

# Iran's Missile Program and Its Implications for U.S. Missile Defense

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Among the many man-made threats to U.S. security, one dwarfs all the others—a foreign attack on the U.S. homeland by nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles. Today two countries, Russia and China, potentially pose this kind of threat to the United States. Fortunately, neither Russia nor China is an enemy; each has significant overlapping interests with those of the United States. The two other countries that may be able to pose a long-range nuclear missile threat in the mid-term future, Iran and North Korea, have no such capability yet. North Korea is closer than Iran, even though last year's satellite launch was far short of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test. Although plans for expanding U.S. strategic missile defense focus on Iran, Tehran has still not decided to build nuclear weapons and continues to focus on short- and medium-range rather than longer-range ballistic missiles.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- U.S. strategic ballistic missile defenses are intended to provide protection against the type of limited attack that countries such as **North Korea** or **Iran** might be able to threaten in the future.
  - **Iran** is the focus of current plans to expand U.S. strategic missile defenses.
  - But Iran's strategic missiles are emerging much more slowly than previously projected, if they are emerging at all.
- The only country that poses an unambiguous, existential threat to the United States from its strategic arsenal is **Russia**.
  - However, a deliberate Russian attack is very unlikely because Russia and the United States are not enemies, have many mutual interests, and have high confidence in the nuclear arms control regimes, which limit and monitor their nuclear force structure.
- **China** too could plausibly launch a devastating nuclear retaliatory strike against the United States.
  - However, China also shares many mutual interests with the United States.
  - U.S. efforts to engage China in talks on nuclear arms control measures are hobbled by the size and characteristics of U.S. and Russian arsenals and the planned expansion of U.S. strategic missile defenses.
- U.S. plans to deploy strategic missile defenses in Europe to defend against Iranian ICBMs should be suspended pending indications that such a threat is beginning to emerge.

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Although plans for expanding U.S. strategic missile defenses focus on the Iranian ICBM threat, that threat is not emerging as was previously predicted. Iran conducted no long-range ballistic missile tests in 2012 and has not flown even the larger space launch vehicle that it displayed two years ago, which could have helped advance ICBM technology. Moreover, Tehran has still not decided to build nuclear weapons and continues to focus on short- and medium-range rather than longer-range ballistic missiles.

It is, therefore, time to adapt U.S. missile defense plans accordingly by suspending the fourth phase of the European Phased Adaptive Approach. Doing so would remove an obstacle to negotiating further reductions in the strategic forces of Russia - the only country that poses an unambiguous existential threat to the United States.

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