

Iran's Ballistic Missile Test: Troubling But Not Cause for Provoking Confrontation

Authored by Kelsey Davenport and Daryl Kimball on Wed, 2017-02-01 21:17

Without question, Iran's decision to continue [testing ballistic missiles](#) is unhelpful and inconsistent with the spirit of a key 2015 UN Security Council resolution. But the Trump administration and the Congress should measure their response to Iran's missile test and refrain from actions that will provoke escalation or unnecessarily endanger the nuclear deal.

Implementation of the 2015 [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action \(JCPOA\)](#) between the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia and the United Kingdom) and Iran blocks Tehran from building nuclear weapons for more than a decade. Keeping the deal in place radically reduces the potential threat from Iranian ballistic missiles, by eliminating their potential to deliver nuclear weapons.

While Iran's ballistic missile tests are clearly not a violation of the nuclear deal, these activities are inconsistent with [UN Security Council Resolution 2231](#), which endorsed the agreement and lifted some UN sanctions, but kept in place restrictions on Iran's ballistic missile activities.

Resolution 2231 "calls upon" Iran not to test any ballistic missiles that are "designed to be nuclear capable." This language is less restrictive than the prior prohibition on missile testing contained in [UN Security Council Resolution 1929](#) (2010), which said that Iran "shall not undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons." This restriction was replaced by 2231.

Unhelpfully, Iran has chosen to continue testing ballistic missiles after implementation of the Iran deal. These past ballistic missile tests were deemed to be "not consistent with the constructive spirit" of 2231, not violations, according to a report on implementation of 2231 by the UN secretary-general.

Similar language was used by France's Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean-Marc Ayrault January 31, in response to Iran's most recent test. Ayrault [said](#), "France has expressed its concern at Iran's continuation of its ballistic missile tests on several occasions" and the continued tests are "contrary to the spirit" of UN Security Council resolution 2231 and "hamper the process of restoring the confidence established by the Vienna agreement."

Given that the missile restrictions are put in place by UN Security Council 2231, the Security Council can and should pursue the matter. According to the British Ambassador to the UN, the Security Council directed the committee to investigate the test. That is a prudent and appropriate response.

How Should Washington Respond?

Today, following reports that Iran recently conducted a ballistic missile test and continues to support Houthi rebels in Yemen who are fighting Saudi forces, the Donald Trump administration said they were putting Iran "on notice." In a briefing for reporters by an unnamed senior administration official said the administration is undertaking a review on how to respond, calling it "a deliberative process."

As for next steps he said that the administration wants to "get their attention" and make it clear that "Iranian behavior in support of the Houthis ... could not be ignored." The official said "this is separate and apart from the Iran nuclear deal, the JCPOA," but would not comment on whether Trump wants to pull out of the 2015 nuclear deal. "Just because there is a nuclear deal, that doesn't mean we will be shy on other issues, ballistic or others," he said.

Some Republican senators have argued in the past that the United States should respond to the missile tests by suspending U.S. sanctions relief as called for under the terms of the nuclear deal. Such a move would be highly counterproductive. It would be a violation of U.S. commitments

under the nuclear deal, provide Iran with an excuse to stop implementation of its obligations under the deal, and would in the long term increase, not reduce the risks posed by Tehran's ballistic missiles.

U.S. policymakers should put the risks posed by the missile tests in perspective and pursue effective actions that address Iran's behavior, but do not undermine progress toward reducing Iran's nuclear potential.

Furthermore, further sanctions of Iranian entities tied to missile development or production will not likely succeed in reducing, or even slowing Iran ballistic missile program, and such moves may actually strengthen the hand of hard liners who want to accelerate the program in response to U.S. pressure. Iran missile program is reasonably self-sufficient and likely has most of the imported items it needs to continue developing new systems, and improving the performance and reliability of existing missiles.

Rather than pursuing additional unilateral sanctions at this time or taking the draconian step of suspending the sanctions relief as outlined in the 2015 P5+1 and Iran nuclear agreement, the United States, our allies and partners should consider other effective means to curb Iran's missile development:

- **Strengthening multilateral interdiction efforts:** Iran has skirted sanctions to procure technologies and materials for its ballistic missile program. Existing UN sanctions on Iran's ballistic missile program will remain in place for eight years, so it would not come as a surprise if Tehran continues to try to find ways to use illicit procurement networks to keep working on its ballistic missiles. Strengthening interdiction capacity, through mechanisms like the [Proliferation Security Initiative \(PSI\)](#), will assist states in identifying and inspecting illicit cargo. In [several cases](#) in the past, PSI is credited with preventing ballistic missile materials from reaching Iran. In 2013, the United States and the United Arab Emirates co-hosted a PSI exercise to focus on weapons of mass destruction interdictions. Additional exercises and workshops in the Middle East could help countries in the region develop tactics, techniques and procedures to enhance interdiction capacities.
- **Expand and strengthen the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR):** The [MTCR](#) is a voluntary, multilateral initiative designed to stem the spread of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and UAVs capable of delivering a nuclear warhead. The 34 member states of the regime commit to establishing export control policies and sets out criteria for evaluating the sale of materials and technologies relevant to such systems. It is credited with stemming the spread of ballistic missiles in several countries. However, over 10 countries are seeking to join the MTCR and its control lists could be reviewed and updated to reflect new technologies.
- **Support efforts to negotiate regional ballistic missile limits:** No other country in the Middle East is subject to ballistic missile limits. Given the tensions between Tehran and its neighbors, it is extremely unlikely that Iran will stop developing its ballistic missile capabilities when countries like Saudi Arabia and Israel field ballistic missiles capable of targeting Iran. However, Iran might be willing to abide by missile limits as part of a region wide effort to ban longer-range ballistic missile systems. The United States could encourage, and support, a regionwide effort to negotiate a ban on missiles capable of carrying WMD.
- **Request an updated assessment of Iran's ballistic missile capabilities:** The intelligence community long [asserted](#) that Tehran was capable of testing an intercontinental ballistic missile, with sufficient foreign assistance, by 2015. U.S. officials have recently said that an ICBM is at least a decade away and Iranian officials have emphasized that they intend to focus on medium-range systems.

Instead of provoking a confrontation with Tehran, Washington should focus its efforts on

Iran's Ballistic Missile Test: Troubling But Not Cause for Provoking Confrontation

Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

strengthening enforcement of the extensive ballistic missile sanctions on the books to continue to slow Tehran's missile program and pursue regionwide restrictions on ballistic missiles in the Middle East.

Source URL: <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2017-02-01/iran%E2%80%99s-ballistic-missile-test-troubling-not-cause-provoking-confrontation>