

Missing a Target:

Missile Testing and U.S. Middle East Policy

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Brief Analysis

Over the course of a few days at the end of May, Iran conducted a missile test; Pakistan conducted three such tests; and Israel launched a reconnaissance satellite. Each of these instances serve as proof, if any were needed, that missiles are becoming an important part of the military scene in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. The question for Washington is how the growing sophistication of Middle East/Southwest Asian missiles will affect the stability of this volatile region.

The Missile Tests

Iran. Iran's missile test in May involved a variant of the North Korean Nodong, which the Iranians call the Shahab-3. Along with Iraq, Iran made extensive use of less advanced Scud-type missiles in the 1980-1988 war, when both sides targeted the other's capitals and major cities. Although only high-explosive warheads were used, the damage was extensive and the impact on public morale was even greater. The Shahab's reported 800-mile range makes targets in Israel accessible as well as air bases used by the United States in Saudi Arabia -- where the Combined Air Operations Center at the Prince Sultan Air Base would be vulnerable -- and Turkey. The Iranian missile appears to be less reliable than Pakistan's version, but Tehran is believed to be using Russian engineers to perfect the weapon. This assistance led to reported friction at the May Bush-Putin summit in Moscow.

Pakistan. Pakistan's May tests, conducted amid fears of a nuclear exchange with India, were especially provocative -- and challenging to U.S. policy. Disturbingly, among those watching the first test, which took place on May 25 (the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad), were several foreign observers. These reportedly included at least one prince from Saudi Arabia (a key U.S. ally in the Middle East), a group from North Korea (one component of President George W. Bush's "axis of evil"), and others from Libya (defined by the U.S. government as a state sponsor of terrorism). The missile itself, called a Ghauri (named for a Muslim warrior who defeated a Hindu rival), was derived from North Korea's Nodong missile, which is based on a Soviet Scud design. From Pakistan, this 950-mile-range, nuclear-capable missile can reach most parts of India. From Saudi Arabia, it can hit all of Israel and most of Iran. And Turkey, Greece, and Italy would all be within easy range if the missile were launched from Libya.

Washington had already been concerned about possible Saudi Arabian interest in Pakistan's nuclear and missile capabilities. In May 1999, less than a year after Pakistan had tested two atomic bombs, Saudi defense minister Prince Sultan toured the unsafeguarded uranium-enrichment plant and Ghauri production facilities at Kahuta outside the Pakistani capital of Islamabad. The visit prompted a formal protest from Washington and raised fears that Saudi Arabia was considering the Ghauri to replace the obsolete CSS-2 missiles it had originally purchased from China in 1988. Those Chinese missiles were flown into the kingdom clandestinely, direct to a private airfield on a farm near Riyadh owned by Prince Sultan, the probable next in line for the throne after Crown Prince Abdullah. This incident caused a diplomatic row between Washington and Riyadh, which led to King Fahd demanding that the United States replace its ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Hume Horan. Since then, Chinese technicians have maintained the missiles, reportedly tipped with comparatively ineffective high-explosive warheads, at two bases south of Riyadh. In his autobiography, Saudi assistant minister of defense Prince Khalid (Sultan's son and the former Saudi commander during Operation Desert Storm) described how he, along with his half-brother Bandar (the Saudi ambassador in Washington), negotiated the missile deal with China, reportedly worth \$3.5 billion. Prince Khalid also reported that the missiles were aimed at Israel and Iran.

Israel. The Israeli satellite launch illustrates that Israel remains a step ahead of its regional rivals technologically, but may also have redoubled its efforts to achieve a strategic parity. Recent reports indicate that, apart from missile- and aircraft-delivered nuclear weapons, Israel has also mounted nuclear-tipped missiles on three submarines purchased several years ago from Germany. Such submarines, operating in the Indian Ocean, could counter any missile threat from Iran and Pakistan. They would also provide "second strike" capability, meaning that Israel could inflict immense punishment on any state that mounted a surprise nuclear, chemical, or biological attack that destroyed Israel's ability to respond with air- or land-based missiles.

U.S. Policy

Public U.S. response to missile launches has varied, depending on the country concerned. In the case of Israel, U.S. policy has been to project a silence that suggests weary resignation. At the same time, Pakistan's missile tests drew disapproving words from Washington. Regarding Iranian missile programs, the United States has actively urged Russia and China to end weapons cooperation with that country. But the most active U.S. opposition to a Middle East missile program has long been directed against Iraq's long-range ballistic missiles. Iraq is the only country in the world banned by the UN Security Council from possessing such weapons; there is no international arms control treaty prohibiting the acquisition of these missiles, and the only restriction on the export of missile technology is an informal agreement (the Missile Technology Control Regime) among the major industrial countries. Iraq agreed to give up ballistic missiles with a range greater than 100 miles as part of the 1991 Gulf War ceasefire. But Baghdad has for three years refused access to UN inspectors seeking to verify its compliance with this agreement, making the dubious claim that all Iraqi missiles and missile-production facilities have been destroyed. In early July, UN officials are expected to meet in Vienna with the Iraqi foreign minister and a team of Iraqi experts to discuss the return of inspectors.

Washington's relatively relaxed response to last month's missile tests and satellite launches may well have been constrained by a number of factors: the need to defuse the India-Pakistan crisis, the need to ensure Pakistan's continued cooperation in the war in Afghanistan, the lack of leverage over Iran, the sensitivity of the Saudis to criticism, and the acknowledgment that Israel wants to maintain intelligence capabilities not dependent on the United States. The Bush administration has already signaled acceptance of an inevitably growing missile threat from the Third World. Last week, the United States formally withdrew from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and started work on a new radar in Alaska to spot incoming missiles from countries like North Korea, Iran, or Iraq. The U.S. also successfully tested a ship-based antiballistic missile.

However, there are strong reasons for the United States to make clearer and louder its opposition to missile tests, perhaps by involving the prestige of the president himself. The spread of advanced missile technology could become a major source of tension in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. When married with weapons of mass destruction, such missiles could be horribly destructive.

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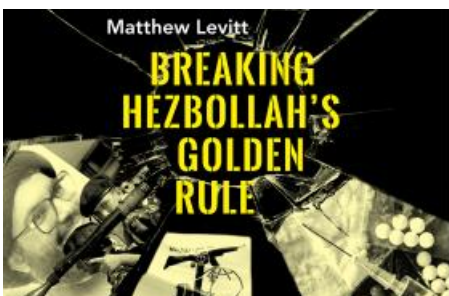
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