons of mass destruction in the agency's counterterrorism center. He helped Tenet prepare the chapter on al-Qaeda's nuclear efforts that appears in Tenet's memoir, "At the Center of the Storm." Now that the uproar over Tenet's mistaken "slam dunk" assessment of the Iraqi threat has died down, it's worth rereading this account. It provides a chilling, public record of al-Qaeda's nuclear ambitions.

Mowatt-Larssen argues that for nearly a decade before Sept. 11, al-Qaeda was seeking to acquire weapons of mass destruction. As early as 1993, Osama bin Laden offered \$1.5 million to buy uranium for a nuclear device, according to testimony presented in federal court in February 2001. When the al-Qaeda leader was asked in 1998 if he had nuclear or chemical weapons, he responded: "Acquiring weapons for the defense of Muslims is a religious duty. If I have indeed acquired these weapons, then I thank God for enabling me to do so."

Even as al-Qaeda was preparing to fly its airplane bombs into buildings, the group was also trying to acquire nuclear and biological capabilities. In August 2001, bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, met around a campfire with Pakistani scientists from a group called Umma Tameer-E-Nau to discuss how al-Qaeda could build a nuclear device. Al-Qaeda also had an aggressive anthrax program that was discovered in December 2001 after bin Laden was driven from his haven in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda proclaimed a religious rationale to justify the WMD attacks it was planning. In June 2002, a Kuwaiti-born cleric named Suleiman Abu Ghaith posted a statement on the Internet saying that "al-Qaeda has the right to kill 4 million Americans" in retaliation for U.S. attacks against Muslims. And in May 2003, at the same time Saudi operatives of al-Qaeda were trying to buy three Russian nuclear bombs, a cleric named Nasir al-Fahd issued a fatwa titled "A Treatise on the Legal Status of Using Weapons of Mass Destruction Against Infidels." Interrogations of al-Qaeda operatives confirmed that the planning was serious. Al-Qaeda didn't yet have the materials for a WMD attack, but it wanted them.

Most chilling of all was Zawahiri's decision in March 2003 to cancel a cyanide attack in the New York subway system. He told the plotters to stand down because "we have something better in mind." What did that mean? More than four years later, we still don't know.

After 2004, the WMD trail went cold, according to Mowatt-Larssen. Many intelligence analysts have concluded that al-Qaeda doesn't have nuclear capability today. Mowatt-Larssen argues that a more honest answer is: We don't know.

So what to do about this spectral danger? The first requirement, says Mowatt-Larssen, is to try to visualize it. What would it take for al-Qaeda to build a bomb? How would it assemble the pieces? How would the United States and its allies deploy their intelligence assets so that they could detect a plot before it was carried out? How would we reinvent intelligence itself to avert this ultimate catastrophe?

A terrorist nuclear attack, as Tenet wrote in his book, would change history. If we can see how this story might end, perhaps we can deflect the arrow before it hits its target.

The writer is co-host of PostGlobal, an online discussion of international issues.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/17/AR2007101702114.html>

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Washington Times

October 18, 2007

Pg. 19

America Becomes Safer

Progress made on missile defense

By Peter Huessy

The United States recently tested a missile defense system. The interceptor from Vandenberg USAF base in California smashed into a target launched from Alaska in a demonstration of the technological prowess of U.S. industry. A message was sent to North Korea that any rocket launched at Los Angeles is going to be destroyed — in other words, that nuclear blackmail is off the table.

The test also gave impetus to deploying a defense in Europe against Iranian rockets. However, before the microscopic dust from the test had settled on the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, the critics came forward belittling the system, claiming in one instance that there was no threat to address. The Center for Defense Information (CDI), published an assessment of missile-defense test failures.

But the analysis asserted that there is no need for a missile defense against Iranian or North Korean rockets because both are no threat to either the United States or our European allies.

Monitoring the threat from ballistic missiles is "one of the most important missions for the intelligence community in the post-Cold War world" according to a 1999 statement from Robert Walpole, the national intelligence officer for strategic and nuclear programs. But in making its assertion, CDI made no reference to missile threat assessments from our intelligence community.

According to Mr. Walpole, the 1995 National Intelligence Estimate [NIE] said North Korea "could flight test an ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile] by the year 2000," and that the "ballistic missile threat that we face is serious; it's growing." In 1998, a North Korean missile test included "an unanticipated third stage" which surprised the intelligence community and provided confirmation that Pyongyang "was pursuing an ICBM."

The NIE estimated that the North Korean rockets could deliver a 1,000-kilogram payload some 4,000 to 6,000 kilometers (in other words, approximately 2,500 to 3,800 miles.) That means it could "reach Alaska, Hawaii, with this large payload," Mr. Walpole said. In addition, a successful third stage would give North Korea the capability of reaching the "rest of the United States with smaller payloads."

