Think Again: Iran’s Missile Program

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In spite of Iran’s verified implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which has rolled back Iran’s nuclear program and subjected it to far-reaching inspections, Iran’s periodic testing of ballistic missiles has provoked substantial angst in Washington. Under UN Security Council Resolution 2231, the resolution endorsing the JCPOA, Iran is “called upon not to undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons” including tests for a period that will last up to eight years. While that language does not impose a binding legal obligation on Iran, both the U.S. and other parties have criticized Iran’s missile testing as “inconsistent” with UNSC Resolution 2231, though not a formal violation.

Since President Trump entered office, his administration has rolled out eight rounds of new sanctions designations and signed new sanctions legislation into law targeting Iran’s missile program. Moreover, the President in January threatened to terminate the JCPOA unless Congress passes legislation stating “that long-range missile and nuclear weapons programs are inseparable, and that Iran’s development and testing of missiles should be subject to severe sanctions.”

Despite this flurry of activity, there have been subtle shifts in Iran’s missile program that could reduce the program’s threat. In particular, Iran’s articulation of a range limit to its missiles and a shift toward short-range solid fueled missiles signals an interest in conventional, regional deterrence, not long-range nuclear missiles.

**Iran is Focusing on Short-Range Missiles Aimed at Conventional Deterrence**

The commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari, asserted that Iran’s missile program is limited to a 2,000 kilometer radius around Iran under a policy endorsed by Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Similar statements have been issued in the past, though Jafari’s statement appears to be a firming up of prior policy and a signal to the U.S. and others regarding the relative limits of Iran’s missile ambitions.

Moreover, Iran’s testing since the conclusion of the JCPOA appears consistent with this limit. According to an analysis from the Center for Nonproliferation Studies and Nuclear Threat Initiative, Iran has shifted from seeking longer range systems toward short-range solid fueled missiles signals an interest in conventional, regional deterrence, not long-range nuclear missiles.

“the JCPOA has helped redirect Iran's priorities for its missile program away from developing an ICBM (whose only purpose would be as a nuclear delivery system), to developing solid-fueled versions of its short-range missiles. While such missiles could also be nuclear-capable, they do not extend Iran’s range or payload capabilities meaningfully, and appear intended to serve a conventional purpose.”

While a 2,000 kilometer range limit would include Israel and Saudi Arabia, in addition to numerous U.S. bases in the region, Iran’s focus on conventional solid-fueled missiles suggests they are indeed aimed at
regional deterrence – as opposed to long-range missile development that could threaten Europe or the U.S. mainland. Such a shift also meshes with Iran’s signing of the JCPOA, which ensures Iran’s missile program cannot be fitted with nuclear warheads. This is a positive that could be built upon through deft diplomacy, or undermined via diplomatic sabotage.

**Pressure Is Unlikely to Change, and May Even Reinforce, Iran’s Missile Calculus**

Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats stated in the annual Worldwide Threats Report this week that Iran “has the largest inventory of ballistic missiles in the Middle East.” Yet, Iran’s competitors are not without missile inventories that match or exceed Iran’s capabilities. Saudi Arabia reportedly maintains dozens of missiles capable of striking Iran, with a maximum range of 2,650 kilometers. Israel is believed to possess both a sizable nuclear arsenal and ballistic missiles capable of traveling up to 6,500 kilometers. Moreover, Iran lacks a modern air force due to a continuing arms embargo and is outspent militarily by Saudi Arabia at a 5:1 rate.

While Iran may prove willing to negotiate over the range of its missiles or confidence building measures with other states if the JCPOA is adhered to, Iran views its missile program as a regional deterrent that is central to its national defense doctrine. Sanctions have not altered that calculus and major arms buildups among Iran’s neighbors have likely strengthened it.

Much of this doctrine stems from Iran’s experience in the Iran-Iraq war, when Iran was almost completely isolated within the region and globally as the world turned a blind eye and even aided Saddam Hussein’s chemical attacks on Iran. Moreover, while Hussein was able to target missiles at Iranian cities from within Iraq, Iran had no similar deterrence or response capability. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has stated that Iran needs its missile program “to prevent another Saddam Hussein around the corner attacking us with chemical weapons because the international community has failed miserably in protecting the Iranian people.” The development of a conventional deterrent and response capability is one that has broad support within Iran across political divides. Unless the U.S. and international community engages on the fundamental issues at the heart of Iran’s missile calculus, no amount of sanctions or regional arms sales will succeed in altering it.

**Iran’s Missile Testing Has Remained Sporadic**

There were only a handful of confirmed reports of Iranian missile launches in 2017. These include:

- Iran test-fired a medium-range ballistic missile January 29;
- Iran test-fired a pair of short-range ballistic missiles in early March;
- Iran launched eight missiles at ISIS (a U.S. enemy) on June 18 in response to a terror attack in Tehran;

While President Trump took to Twitter to allege another Iranian missile launch September 23, this report was actually based on old video of the January test. Further, while Iran test-fired a Simorgh satellite rocket July 27 amid passage of Congressional sanctions targeting Iran’s missile program, that rocket is not designed to be capable of reentering the atmosphere and thus has limited military applications.
It is noteworthy that the July 27 launch appears to be the last undertaken by Iran - a testing pause of more than six months that has extended into 2018. In roughly the same period, the U.S. Navy has reported a significant lapse in dangerous run-ins with the IRGC in the Persian Gulf. While these trends should be monitored, it appears possible that Iran is attempting to avoid giving the U.S. a pretext to sabotage the JCPOA and turn Europe against Iran.

