

COLD WAR GAMES: IRAN, RUSSIA AND MISSILES

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The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union entailed building up nuclear arsenals with delivery systems and then negotiating treaties of disarmament and non-proliferation. Simply put both sides realised that the weapons once deployed couldn't be used even to deter or win proxy wars and therefore their existence was more dangerous than any benefits that could be gained from their being. Mutually assured destruction (MAD) was the most likely result of any conflict escalation so at best the nuclear arsenals and their delivery systems gave their owners a feeling of security that they couldn't be directly attack. This was providing that the other side was rational to comprehend the consequences of nuclear annihilation.¹

Today in 2016, Iran is probably contemplating the same dilemma. Iran has been developing nuclear facilities yet this doesn't appear to be of any benefit. Iran is not even able to wield leverage over Russia who has constantly bullied it and is now sidelining it because of the situation in Syria. Iran forces are being forced to withdraw progressively from Syria.²

So Iran is facing the Cold War game of building up weapons yet facing arms control and disarmament process. The current focus against Iran typified by the P5+1 negotiation has been Iran's nuclear program; debating whether it has military components and intent.³

Lessons from Cold War history that focussed on the arms race, nuclear strategy and non-proliferation show us that having a nuclear bomb is only one part of the picture. The other is the delivery systems for any such weapon. A nuclear device has to be delivered to its target and explode in the correct fashion or else it is useless. That is to say it is useless both as a military weapon and as a political tool.⁴

Nuclear weapons debated widely in strategy and deterrence from the Cold War and after it shows that they are more a political tool than a military one. The actual use of a nuclear weapon is so devastating that only a madman would do so or perhaps an accidental explosion. So unless a state's opponents believe that it can be delivered to the target and work, then the nuclear weapon lacks both military and political credibility. That is to say it lacks credibility as a weapon, as a threat, as a deterrent and as dissuasion.⁵

Since the post WW2 period a growing number of states developed or acquired nuclear weapons, thus joining a prestigious club whose only member was the United States. Those states include the Soviet Union, China, France, Britain, India and Pakistan. The technology was basically the same. Those with only aircraft as a delivery means lacked the credibility to

use their nuclear weapons as an effective military weapon and political tool because aircraft could be shot down before they reached their targets. The inter-war year strategy that the bomber would always get through had been shown to be ineffective during WW2.⁶

On the other hand those countries that had developed missiles by the mid-1950s had an effective means to deliver the nuclear weapon to its target even if wasn't accurately. Radiation would cause damage in addition to the blast. At this stage it was not possible to shoot down missiles. It was only during the 1980s that President Regan proposed the Star Wars program to develop such capability to "shoot a bullet with a bullet" or destroy a missile in flight at over speed times the speed of sound.⁷ Even now such capability is limited mainly to much slower rockets, such as the Israeli Iron Dome system.

Iran must have read the Cold War history literature in fine detail because at the same time as constructing nuclear facilities, civilian only in its claims, it is also developing a surface-to-surface missile capability that can only have military use.⁸

The simultaneous development of the ability to project military power by missiles strikes long distances beyond its borders together with verbal threats against states such as Israel gave rise to the cause of concern by the rest of the world led by the West, about the Iranian nuclear facilities under development. It would seem that the Iranian end game could well be to have a nuclear warhead for the missiles and to threaten other states with them; or at least provide an umbrella for organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah.⁹ These are proxy to the Iranian ideology and Shia religion operating in the Eastern Mediterranean in Gaza against Israel and in Syria and Lebanon.

Iran has the most diverse and most sophisticated missile program under development in the Middle East consisting of 27 known missiles or rockets that include: Ashoura, Musudan, Emad, Fajr, Fakoor, Qadr, Naze'at, Khalij-e Fars, Kowsar, Qiam, Safir, Sejil, Shahab, Soumar, Zelzal and various versions of all of these.¹⁰ Each new version has longer range, currently moving outside of the 2000km region to those capable of reaching Europe and beyond or 5000km. Some are truly new developments while others forego payload and accuracy for longer ranges.

There is no doubt that the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s was the catalyst and impetus that started the Iranian missile program. That war showed that missiles and rockets, even with conventional warheads, can cause substantial damage and terror. However since the fall of Saddam's regime in Iraq in 2003 such a need should no longer exist for Iran? There is no state that is at war with Iran or even threatening it militarily in 2016. Why then, asks the West and Israel, does Iran need not only such a diverse and complex missile program as well as underground missile bases and silos and mobile launchers?¹¹

The concern is that the missile program is reminiscent of Cold War nuclear planning, strategy and deployment. As then as today with Iran, underground silos and mobile missiles cannot be easily monitored or destroyed giving Iran the capability for a surprise and devastating strike against anyone. Indeed, as was shown by Iraq's Scud missiles strikes on Israel and Saudi Arabia in 1991, missiles with conventional warheads can result in death, damage and trauma.¹²

In October and November 2015 Iran test launched two ballistic missiles.¹³ Such testing is also a-Cold War-style nuclear move. It demonstrates capability and is a flexing of muscles. Being ballistic missiles they have the potential capability for warheads other than just conventional. The tests have generated a ripple of anger through other Middle East states such as Saudi Arabia, who is higher on the list of Iranian adversaries than Israel and is geographically closer to the Iranian missiles.¹⁴

Recently Saudi Arabia executed the Shia cleric and scholar Sheikh Nimr who lived there for being critical of the Saudi government, calling for free elections. This has heightened tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia.¹⁵ However despite having a missile capability with conventional warheads to strike Saudi Arabia Iran is not capable of using it as political tool. Shia living in Saudi Arabia cannot be currently protected by Iran. The danger remains that Iran, if it attained a nuclear warhead for these missiles, could threaten Saudi Arabia.

