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Meeting the Iranian Threat

We need homeland missile defenses to counter Iran's growing threat.

As the United States withdraws its combat forces from Iraq and begins a similar drawdown in Afghanistan, Iran is rapidly broadening its reach and presence in and beyond the region — and its technological prowess in weaponry — to undergird a strategy of global proportions, to threaten Americans at home and abroad as well as our overseas friends and allies. As the United States draws down its presence in the region, Iran is moving to fill the resulting power vacuum. U.S. missile-defense plans and programs need to adapt to the likely consequences, including an increasing threat to the U.S. homeland and broadening Iranian influence in the Middle East.

In his July 2011 quarterly report to Congress, Stuart W. Bowen Jr., U.S. special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction, concluded that “Iraq remains an extraordinarily dangerous place to work. . . . It is less safe, in my judgment, than 12 months ago.” This is in no small part due to Iran's growing involvement in the Iraqi conflict — which is likely to grow further as U.S. troops are withdrawn.

Last summer, Adm. Mike Mullen, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, observed that “Iran is very directly supporting extremist Shiite groups which are killing our troops” in Iraq. (The Taliban, meanwhile, has used rockets obtained from Iran to target NATO and U.S. forces in Afghanistan.) And in his final statements as secretary of defense, Robert Gates noted that about 40 percent of American servicemen killed since the end of U.S. combat operations last fall were killed in attacks by Shi'ite militias armed, trained, and funded by Iran.

In his confirmation hearing, Gen. Martin Dempsey, the current chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, noted that recent activities “are intended to produce some kind of Beirut-like moment . . . and then in so doing to send a message that they have expelled us from Iraq.” Thus is the stage being set for Iran to dominate the future development of Iraq.

Iran has also supported uprisings where they weaken U.S. influence and opposed them where, as in Syria, they diminish Iran's own position. But if uprisings of the latter sort gain the upper hand, Iran is quick to moderate its opposition and seek accommodation. While troublesome, these tactical moves are just part of a larger and more threatening Iranian strategy that is rapidly becoming clearer — one that includes a central role for nuclear weapons.

The head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, Fereidoon Abbasi, has reported that by the end of this year, Iran will triple the amount of uranium it has enriched to a level of 20 percent. Although uranium enriched to this level may fuel Tehran's small nuclear-research reactor, which produces medical isotopes, it also bolsters the knowledge of Iranian nuclear experts and their ability to master all stages of enrichment, including to the higher levels needed to produce a nuclear weapon. Thus, as an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report issued in June indicates, Iran is accelerating the pace of its nuclear-weapons program.

This has implications for Iran's geostrategic aspirations in the Middle East and far beyond. For example, recent Turkish hostility to Israel is, in the opinion of many, all about Turkey's relationship with Iran. Turkey is now developing and exploiting its Iranian connections while seeking to balance these with the interests of its NATO

partners — e.g., Ankara has agreed to base a radar in Turkey, to help defend NATO territory against Iranian ballistic missiles, while sometimes opposing the tracking of missiles from Iran.

The July 29 mass resignation of high-ranking Turkish military officers (including the four most senior ones) signaled a significant shift from Turkey's secular government toward one likely to be less friendly to Western democracies and more friendly to Islamist states such as Iran. This trend bodes ill for Turkey's willingness to defend NATO territory from Iranian missiles.

This trend dovetails with Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's May 2010 agreement to a swap with Iran of low- for high-enriched uranium in order to avoid further sanctions on Iran. Notably, Erdogan has posed an ominous question for the international community: "In fact, there is no nuclear weapon in Iran now, but Israel, which is also located in our region, possesses nuclear arms. Turkey is the same distance from both of them. What has the international community said against Israel so far? Is this the superiority of law or the law of superiors?"

So it is appropriate to ask: Whither goeth our erstwhile missile-defense partner in defending NATO territory, including the United States?

Meanwhile, Iran has been collaborating with North Korea on nuclear weapons and ballistic-missile technology and is sharing ballistic-missile technology with Venezuela. If these missiles are armed with nuclear warheads, Venezuela may threaten the United States in a 21st-century version of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

Indeed, nuclear-armed ballistic missiles apparently play a key role in Iran's emerging strategy. On June 29, British foreign secretary William Hague stated that Iran had "been carrying out covert ballistic missile tests and rocket launches, including testing missiles capable of delivering a nuclear payload." This statement complemented an IAEA report issued in June that said Iran was close to producing a nuclear warhead that could be carried by its intermediate-range ballistic weapons, and that the Shehab-3 nose cone has been redesigned to carry a nuclear warhead.