Iran launched roughly five missile tests per year from 2006 to 2012 before nuclear negotiations involving the U.S. gained traction in 2013, according to Michael Elleman of the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Iran largely abstained from missile tests while the negotiations that led to the JCPOA were underway. Since then, the frequency of Iran’s missile tests has been largely consistent with past practices, and - barring major changes - there remains little reason to expect Iran to dramatically ramp up or seek to field a missile capable of reaching beyond the region.

To put Iran’s missile testing in perspective, the CNS-NTI report notes that North Korea tested 14 missiles capable of traveling more than 3,000 kilometers between the signing of the JCPOA and August of 2017, a feat that has not been replicated by Iran.

**Transfers to Yemen?**

U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley has taken the lead for the administration in alleging that Iran transferred missiles to Houthi rebels in Yemen, which were in turn launched against Saudi Arabia. Iran has vociferously denied the claim while indicating that Houthi missile stocks were left over from prior Yemeni governments. While Russia has dismissed the Trump administration’s allegations as inconclusive, a confidential UN report has indicated that Iran “failed to block ballistic missile supplies from being used by Houthi rebels.”

Saudi Arabia’s intervention in Yemen - with substantial military assistance from the U.S - has been heavily focused on rolling back Iran’s alleged influence there. Yet, at least at the outset of the conflict, ties between Iran and the Houthis were tenuous at best, with Houthi rebels ignoring Iran’s warnings against taking the capital Sanaa in 2014. If Iran-Houthi ties have now progressed to the point where Iranian support has enabled the Houthis to nearly strike key targets in Riyadh, it should be a clear signal to policymakers that U.S. backing of Saudi Arabia’s intervention is having the opposite of its intended effect and is endangering Saudi and regional security.

What is needed is what the Trump administration has avoided since it came into office: serious, multilateral diplomacy aimed at ending the conflict in Yemen and ameliorating all the actors’ security concerns. Absent this, the negative trend line of the war in Yemen is likely to continue, with disastrous results for the Yemeni people and regional security.

**Trump is Escalating Missile Sanctions without a Serious Diplomatic Plan**

Thus far, the Trump administration has continued to designate entities and individuals with ties to Iran’s missile program, while also signing new legislation into law targeting the program. Calls to subject Iran’s program to “severe sanctions” would be largely redundant, as the program is already heavily sanctioned. The administration and Congress’ actions since January 2018 include:
February 2, 2017 – The Treasury Department imposes sanctions on 25 individuals and entities following Iran’s January launch;

May 17, 2017 – The Treasury Department sanctions seven individuals and entities, including a Chinese network, for supporting Iran’s missile program;

July 18, 2017 – The Department of State designates two entities for supporting Iran’s missile program while the Treasury Department designates sixteen entities and individuals for supporting the IRGC;

July 28, 2017 – The Treasury Department imposes sanctions on six Iranian entities supporting Iran’s missile program in response to its launch of the Simorgh space rocket;

August 2, 2017 – The administration signs the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) into law, which mandates the imposition of additional sanctions in response to Iran’s missile program;

August 14, 2017 – The Treasury Department imposes sanctions on eleven entities and individuals, including one entity for supporting Iran’s missile program;

October 13, 2017 – The Treasury Department designates the IRGC as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT), while also designating four entities including for ties to Iran’s missile program;


January 4, 2017 - The Treasury Department sanctioned “five Iran-based entities subordinate to a key element of Iran's ballistic missile program.”

January 12, 2017 - In addition to sanctioning Iranian persons and entities under human rights sanctions, the Treasury Department designated persons and an entity for ties to entities sanctioned for supporting Iran’s missile program.

In the absence of serious, direct diplomatic engagement between the U.S. and Iran, there is little possibility of changing Iran’s security calculus and no possibility of trading in sanctions for concessions on Iran’s missile activity or other concerning behavior – ensuring that the status quo remains the same or worsens, but never sustainably improves.

Moreover, while it is fair to be concerned about the potential uses of Iran’s missile program or other Iranian activity that runs counter to U.S. interests, it is important to ensure that economic pressure is calibrated and proportional. Continuing to ramp up sanctions designations and legislation at such a pace risks undermining sanctions relief obligated under the JCPOA and could harden domestic political pressure within Iran to begin hedging on JCPOA-compliance and take a more aggressive stance towards the U.S. across the region.

Instead of replacing nuclear escalation with missile escalation, the Trump administration and Congress should protect the gains of the nuclear accord and seek to build on them through serious diplomatic engagement. Failure to do so will risk the unraveling of the nuclear accord and the U.S. once again facing the threats of a nuclear-armed Iran or war.