

Iran's Shift to a More Offensive Posture Could Be a Sign of Weakness

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Brief Analysis

Pressures at home and abroad may be driving the regime to embrace new offensive operations and tactics, leaving the door open for a broader offensive strategy if another war erupts in the Middle East.

In the post-9/11 era of regional military interventions, Iran sought to deter invasion by adopting a defensive strategy with a “threat-centric” asymmetric approach. This strategy entailed focusing on its own vulnerabilities and how enemies might exploit them, developing suitable means to detect and respond to imminent threats. Over time, however, the regime appeared to question the efficacy of this approach, especially after President Trump assumed office and pulled the United States out of the nuclear deal. Last year’s deadly Islamic State terrorist attack in Ahvaz—for which Tehran blamed the United States and its regional allies—added to the air of uncertainty, as did Israel’s numerous military strikes against Iranian activities in Syria.

Today, Tehran’s rhetoric and actions indicate that its defensive threat-centric posture may be giving way to an offensive “target-centric” paradigm. The armed forces are already hinting at this new mindset at the tactical and operational levels. If this trend continues—particularly if it results in a wider strategic shift—it could spur Iranian forces or their partners to disrupt the status quo in theaters such as the Golan Heights, west Iraq, and Yemen (e.g., Hodeida and the Bab al-Mandab Strait). This potential willingness to escalate could be exacerbated by the regime’s apparent belief that it is close to overt war with Israel.

SIGNS OF A NEW MILITARY PARADIGM?

Instances of Iran threatening to carry out preemptive action are hardly new—military commanders have been talking about it in clear, open terms for years (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the->

strategic-culture-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-religion-expediency-a). Recently, such statements have struck a more preventive tone in response to the West’s supposed “complex all-out hybrid war” against the Islamic Republic (the wording used last week by Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, the former head of the IRGC and current military advisor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei). Yet the notion of Iran actually initiating a preventive conflict is another matter—any such plans would have to be accompanied by convincing preparations on the ground, carried out in the face of domestic economic and political difficulties.

On January 27, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri, the chairman of Iran’s Armed Forces General Staff, noted that the military has been pursuing a new offensive posture at the operational and tactical levels to enhance deterrence and “protect our interests,” albeit while still maintaining a defensive strategy overall. A day earlier, Brig. Gen. Kiomars Heidari, commander of the Islamic Republic of Iran Army Ground Forces, called it a “new organizational approach to wage offensive and target-centric warfare,” noting that his service branch had nearly completed its transformation into a more agile force with added rapid-reaction and mobile mechanized brigade-level combat units in place of traditional heavy divisions. He also declared tactical asymmetric warfare a thing of the past now that Iran’s conventional forces are confidently “adopting offensive tactics for defensive purposes.” Meanwhile, when the military conducted a series of drills called “Eqtedar (Determination) 97” late last month, observers noted some tactical changes and marginally better mobility—though marred by significant shortcomings in manpower, equipment, and logistics.

Similarly, when the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) conducted the “Great Prophet 12” exercise in December, they reportedly tested new naval and ground offensive tactics, practicing long-range air assaults on enemy islands, amphibious landings on enemy coastal areas, and large-scale seizure of territory for the first time. Although such tactics would arguably fare poorly against a potent conventional force, they could give Israel and other regional actors potential cause for concern if Iran decides to integrate them with its **growing missile capabilities (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-continued-push-for-a-nuclear-ready-missile-capability>)** or its host of militia proxies deployed in various hotspots. As deputy IRGC chief Gen. Hossein Salami noted on January 28, Iran will make more use of such proxies “to face the enemy wherever it decides to make a move against us.” Thus, while Iran previously used a threat-centric approach to determine whether to set up its defensive line along its borders or exploit proxies outside it, this line is expected to become blurrier in the new paradigm.

A MUCH-NEEDED BOOST OF CONFIDENCE

If Iran is indeed pursuing a wider doctrinal transformation, it may have several reasons for doing so. Such a shift could refresh confidence in the military’s capabilities, show how far the regime has come since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, and amplify the self-congratulatory paeans that will no doubt accompany this month’s celebration of the Islamic Republic’s fortieth anniversary. It could also reflect a recognition that the previous paradigm was insufficient to address the risks presented by modern hybrid threats. Likewise, it may indicate eroding faith in the deterrent power of Iran’s existing capabilities and policies, based on the assumption that determined, evolving enemies would eventually find a way to overcome Iran’s static defenses absent the threat of strong offensive capabilities.

Another sign of vulnerability is the fact that IRGC commanders have increasingly been voicing frustration with the government’s supposed eagerness to seek Western help in resolving domestic problems (e.g., facilitating financial and business transactions through mechanisms outlined in the nuclear deal). Perhaps in response to this frustration, senior regime figures have indicated a greater willingness to enter alliances with non-Western powers. For example, General Safavi recently proposed a strategic alliance with Russia and China to counter what he described as U.S. and Israeli hybrid warfare against the regime.

An Iranian paradigm shift could also be a response to the new U.S. approach laid out in the January 2018 **National**

[Defense Strategy \(https://www.defense.gov/explore/story/Article/1656414/what-is-the-national-defense-strategy/\)](https://www.defense.gov/explore/story/Article/1656414/what-is-the-national-defense-strategy/), which emphasized being strategically predictable to partners but operationally unpredictable to enemies. That is, Tehran may be signaling Washington that it will react defensively to a predictable behavior, but offensively and aggressively to unpredictable behavior—as seen in the naval swarming maneuvers and rocket fire that Iranian forces hastily organized near the USS *Stennis* carrier group when it made a short-notice visit to the Persian Gulf in December.

CONCLUSION

If Iran's leaders come to a Clausewitzian fork in their strategic thinking and decide that only surprise offensive war can bring decisive victory, it would represent a drastic departure from their past focus on making incremental gains through indirect action and strategic patience. Yet such a shift may not be so far-fetched at a time when more citizens are losing confidence in the ruling establishment and the unpredictable Trump administration is applying greater pressure.

In the near term, Tehran can be expected to show more signs of nervousness about its deterrent posture, likely by staging further military drills and unveiling offensive equipment and capabilities (even if some of them push the limits of authenticity). Foreign officials should keep especially close watch for the emergence of any first-strike capabilities, whether in the form of new systems or upgrades to existing ones. This could include evidence that the recently unveiled Hoveizeh cruise missile (with a claimed range of 1,350 kilometers) will be deployed on submarines or merchant ships, as well as announcements regarding more-accurate, longer-range weapons like the Dezful compact ballistic missile, which has a claimed range of 1,000 kilometers and high explosive power.

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