

Missiles and Diplomacy:

The Middle East's Dangerous Mix

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Brief Analysis

The temporary seizure by the Spanish navy last week of a ship carrying Scud missiles from North Korea to Yemen was a reminder of the extent of missile proliferation in the Middle East. Similarly, Yemen's insistence on receiving the missiles, despite U.S. pressure, is a reminder of how much priority Middle Eastern states place on missile arsenals.

Why Yemen Wants Missiles

U.S.-Yemeni relations have been tricky for many years. In 1990, Yemen, then a member of the United Nations Security Council, voted against the resolution allowing the use of force against Iraq following the invasion of Kuwait. "That will be the most expensive 'no' vote you will ever cast," a U.S. diplomat told the Yemeni ambassador to the UN in front of an open radio microphone. Three days later, Washington cut its entire \$70 million aid package to the country. Indeed, San'a and Baghdad had had warm relations for years. In 1989, Iraq and Yemen, along with Jordan and a reluctant Egypt, temporarily joined in the short-lived Arab Cooperation Council, which was perceived as a counter to the more pro-Western Gulf Cooperation Council (made up of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates [UAE], and Oman).

U.S.-Yemeni relations improved somewhat in the late 1990s. The United States agreed to some sales of tanks, armored personnel carriers, and patrol craft, which cleared the way for the U.S. Navy to use the strategic port of Aden for bunkering calls -- until the USS Cole was seriously damaged in a suicide bomb attack in 2000. In the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks, President Ali Abdallah Salih visited Washington, where he was feted by President George W. Bush as an ally in the "war on terror." A U.S.-Yemeni security pact was signed allowing for intelligence cooperation against al-Qaeda and the training of Yemeni security officers. Moreover, an aid package worth \$130 million was reportedly approved -- enough to pay three times over for the fifteen Scuds and other equipment seized and released last week.

Some sort of cooperation with Yemen is clearly vital. Osama bin Laden has ancestral roots there, and Yemenis are thought to make up one of the larger national subgroups in al-Qaeda. The targeted assassination in November of an

al-Qaeda leader in Yemen (using a Predator unmanned aircraft and Hellfire missile) showed the benefits of working together. But it was also a reminder that, like Afghanistan, Yemen has only tenuous control over its own territory outside the main towns and cities.

In light of these facts, it was not surprising to hear media speculation that the seized Scuds might be transferred to a more dangerous user. Yet, transferring the missiles to a terrorist group would be implausible, given the difficulty of concealing the required support vehicles from Western intelligence. Transfers to another country (e.g., Iraq) are conceivable, but there is no evidence that Yemen intends to take that route.

Yemen's new Scuds may wind up being aimed at Saudi Arabia, given the countries' historically tempestuous relations. Riyadh puts Salih in roughly the same category as Saddam Husayn, both politically and psychologically. When Salih orchestrated the union of North and South Yemen in 1990, the Saudis saw the emergence, at their back door, of a less-than-friendly, comparatively poor, well-armed state with a native population greater than their own. Hence, few observers were surprised when Riyadh backed an ill-fated 1994 secession attempt by the south.

The 200-mile range of the new Scuds (if indeed they are, as reported, only the North Korean Scud-Bs rather than the Scud Cs or Ds that North Korean scientists have perfected) is insufficient to reach some strategic Saudi targets (e.g., the port city of Jeddah). But the major Saudi air base at Khamis Mushayt is well within range; hence, the new Scuds may arguably counter the base's deterrent threat against Yemeni aggression. Also in probable range is the Saudi strategic missile base at as-Sulayil, where some thirty to fifty Chinese CSS-2 East Wind missiles, capable of reaching all of Yemen, have been based since 1989.

Missiles As the Must-Have Weapon in the Middle East

The moral of the recent Scud saga is that, despite their inaccuracy, such missiles are considered a must-have item for military arsenals in the Middle East. Ever since Iraq used them on Tehran during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War -- prompting hundreds of thousands of citizens to flee temporarily to the countryside -- their impact on an enemy's morale has become legendary. Israel, despite spending hundreds of millions of dollars on antimissile systems, is still fearful that Iraqi Scud attacks could accompany a military confrontation between Washington and Baghdad; hence, it is clear even to poor countries that money spent on missiles is money well spent.

Many countries in the region have expended significant energy on acquiring missiles. Besides the aging CSS-2s they already possess, the Saudis are reportedly looking to buy missiles from North Korea, either directly or through Pakistan. Countries with Scuds include Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria, the UAE, and Yemen. Several of those countries have proven impervious to U.S. pressure to give up their missiles. In 1989, for example, Dubai (part of the UAE) mischievously acquired six Scud launchers and missiles from North Korea but never admitted it (they sit in storage, reportedly unexercised and probably useless). While complaining about the missiles, Washington was prepared to sell the UAE the most advanced version of the F-16 despite U.S. laws discouraging such sales to countries engaging in missile proliferation. More ominously, Egypt has supplemented the Scuds it acquired from the Soviet Union with more recent acquisitions from North Korea -- a move that Washington has overlooked.

Although Scud missiles are not particularly accurate, they can be deadly weapons. For example, Syria has developed a force of Scuds armed with chemical weapons capable of hitting any part of Israel; these missiles have been placed in protective bunkers in the north of the country.

Less than a month ago, the United States signed the new International Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation (ICOC), with Undersecretary of State John Bolton declaring that Washington had "high confidence in its future potential." Yet, the ICOC is based on the U.S.-Russian prelaunch notification scheme, which is a confidence-building measure for states that play by the rules. Because this measure is not particularly relevant to states that ignore or evade agreements, the ICOC is unlikely to do much to stem the transfer of Scuds from rogue regimes.

Indeed, establishing any effective international regime to control the supply of missiles to the Middle East would be extremely difficult. Scuds and other missiles are in the hands of too many states that are willing to transfer them to troublemakers for the right price (e.g., Libya and North Korea transferred Scuds to Iran during the Iraq-Iran War). Moreover, Iran and Iraq, and perhaps other Middle East states, are attempting to manufacture Scuds and more advanced missiles domestically, which suggests that containing missile proliferation will soon become even more difficult.

Although slowing missile proliferation remains a worthy goal, it is only prudent to plan for missile defense as well. Many U.S. allies in the Middle East are interested in missile defense. Nearly all the GCC states (along with Turkey) have acquired the Patriot defense system, and Israel has developed the much more advanced Arrow antimissile system with U.S. funding. One need only look at recent developments in the Middle East to see why the United States has been so interested in developing theater missile defenses that could be deployed to the region.

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