Iran after Sanctions: Military Procurement and Force-Structure Decisions

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Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, US diplomacy and sanctions, along with more recent UN Security Council Resolutions, have greatly constrained Tehran's ability to acquire arms.[1] However, by 2020, the ban on arms transfers to Iran will have been lifted in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which gave international legal force to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). (By 2023, a similar ban on aiding Iran's missile programs will have been lifted.) With Iran's economy slowly recovering from the effects of sanctions and its parliament voting to increase the defense budget, the country will soon have more funding available for arms purchases than at any time in the recent past. This paper analyzes the factors that may shape Iran's procurement and force-building decisions, and how these decisions may advance its goal of becoming the Middle East's dominant power.

Back to the future

To understand Iran's future procurement and force-building options, it is important to examine its past choices.[2] It is unclear whether Iran purposefully designed the overall contours of its unique, unbalanced force structure – comprising ground and air forces that are fairly modest relative to the country's size; a highly capable guerilla navy;[3] a massive missile stockpile; and large proxy forces – or has been forced to accept this structure due to procurement constraints. Likewise, it is difficult to determine whether Iran adopted an asymmetric approach to war fighting to compensate for its conventional weakness or because this approach reflected a uniquely Iranian way of war.[4]

Iran reportedly tried to buy massive quantities of surplus Eastern Bloc weapons shortly after the end of the Cold War, when they became available at low cost. At this point, with the 1980–88 Iran–Iraq War fresh in their minds, Iranian leaders may have been trying to build the type of large conventional military Iran would have needed for a rerun of the conflict – even after Iraq's defeat in the 1991 Gulf War.[5] Tehran reportedly sought to purchase hundreds of combat aircraft and thousands of armored vehicles, among other systems.[6] However, US pressure and a lack of funding apparently thwarted these attempts to establish a large conventional military. As a result, Iran opted for a very different kind of military than the one it may have tried to create in the early 1990s.

Yet even if Iran had succeeded in purchasing large numbers of conventional arms, it would still have pursued the asymmetric approach behind its guerilla navy, missile force and proxies. After all, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which has traditionally eschewed conventional approaches to warfare in favor of a revolutionary Islamic approach, controls these forces.[7]

Ways of war and lessons learned

Iran's preferred way of war is to deter major conventional conflicts – which in its experience have tended to be bloody, costly and protracted – while shaping the regional environment using proxies and information warfare.

Thus, Iran's military posture emphasizes deterrence and defense, as it pursues a national-security strategy designed to change the regional status quo by expanding its influence at the expense of Israel, Gulf Arab countries and the United States.

This approach reflects Tehran's assumptions about the way the world works, how best to employ the instruments of national power and the lessons of conflict since the 1980s – particularly those of the Iran–Iraq War. Tehran believes that:

- Proxy operations ousted US and Israeli forces from Lebanon in 1983 and 2000 respectively, ejected US forces from Iraq in 2011 and defeated rebel groups battling Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria in 2015 and after.
- Clashes between the US Navy and its Iranian counterparts in the Gulf during the latter phases of the Iran–Iraq War showed that the former is ill-equipped to deal with the IRGC's guerilla navy, with its small boats and fast attack craft.[8]
- Iraqi missile strikes during the Iran–Iraq War, which devastated Iranian morale, demonstrated the need for a strategic bombardment capability of its own to counter that of enemies.[9]

Acting on these beliefs, Tehran has sought to fill critical capability gaps and selectively modernize its military. It has built up its proxy capabilities by creating a Shia foreign legion that has fought in Syria and Iraq. It has bolstered its guerilla navy through the acquisition of modern mines and anti-ship missiles, as well as large numbers of small boats, fast attack craft and midget submarines. It has built a massive rocket and missile force while supplying rockets to Hizbullah, Hamas and, to a lesser extent, the Houthis. And it recently acquired a modern air-defense system – the S-300 *Favorit* surface-to-air missile system.

Yet major gaps remain. Iran's ground forces lack large numbers of modern tanks and infantry fighting vehicles; its air force lacks modern fighters and ground-attack aircraft; and its ground-based air defenses are relatively weak, relying mostly on dated or obsolete systems.

Guns or butter?