Iranian leaders have openly bragged about their progress, which they claim is independent of external help. Their claims, punctuated by a variety of recent events, indicate an aggressive, unmistakably deliberate Iranian strategy of threatening the United States and our overseas troops, friends, and allies. These events include the launching of Iranian-built submarines, tests of domestically built air-defense missiles and radar-evading missiles to threaten naval targets in international waters, and, most notably, a ten-day maneuver exercise last summer that involved the launching of some 14 ballistic missiles of various ranges, after which Iran's defense minister, Gen. Ahmad Vahidi, boasted: "The war games . . . show Iran's great capability in designing, producing and using various kinds of missiles based on domestic knowledge. This showed that the sanctions imposed had no effect on Iran's missile program."

These developments significantly escalate the threat to Israel — often called the "Little Satan" by Iranian authorities — and to our European allies. And Iran's successful launch in June of a satellite, Rasad — which means "observation" in Farsi — illustrates its progress toward the multi-stage long-range-missile capability needed to threaten directly the United States, or, as they call us, the "Great Satan."

Relying on U.N. sanctions to deal with this escalating threat would be a triumph of hope over experience. As General Vahidi boasted, sanctions have been ineffective. In any case, hope is not a strategy; effective defensive capabilities are needed to counter Tehran's aggressive programs, including nuclear-armed-missile threats to Israel and our other allies in the Middle East and Europe and a nuclear-armed-ICBM threat to the United States by as early as 2015, according to official U.S. estimates.

But shorter-range nuclear-armed ballistic missiles could pose a threat to the United States even sooner — and recent declarations by Iranian officials make clear they are at least aware of this possibility. For example, the head of Iran's navy, Rear Adm. Habibollah Sayyari, made the startling assertion in September that the Iranian navy could operate near U.S. "maritime borders." According to the Iranian press, "top Iranian officials" later clarified this claim to include specifically ships that may go as far as the Gulf of Mexico.

White House and Pentagon spokesmen have been skeptical of these Iranian claims, but they should not be summarily dismissed. After all, the 1998 Rumsfeld Commission Report on the ballistic-missile threat to the United States pointed out that ships off our coasts could launch ballistic missiles toward our coastal cities. More ominously, the authors of the 2004 Commission on the Electromagnetic Pulse (EMP) report to Congress testified that Iran had launched a ballistic missile from a vessel in the Caspian Sea to high altitude, and that other tests implied an interest in “triggering” warheads at an altitude that could create an EMP. That could have devastating, long-lasting effects over a very large part of the United States, if not the entire country, depending on the size and point of detonation of an EMP device.

Indeed, Dr. William R. Graham, a science adviser to President Reagan and chairman of the congressionally mandated EMP Commission, has stated that an EMP attack could disable telecommunications and transportation systems, the electric-power grid, and other critical infrastructure. With an indefinite severing of current “just-in-time” supply chains of food, drugs, and other critical items, two-thirds of the U.S. population might not survive. Such an attack might be mounted with a single nuclear warhead launched by terrorists (whether agents of al-Qaeda or Iran) on a SCUD-type short-range missile from a vessel off the U.S. coast.

What is most notable about the recent Iranian statements about deploying their ships to the U.S. coasts is the focus on the Gulf of Mexico. The U.S. Navy’s ballistic-missile-defense Aegis ships can shoot down such missiles if they are cruising near the launching ship. Today we have Aegis ships operating off our west and east coasts. However, they do not normally operate in the Gulf of Mexico. Thus, this area is vulnerable to the threat of missile attack.

Happily, there is an affordable near-term response to this EMP threat from the south. We can cure our current vulnerability by deploying the Navy’s Standard Missile 3 (SM-3) interceptor and an associated radar and command-and-control system at several military bases around the Gulf of Mexico. This would in fact be a homeland-defense version of the Aegis Ashore component of the U.S. program for building comparable capabilities in Central Europe. (Aegis Ashore is essentially a land-based version of the ballistic-missile-defense system currently based on Aegis ships.)