According to Mr. Walpole, the 1998 North Korean Taepodong rocket launch "served as a wake-up call." It proved the central assertion of the Rumsfeld commission report on missile threats to the United States, which came out in 1998. The report underscored that "it is possible for a country with a well-based Scud [missile] technology infrastructure to develop an ICBM in five years."

As Mr. Walpole said of the report: "I can't disagree with that." Furthermore, he warned, foreign assistance was becoming fundamental to the ballistic missile threat, not only for the North Korean rockets but specifically for the Iranian Shahab-3 ballistic missile. In addition, the sale of such ballistic missiles could occur with little or no warning.

According to current intelligence reports, the North Korean government transferred to Tehran the BM-25 ballistic missile, along with launchers. The weapons have a range of 3,400 kilometers, which gives Iran the capability of striking targets throughout Europe. This missile transfer underscores the correctness of Mr. Walpole's 1999 assessment and highlights the current threat we face from both Pyongyang and Tehran. In addition, the reported transfer of nuclear material from North Korea to Syria (aboard a freighter whose cargo was labeled "cement" and could very well have been destined for Iran) underscores the hazards facing the United States and allies if we listen to the critics and their belittling of the threats now so obvious to the American public.

The United States previously failed to begin the deployment of a missile defense of the American continent because past national leaders remained wedded to mutual assured destruction (MAD). They reasoned that the policy worked with the former Soviet Union, and wondered what could be wrong with the same embrace of the mullahs in Tehran and the Soprano government in Pyongyang. Thus it was the Clinton administration helped "cook the books" by withholding the 1995 threat assessments from "key judgments" submitted to Congress.

A little history lesson is instructive. These same critics failed to support President Reagan's deployment of missiles in Europe and the United States, the Pershings, Ground-Launched Cruise Missiles and Peacekeepers, when fielding a continental U.S. missile defense was prohibited by the ABM [Anti-Ballistic Missile] Treaty. The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted from this prudent policy of peace through strength, requiring tough decisions by a strong U.S. president.

In 2002, President Bush eliminated the stranglehold of the ABM treaty, and the United States moved to begin the deployment of a layered, global missile defense to protect the American people, our allies and friends abroad. Coupled with a continued strong deterrent, America is becoming safer as we move forward in the 21st century. *Peter Huessy is president of GeoStrategic Analysis.*

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/article/20071018/EDITORIAL/110180008/1013>

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New York Times
October 19, 2007

Air Force Officers To Be Fired For Violating Nuclear Safety

WASHINGTON, Oct. 18 (AP) — The Air Force is planning to fire at least five officers for violations of nuclear security rules that allowed armed missiles to be mistakenly loaded on a B-52 bomber and flown over the central part of the United States, officials said Thursday.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, are to be briefed Friday on the disciplinary plan and other results of an Air Force investigation of the flight, which took place on Aug. 30.

The B-52 flew from Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota to Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana with six nuclear-tipped cruise missiles mounted under one wing. A total of 36 hours passed before the missiles were properly secured, officials have said.

Mr. Gates said Thursday that officials wanted to reduce the chances of another such episode “to the lowest level humanly possible.” But it “would be silly” to promise it will not happen again, he said at a news conference with Admiral Mullen.

Neither Mr. Gates nor Admiral Mullen commented on the pending disciplinary action.

Two Defense Department officials, who were not authorized to discuss the report on the record, said earlier Thursday that the Air Force investigation found that long-established procedures for handling the munitions had not been followed. One official said the report recommended that five or more officers be relieved of their duties.

The officials declined to say what procedures had not been followed. But the events in August would have required a series of lapses by a number of people.

The Air Force said last month that one munitions squadron commander was fired shortly after the flight and that ground crews and others involved had been temporarily decertified for handling weapons.

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/19/us/19missile.html?_r=1&ref=washington&oref=slogin

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Washington Post
October 19, 2007

Pg. 5

Analysis

Bush's War Rhetoric Reveals The Anxiety That Iran Commands

By Peter Baker, Washington Post Staff Writer

When President Bush this week raised the specter of World War III if Iran manages to build nuclear weapons, he not only roiled the diplomatic world, he also underscored how much Iran has come to shadow the political dialogue both here in Washington and on the presidential campaign trail.

While Iraq has faded from the Beltway debate for now, Iran has emerged as the top foreign policy topic of the moment. Democratic candidates are arguing about Bush's efforts against Iran, with underdogs accusing front-runner Hillary Rodham Clinton of giving the president a blank check. Republican candidates, on the other hand, are vying over who would be toughest on Iran, with each vowing to take military action if necessary.

