Stop the war talk

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

There are a couple of lessons in the latest intelligence finding that Iran does not have a nuclear weapons program.

The first is the continuing need for skepticism whenever war talk emanates from this administration. We need only go to "I" in the alphabet - Iraq and lately Iran.

The other is that international pressure, short of military options, can work. Iran, though continuing to enrich uranium, is said to have given up its nuclear program in 2003. Contradicting an earlier finding, the new National Intelligence Estimate says Iran halted the program "primarily in response to increasing international scrutiny and pressure."

So can we stop the war talk now?

Instead, the United States should try direct talks to make sure Iran continues to forgo nuclear weaponry, realizing, however, that in negotiations, one side generally doesn't give up what it wants before talks even begin. That, however, is what the U.S. has been asking of Iran, a demand made to the tune of sabers rattling.

The Iranians must cease uranium enrichment as a condition of direct talks. French Ambassador Pierre Vimont reminded the Editorial Board in a visit a couple of weeks ago that this is his country's position as well.

His rationale: At the end of such talks, Iran would have what the other countries had sought to prevent - enough enriched uranium to produce nuclear weapons. OK, but in the absence of direct talks, Iran will have this anyway. The demand seems almost designed to prevent direct talks. And if military options puzzlingly remain a preference, talks don't remove them.

Iran says it wants nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. The world has been dubious. The administration a few weeks ago imposed harsher sanctions against Iran and is joining other countries in urging harsher action from the U.N. Security Council. This new intelligence estimate may dampen that enthusiasm in other countries.

But particularly unhelpful throughout this process has been the saber rattling. President Bush invoked the prospect of World War III. Vice President Dick Cheney was warning of dire consequences. Others have

suggested bombing Iran. This was foolhardy even before this new assessment. An Iran engaged through direct diplomacy is one that will be more prone, though not guaranteed, to moderate its position. Much damage can still be done in the remaining months of the Bush administration. When it comes to Iran, this new intelligence estimate makes it clear that at the very least, the administration should tone down the rhetoric.

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