As part of its funded program, the Pentagon’s Missile Defense Agency is developing a prototype of the needed Aegis Ashore infrastructure — and, once developed, the capability probably can be deployed more quickly at Gulf of Mexico coastal sites than it can in Central Europe. The anticipated cost of each of the sites is about \$350 million — and given the defense footprint of the current SM-3 interceptor, only three or four sites would be needed. A planned and funded improvement of the SM-3 will double the defensive footprint, so that as few as two sites may be sufficient to provide the same defensive coverage.

While planning for the deployment of several Aegis Ashore sites, Congress should make sure right now that enough SM-3 interceptors will be produced to be ready for deployment as soon as the first of these sites can become operational. Congress should keep production lines for the currently deployed interceptors open and running, while developing follow-on interceptors. This is a small price to pay for the increased level of security that would result.

A quick fix to our current vulnerability to a near-term threat is necessary but not sufficient. Also needed is a comprehensive, increasingly robust missile-defense system to defend all Americans and our overseas troops, friends, and allies from likely greater numbers of more capable future ballistic missiles.

— *Henry F. Cooper was chief U.S. negotiator at the Geneva Defense and Space Talks with the Soviet Union (1985–89) and director of the Strategic Defense Initiative (1990–93). Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr. is president of the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, Shelby Cullom Davis Professor of International Security Studies at the Fletcher School, Tufts University, and co-chairman of the Independent Working Group.*



Where Is the...

Aegis BMD



...Missile Defense Fleet?

Ships are usually on station on both the East and West Coasts—but not in the Gulf of Mexico.

There, we need “Aegis Ashore” to protect against ship launched SCUDS—or longer range ballistic missiles launched from Venezuela.

Forward...At Sea...On Patrol



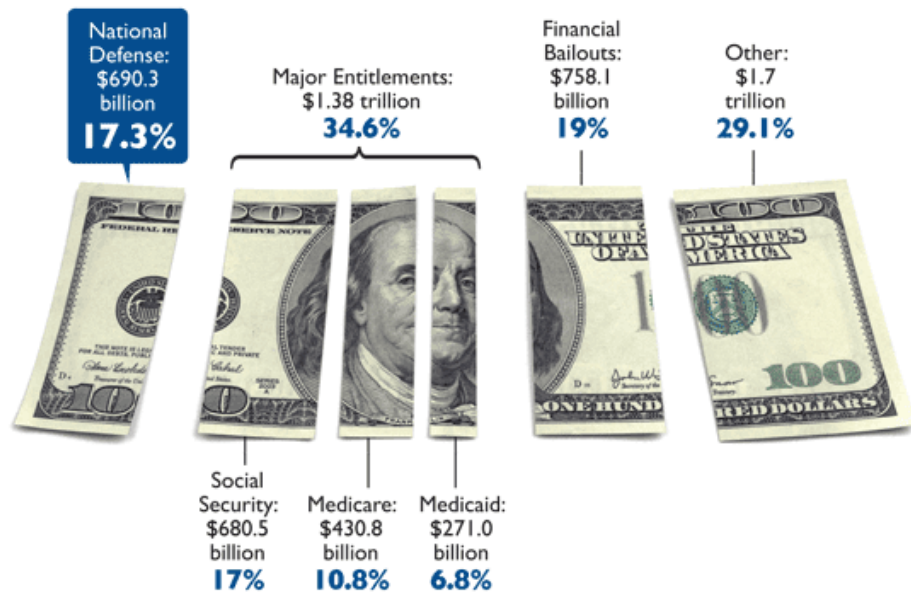
Enabling Capabilities, Providing Options for U.S. and Allies

Remember:

- *National defense is a Constitutional obligation;*
- *Compromising core missions jeopardizes security;*
- *Military equipment is aging;*
- *Defense spending is near historical lows;*
- *Defense budgets may well shrink even further, given the “Sequester” legacy of last summer’s Super Committee which threatens havoc if Congressional inaction “triggers” further cuts.*

Defense Spending Is Less Than One-Fifth of the Federal Budget

The federal government spends half as much on national defense as it does on the three major entitlement programs. Defense spending is also only slightly more than Social Security spending. Figures shown are federal outlays in fiscal year 2009.



Source: Office of Management and Budget, Budget of the U.S. Government, FY 2010, Historical Tables, Table 3.2, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/Historicals> (December 9, 2009).

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