Bush's comments at his Wednesday news conference only fueled the discussion and may have also signaled a shift in his personal redline in Tehran's progress toward a nuclear weapon. With most attention focused on the doomsday scenario he invoked, another part of his answer may be telling. Although in the past he has said it is "unacceptable" for Iran to possess a nuclear bomb, Bush said Wednesday that it is unacceptable for it to even know how to build a bomb.

The talk of military options has led to sometimes feverish speculation that a strike may be imminent, a notion dismissed by administration officials who say that Bush is committed to diplomacy at this point. But with 15 months

left in office, Bush may eventually confront the choice of dealing with Iran's program or passing the problem onto a successor.

For now, the White House spent yesterday trying to douse the flames of Bush's news conference remark. "If you're interested in avoiding World War III," he said, "it seems like you ought to be interested in preventing them from having the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon."

White House press secretary Dana Perino said that was "a rhetorical point," not a threat. "The president was not making any war plans, and he wasn't making any declarations," she said. "He was making a point, and the point is that we do not believe . . . Iran should be allowed to pursue nuclear weapons."

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said Bush meant that a nuclear Iran would provoke its neighbors. "You very likely would have a nuclear arms race in the Middle East," he said, which would increase "the risk of an accident or a miscalculation or of those weapons or materials falling into the hands of terrorists."

Bush's comments drew a sharp statement from the Iranian Foreign Ministry, which condemned his "warlike rhetoric," the Associated Press reported. "This sort of policy will jeopardize peace and security at the international level," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini.

Some Democrats criticized Bush for an alarmist tone. "He continues to dial up the fear factor instead of reaching to bring this world together, to work together, to make sure that we can avoid World War III or any other war, for that matter, and end the war we're in that we can't get out of," Sen. Barbara Boxer (Calif.) said on MSNBC.

Yet analysts said the rhetoric disguises the fact that Democrats and Republicans generally agree on Iran while emphasizing different parts of the strategy. For the most part, leaders in both parties advocate diplomacy and sanctions to pressure Tehran and generally do not rule out the use of force should it be necessary. "There's some degree of consensus," said Ray Takeyh, a scholar at the Council on Foreign Relations. "I don't think anybody's looking forward to expanding the zone of conflict in the Middle East."

Michael Rubin of the American Enterprise Institute said the debate overemphasizes the worst-case options. "Iran getting nuclear weapons would be like dying of cancer," he said. "Military strikes would be like dying of a heart attack." An attack on Iran might not even stop its nuclear program, he said, but "it would upset the world, it would bog us down, it would drive up the price of oil."

Some suggest that the United States may have to accept that it cannot stop Iran. "There are ways to live with a nuclear Iran," retired Gen. John Abizaid, former chief of U.S. Central Command, said at the Center for Strategic and International Studies last month. "Let's face it: We lived with a nuclear Soviet Union, we've lived with a nuclear China and we're living with [other] nuclear powers, as well."

The leading Republican candidates rejected this scenario, using speeches to the Republican Jewish Coalition this week to rule out a nuclear Iran. "We've seen what Iran will do with ordinary weapons," said Rudolph W. Giuliani, the former New York mayor and GOP front-runner. "If I am president of the United States, I guarantee you we will never find out what they will do if they get nuclear weapons, because they're not going to get nuclear weapons." Other candidates also rattled sabers. "The U.S. must make it clear we will not allow Iran to become a nuclear threat," said former senator Fred D. Thompson (Tenn.). "The military must never be off the table." Former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney said: "Iran has to understand that not only is the military option on the table, it is in our hand" and the next president must make clear that "this is not just some far-flung idea . . . but instead we are poised and ready to act."

Arizona Sen. John McCain, who once jokingly sang "Bomb, bomb Iran" to the tune of the Beach Boys' "Barbara Ann," agreed but held out hope it will not come to that. "I keep praying every night that we will avoid a conflict with Iran," he told the Associated Press. "I don't think it's inevitable that we're in a conflict with Iran. But I certainly see it as one scenario that could -- and I emphasize could -- take place if we are not effective" using diplomacy and sanctions.

The Democratic debate has come from the other direction. Sen. Barack Obama (Ill.) and former senator John Edwards (N.C.) have criticized Clinton for voting for a resolution labeling Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps a terrorist organization, arguing that such a designation empowers Bush and could lead to war.

Still, Bush's threshold remains uncertain as he tries to rally international pressure on Iran. Some saw his declaration as meaning that even "knowledge" of nuclear bomb-making would be unacceptable. "They have just redefined the nature of the problem," said Flynt Leverett, a former National Security Council official under Bush who is now at the New American Foundation.

Bush spokesman Gordon Johndroe said that would be reading too much into the president's words. "There's been no change in the policy; that's just another way of saying we don't want them to develop nuclear weapons."

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/18/AR2007101802394.html>

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