Tehran has long faced a dilemma in balancing investment in social-welfare programs with military spending – each of which is important to a different aspect of regime security. As revolutionaries, Iran's leaders fear nothing more than a counter-revolution. Many of them see the food and fuel subsidies that have long been a central feature of the Iranian economy as a means to not only help the poor and create a just society but also to prevent economic conditions from becoming so dire as to foment another revolution. As the middle class and the wealthy also benefit greatly from the subsidies, Iran has spent several years attempting to rationalize the economy by replacing them with cash payments targeted at those in need – albeit with only limited success. These outlays remain a national-security priority and will continue to compete with defense spending to some extent.

Syria: an inflection point?

For Tehran, the Syrian conflict, like the Iran–Iraq War, is an 'imposed' war. Many in Tehran saw the uprising against the Assad regime as part of a US–Saudi–Israeli conspiracy to undermine the 'Axis of Resistance', whose core members are Iran, Hizbullah and Syria. The war threatened both the survival of the Assad regime and Tehran's air bridge to Hizbullah in Lebanon, which runs through Damascus International Airport.

In responding to this crisis, Iran built on existing capabilities and approaches. The country created an expeditionary Shia foreign legion consisting of fighters from Hizbullah, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight in the conflict. It also augmented its IRGC–Quds Force advisors with IRGC ground forces, as well as personnel from the Basij and the Artesh, the IRGC's militia and Iran's conventional army respectively.[10] In doing so, Iran followed much the same path taken by the US since 9/11, whereby the latter's special forces became more 'conventional' and its conventional forces became more 'special' as the result of more than a decade of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Throughout the Syrian war, Iran has deployed as few ground forces as possible to protect the Syrian regime.

Indeed, Iran reportedly has around 1,500 troops in Syria – far less than 1% of its 100,000-man IRGC ground forces and 350,000-man Artesh combined. By comparison, there were times during the last decade when the US had deployed around one-third of its ground forces to Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran has tried to offload as much risk and as much of the war fighting burden as possible onto its Shia foreign legion and Russia, which has provided critical air and heavy fire support to the effort.

This is not the behavior of a military seeking to become a major military power, with a concomitant readiness to wage conventional war. Iran knows – based on bitter experience and observation of US campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan – how costly and difficult it can be to end a war. As a consequence, Tehran seeks to avoid conventional wars at almost any cost.

Looking ahead

Iran's leaders likely feel that events since the end of the Iran–Iraq War have vindicated their approach to force building and the use of the military. Iran has received a high return on relatively modest defense investments. It has acquired impressive capabilities, using them judiciously and effectively to gain leverage over adversaries, shape regional developments, and project influence while avoiding a major war. As part of this approach, Iranian military officials have warned that an attack on Iran would lead to a war that would spill over its borders, and would prompt a crushing response.[11] American military officials have warned that an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities would destabilize the region.[12]

Iran already has an effective deterrent. In the hands of Tehran's proxies and partners, Iranian-supplied rockets and missiles can threaten America's foremost regional allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Iran's missile force has the range to strike targets across most of the region. Tehran can disrupt traffic through the region's two major maritime chokepoints: the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al-Mandeb Strait. And its proxies can subvert neighboring countries, project Iranian influence throughout much of the region and conduct terrorist attacks on several continents.

Therefore, Iran is likely to broadly maintain its approach after the bans on arms transfers to it and, subsequently, on support for its missile program are lifted. Furthermore, it will fill capability gaps, selectively modernize its military and rebalance its conventional forces to reflect lessons learned in Syria. To this end, Iran will try to purchase the kinds of major weapons systems that it has been unable to produce domestically, such as surface-to-air missiles,[13] advanced fighter aircraft, tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and light armored vehicles.[14] Indeed, media reports indicate that Iran has already approached Russia about buying Su-30 fighter aircraft, S-400 surface-to-air missile systems, T-90 tanks, modern artillery systems and *Yakhont* anti-ship cruise missiles.[15] Iran is also likely to continue strengthening its guerilla navy by seeking advanced mines, torpedoes, anti-ship cruise missiles and anti-ship ballistic missiles. It will seek technology to improve the accuracy of domestically produced ballistic and cruise missiles, and to manufacture countermeasures and penetration aids.[16] The country will also likely seek materiel for its Shia foreign legion – including light armored vehicles, fixed- and rotary-wing close air support aircraft, transport helicopters, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance technology – so that its proxies can conduct sustained operations abroad, independent of Russian air and fire support.