It is therefore not surprising that the United States has considered preparing sanctions against Iran because of the missile program, while both Iran and the United States are still honouring the nuclear agreement reached in 14 July 2015.¹⁶ Time will tell what transpires.

Military strategy dictates that the best form of defence is the offence and so Iran is somewhat fearful that the West led by the United States and maybe Israel could take military action against its missile program or even its nuclear facilities currently under construction. The uranium is supplied by Russia. If the Cold War was still under way this would give the impression to be a proxy conflict between Russia and the United States. However now Russia is more interested in the financial rewards of such deals than in changing the ideology and politics of the nations it supplies. Nevertheless still with Cold War thinking maybe Iran considers that ballistic missiles would be a deterrent to such strikes. Namely, a strategic thinking of Iran being able to respond by launching missiles would be a deterrent to be attacked.¹⁷

However Iran has to carefully consider this strategy. Even if Iran had nuclear capability in addition to conventional warheads for its missiles it would be in the same situation as the Cold War nuclear powers. Having a nuclear bomb and missiles doesn't guarantee that any opponent will be deterred. It certainly didn't prevent proxy wars such as Vietnam. Then both the United States and the Soviet Union had nuclear weapons but couldn't use them to win the war or even deter the other side from any action.¹⁸

So Iran is also knocking on Russia's door for those other missiles it has paid for and not yet received; the four S-300 surface-to-air missile defence system that is designed to defend against aircraft and cruise missiles. Iran needs to defend its nuclear sites because its surface-to-surface missiles cannot, with 100% assurance, prevent or deter an Israeli or American strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.¹⁹

Herein is the potential for a deal. If Iran were to forego its domestic surface-to-surface missile program, which is a military offensive weapon against others, then it would seem acceptable that it could be permitted to procure a foreign surface-to-air missile that is a defensive system. Once Iran lacks the ability to deliver a nuclear warhead in a strike against Saudi Arabia, Israel or any other country, then concerns could also be somewhat ameliorated over Iranian uranium enrichment. Iran would also need to be restricted in its other delivery capabilities such as aircraft.

However Iran is taking the other view than such a deal. With the United States threat of sanctions over the missiles, Iran says it will build more, believing that peace and security can only be achieved through strength.²⁰ The causes of such reasoning can be multiple, including domestic Iranian politics. There are issues of priorities.

The Iranian reasoning is such: why should we give up on any capability if countries, such as Israel and others, have both capabilities? It's a matter of justness and fairness, which is a very basic tenet of the Shi'a. It's also a matter of Iranian pride.

There is also the state of the relations between the Iranian President, the military leaders and the religious leadership. It is understandable that the military are not willing to give up their missiles while it is equally comprehensible that the President representing the wishes of the people who don't want sanctions. Iran therefore needs to consider priorities.

Who will win in such domestic politics is not the question, rather who has the most to lose is the substance. Can Iran continue to remain outside of any regional settlement including challenges posed by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq is at the fore of American thinking over whether to impose sanctions or not.

The United States, NATO allies and Israel have many options including diplomacy and active and passive defence systems regarding Iran and all these types of Iranian missiles. Firstly, Iran has yet to convince Russia to supply the S-300 so this may not happen. Secondly, there are defence systems operational and under development to defend against missiles that could be launched from Iran; that didn't exist during the Cold War.

Reading and applying Cold War nuclear strategy is not enough for Iran given the marches of new technology. Anti-missile systems include the joint America-Israel Arrow 3 missile that on 3 December 2015 succeeded in a complex test to detect, identify, track and discriminate real from target decoys delivered into space. It is designed to seek and destroy Iranian Shihab 3 missiles.²¹

So Iran needs to consider its options carefully lest the bottom line become crippling international sanctions, no surface-to-air missiles to defend any site or city in Iran, redundant surface-to-surface missiles that can be destroyed before reaching their targets, and the risk of being attacked. Not only will this diminish Iran's direct security, but it will also nullify the umbrella it provides for such organisations as Hamas and Hezbollah. Iran should realise that pursuing a missile policy of any type has no merit.

At the same time other countries such as the United States and NATO allies in Europe need to reflect the balance of power in the Middle East, including the role of Iran. Reminiscent of the Cold War, a balance of power, or two equal opposing states or blocs, can provide a situation of no or little conflict. Iraq is a battle ground because it lacks a central government. If Iran which is a Shia state were also in a similar situation then forces such as the Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL) which is Sunni may advance eastwards all the way to Afghanistan and beyond.

So politics and military strategy play out with similarities to the Cold War. Iran and Russia are engaged in a supplier-client relationship for surface-to-air missiles and nuclear facilities.

Iran develops and flexes its muscles with surface-to-surface missiles. The West led by the United States strives for arms control and disarmament. And other states in the region seek and build alliances. The notions of Realpolitik are well suited to define what happens next; and that is everyone acting in their own interests to achieve supremacy over everyone else.

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