Evaluating the Latest Iranian ICBM Threat Assessment

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In search of new insights into the nuclear dangers posed by Iran, the press and pundits have latched onto a single sentence found in the Pentagon's April 2010 congressionally-mandated assessment of Iran's military power: "With sufficient foreign assistance, Iran could probably develop and test an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of reaching the United States by 2015."

Unfortunately, the 2015 date has been repeatedly quoted without qualifying language or context, leading many casual commentators to suggest erroneously that the report warns of the emergence of an Iranian ICBM sooner than previously projected. For example, The Weekly Standard's Fred Barnes in a Fox News Special Report on April 22 stated: "And now we have this report that says they were wrong about how soon...an Iranian missile could reach the United States."

A careful examination reveals that the Pentagon's latest report does not contradict recent "worst case" assessments of Iran's ICBM potential. In fact, the same exact language was used in the April 2009 "Ballistic and Cruise Missile Threat" Report of the National Air and Space Intelligence Center. Nor is the Pentagon's new assessment inconsistent with President Obama's emphasis last fall on responding to the more immediate threat emerging from Iranian medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) when he announced his plan to re-focus U.S. missile defense deployments in Europe. The latest annual "Report to Congress on the Acquisition of Technology Relating to Weapons of Mass Destruction and Advanced Conventional Munitions" (covering calendar year 2009) by the intelligence community judged that: "producing more capable MRBMs remains one of [Iran's] highest priorities."

Looking back over the previous decade, the only significant change made in estimating Iran's ICBM timeline has been to lengthen it. As Joint Chiefs of Staff Vice Chairman Lt. Gen. James Cartwright acknowledged in August 2009, the U.S. government had previously assumed the Iranian ICBM threat "would come much faster than it did."

An Unreliable Clock

Fixating on the 2015 date in the Pentagon report is even more inappropriate because of the flawed linguistic formulation surrounding it. First, to declare that Iran could probably develop and test an ICBM by 2015 "with sufficient foreign assistance" is to rob the date of any significance. If the foreign assistance were sufficient, then Iran could certainly develop and test an ICBM by 2015, but such a self-evident construct does not convey useful insight. Although the flight test milestone is said to be dependent on foreign assistance, little information is provided to permit evaluation of this dependency.

The Pentagon report does not elaborate on what kind of assistance has been received, whether and by whom it is still being provided, and what the prospects are for Iran obtaining "sufficient assistance" in the future. The intelligence community's latest WMD Technology Acquisition Report specifically mentions that Iran had received assistance from "entities in China and North Korea, as well as assistance from Russian entities at least in the past." However, the Pentagon report mentions only that "Iran has received assistance from North Korea and China." The absence of a reference to
Russia is potentially significant, considering earlier intelligence assessments that an Iranian ICBM was likely to be based on Russian help.

A second logical flaw is the report's use of "could probably." This word pair obscures the issue of probability. Does it mean there is a ten percent chance or a 60 percent chance of a test in 2015? In traditional intelligence estimate usage, "could" refers to lower probability events, which cannot be ruled out, while "likely to" or "will probably" refers to the analysts' best guess of what will happen.

A third problem derives from the lack of a definition for the phrase, "develop and test." How successful does the test have to be to signify that the milestone has been reached? Is it more than an attempt resulting in the missile exploding on the launch pad? Is it less than a flight test delivering a warhead to a distant target area?

Iran's current ability to deliver conventional warheads on short- and medium-range missiles is a known and very concrete threat to the region. The ability of Iran to deliver nuclear weapons at intercontinental distances in 2015 is a "worst case" theoretical construct. Based on the meager and imprecise level of information provided by the Pentagon report, we have little reason to regard the latter as a likely contingency.

Déjà vu?

This is not the first time important qualifiers in intelligence assessments have been omitted from public commentary. One critical component of the leading "Key Judgments" in the 2002 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraqi WMD was: "if left unchecked, [Iraq] probably will have a nuclear weapon during this decade."

Hardly anyone noted in absorbing and later recalling this warning that Iraq was already under serious "checks" in the form of sanctions at the time of the estimate's release and it fell under even more severe constraints two months later with passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1441 and the return to Iraq of international weapons inspectors. We now know that Iraq's nuclear reconstitution capabilities were actually deteriorating at the time of the NIE's publication, and in retrospect can even see in the language of the flawed estimate reasons to doubt its conclusion that Iraq's nuclear clock was again ticking. Unfortunately, qualifying language and caveats were overlooked by press and policy-makers in the lead-up to war.

What Motivates Iran's Regime?

In assessing the Iranian threat and devising policy responses, arriving at a speculative date for an ICBM flight test is much less relevant than digesting the first two substantive sentences in the Pentagon's latest report: "Since the revolution, Iran's first priority has consistently remained the survival of the regime. Iran also seeks to become the strongest and most influential country in the Middle East and to influence world affairs."

The press and pundits would be well advised to ponder the implications of these far more newsworthy assessments rather than to chase the mirage of a shift in intelligence assessments of Iran's future ICBM capability or to panic about the latest nuclear achievement announced by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. If regime survival is its first priority, Tehran is not going to launch a first-strike attack on Israel or on U.S. forces in the region. If gaining strength and influence is an important objective, Tehran will not be indifferent to the threat of diplomatic isolation and will not forever rule out constructive arrangements with other countries to enhance its security.

Bottom Line

If the United States wishes to dissuade Iran from developing nuclear weapons, it should avoid brandishing the rhetoric of regime change and preventive attack. Otherwise, the Iranian government may become convinced that the only way to avoid the fate of Saddam Hussein's Iraq is to emulate Kim Jong Il's North Korea in withdrawing from the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and
obtaining a rudimentary nuclear deterrent.

Instead, the United States should soberly assess Iran's nuclear and missile potential, realizing that an Iranian nuclear threat is not imminent and that Tehran is years away from ever being able to credibly threaten the United States with long-range, nuclear-armed missiles. Under these circumstances, Washington should vigorously but patiently pursue collective measures. These would include both further impediments to foreign assistance with Iran's missile and nuclear programs and also inducements for Iran to comply fully with its NPT obligations, behave responsibly in the region, and ease repression against the Iranian people. - GREG THIELMANN

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