

McConnell fears Iran nukes by 2015

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Iran's development of nuclear arms is "very dangerous," and Tehran could deploy the weapons within the next several years, the nation's most senior intelligence official told the Senate yesterday.

"We assess that Tehran seeks to develop nuclear weapons and has shown greater interest in drawing out the negotiations rather than reaching an acceptable diplomatic solution," said retired Vice Adm. Michael McConnell, the new director of national intelligence.

"This is a very dangerous situation, as a nuclear Iran could prompt destabilizing countermoves by other states in this volatile region," he told members of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Iran could have the capability to build nuclear weapons by 2015 and about the same time will be able to mount a nuclear warhead on a missile, Mr. McConnell said in response to a question from Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, New York Democrat.

Asked whether Iran would use a nuclear weapon against Israel, Mr. McConnell said: "They've stated that they would consider that, that Israel shouldn't exist, should be wiped off the map. I don't know that I would conclude that they would use it in a prescribed period of time, but that risk would be there."

Mr. McConnell said Iran poses a threat to the United States beyond its nuclear weapons program and is seeking to project military power "with the goal of dominating the Gulf region." Iran is working to disrupt U.S. military operations and the reinforcement of U.S. forces in the region, "thereby raising the political, financial and human cost of our presence," he said.

"To this end, Tehran views its mounting inventory of ballistic missiles as an integral part of its strategy to deter and, if necessary, retaliate against forces in the region, to include United States forces," Mr. McConnell said.

Tehran's power projection capabilities include "terrorist operations" that are aimed at regime preservation, deterring U.S. or Israeli attacks and driving the United States out of the Middle East, he said.

The Lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah is a key element of Iran's strategic goals, and the group could carry out attacks against the United States if it or Iran is threatened, Mr. McConnell said.

He also described Iran's role in Iraq, saying the United States has evidence that Iran is training insurgents at sites outside Iraq to use explosively

formed penetrators against U.S. troops.

“If Iran is training Iraqi militants in the use of Iranian weapons, which are then being used to kill Americans in Iraq, I think that’s a very serious act, and one that we ought to consider taking steps to stop,” said Sen. Joe Lieberman, Connecticut independent.

Army Lt. Gen. Michael Maples, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), was asked during the hearing whether China will pose a threat to the United States because of its weapons buildup.

“China, today, could be a military threat,” he said. “They have intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear warheads and so on, so it’s a matter of they’re building their military, in my view, to reach some state of parity with the United States. So, in a threat sense, it becomes intentions. So they’re a threat today, they would become an increasing threat over time.”

But Tom Fingar, the deputy director of national intelligence for analysis, said China has had nuclear capability for decades and that Beijing “appeared to have decided that we are not an enemy” and wants a peaceful global environment to better address its “very severe social problems.”

Gen. Maples also told the Senate panel that North Korea is taking “initial steps” to comply with the Feb. 13 Beijing agreement by allowing international inspections of the Yongbyon nuclear facility. The DIA will be watching “a number of successive steps” that North Korea needs to take under the agreement, Gen. Maples said.

Joseph DeTrani, the mission manager for North Korea in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, disclosed during the hearing that U.S. intelligence agencies have information that Pyongyang acquired “material sufficient for a production-scale capability of enriching uranium” in violation of agreements to denuclearize. It was the first time a senior U.S. intelligence official had discussed the covert North Korean uranium-enrichment program publicly.

“They were confronted with that information in October 2002, and at that time they admitted to having such a program,” Mr. DeTrani said. “And immediately thereafter, that’s when they pulled out of the [nonproliferation treaty], they asked the [International Atomic Energy Agency] to leave and so forth.”

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