However, Iran is unlikely to buy large numbers of fighter aircraft or armored vehicles due to the high cost of doing so. For instance, initial outlays for a single squadron of fighter aircraft could exceed US$2 billion. The process of recapitalizing the air force could cost significantly more than US$100bn, as it would require the Iranian military to buy modern aircraft; stockpile munitions and spare parts; modernize and harden air bases and maintenance facilities; and expand command, control, communications and intelligence networks. As Iran will also continue to emphasize self-reliance and domestic production of weapons wherever possible, arms sales will likely involve technology transfers.

In addition, Iran is likely to continue to emphasize the development of cyber capabilities,[17] which are emerging

as a fourth leg of its current deterrent/war fighting triad. The legs of this triad consist of: the anti-access/area-denial capabilities of the IRGC's guerilla navy; the long-range strike capabilities of the IRGC's rocket and missile forces; and the proxy forces overseen by the Quds Force. Using the triad, Iran can conduct acts of subversion and terrorism, as well as irregular and conventional military operations.

Finally, Iran will continue work on developing more efficient gas centrifuges[18] and will try to acquire nuclear-research reactors. It will do so to resume its march toward threshold nuclear status – and perhaps beyond – in around ten years, when the foreign powers lift or ease the constraints on its nuclear program.[19]

Iran's way of war is unlikely to change significantly. The country may partially rebalance its force structure to strengthen air and ground defenses, and may improve the expeditionary capability of its Shia foreign legion. But its modus operandi will continue to focus on *indirection*, *ambiguity* and *patience* – while relying on proxies to provide stand-off and, to a lesser extent, a degree of deniability. This allows Iran to manage risk and limit the potential for escalation, as it implements an anti-status quo strategy that will inevitably bring it into conflict with foreign powers that aim to maintain the regional status quo.[20]

Shaping Iranian choices

The US may be able to shape Iranian procurement decisions to some extent, by influencing Tehran's threat perceptions and desire to mitigate certain vulnerabilities or exploit those of its adversaries. This could involve forcing Iran to invest scarce resources in capabilities to which the US already has a response, or to divert resources away from systems that would present a significant challenge to American forces. Washington could also present Tehran with multiple dilemmas, prompting the latter to overextend itself by attempting to develop a diverse and costly mixture of capabilities.[21] Through procurement decisions, military presence, force posture, covert operations and information campaigns, Washington may be able to spur Tehran to:

- Allocate even more resources to its development of missiles (while taking steps to disrupt this process), because the US has invested heavily in missile defense.
- Continue investing in its guerilla navy, because this threat is largely limited to the Gulf and the US Navy can counter it, albeit at a price.
- Continue transforming its Shia foreign legion into quasi-regular military organizations, because the US may be able to target these groups more easily than lightly armed militias that can blend into a civilian population.
- Focus on the development of internal-security and conventional ground forces, because this would divert resources away from Iran's development of expeditionary capabilities and a land bridge to the Mediterranean.

By presenting Iran with multiple dilemmas, Washington may also be able to prevent the country from significantly modernizing and thickening its air defenses, thereby reducing the potential cost of a US or Israeli pre-emptive strike on Iranian nuclear facilities.

A last word

Iranian procurement and force-building decisions in coming years are almost certain to alter the Middle East balance of power to the detriment of the US and its partners. The factors that will influence this process the most are whether:

- The US will remain engaged as a security provider in the region and will act in a way that projects an image of competence and resolve.
- Gulf Arab states can transcend their political differences and function as an effective coalition to more fully realize, with US help, their collective potential.[22]
- Iran can consolidate its 'arc of influence' in the Middle East by strengthening its position in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, as well as by forging its Shia foreign legion into an expeditionary force capable of sustained independent operations throughout the region.

The US and its Gulf Arab partners should be able to meet the first two conditions, but they have failed to do so in recent years. If they are to effectively counter a resurgent Iran, they must do better, while hindering Iran's efforts to close capability gaps, selectively modernize its military and develop its Shia foreign legion into a more effective expeditionary force. Finally, the US should work with allies to hold Iran to its commitments under the JCPOA while fixing shortcomings in the agreement, so that the Islamic Republic does not eventually emerge as a nuclear threshold state. The future peace and security of the region may depend on it.

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Notes

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