

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

The Pace and Threat of Missile Proliferation

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Note: Dr. Graham served as a member of the Ballistic Missile Threat Commission and Dr. Payne served as an expert consultant to the Commission.

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The 104th Congress directed the creation of a bipartisan Commission To Assess The Ballistic Missile Threat To The United States. The Commission's task was to "assess the nature and magnitude of the existing and emerging ballistic missile

threat to the United States." The Commission presented its findings publicly on 15 July in a 28-page unclassified summary of its much longer classified report. Following six months of extensive work, including reviewing all of the pertinent information from the various intelligence agencies, the Commission concluded, "A new strategic environment now gives emerging ballistic missile powers the capacity, through a combination of domestic development and foreign assistance, to acquire the means to strike the U.S. within about five years of a decision to acquire such a capability (10 years in the case of Iraq)." This finding is far less sanguine on the subject than the Intelligence Community's own prior estimate, which, according to official testimony before Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, concluded "No country, other than the major declared nuclear powers, will develop or otherwise acquire a ballistic missile in the next 15 years that could threaten the contiguous 48 states or Canada."

The primary reason the Commission's conclusions are considerably more pessimistic than those of the Intelligence Community is not because the Commission posited only a "worst case"; rather, the Commission used a more comprehensive methodology in evaluating foreign missile development and deployment programs. Previous analytical models based on the pace and pattern of U.S. and Soviet missile programs, for example, no longer are relevant. In many cases approaches to missile development and deployment that were rejected by the United States as insufficiently rigorous are in fact well-suited to those countries now seeking long-range missile capabilities. The costly and time-consuming U.S. emphasis on missile safety, reliability, and accuracy, and the requirements for high volume production, are unnecessary for those countries whose missile needs can be met with a relatively small number of less accurate and less reliable weapons. North Korea, for example, reportedly conducted only one test launch before it deployed its medium-range No Dong missile and transferred No Dong technology to Pakistan.

How is it that the missile requirements for some emerging powers can be met with development and deployment practices that are less rigorous than past U.S. and Soviet patterns? The answer is extremely important, typically overlooked, and does not require access to highly-classified information. Indeed, that answer has been provided publicly and repeatedly by political and military leaders in numerous countries now seeking missile capabilities.

These emerging powers desire the capability to deter and coerce others; and ballistic missiles, even missiles that are obsolete by U.S. standards, are near-ideal instruments for deterrence and coercion, especially for emerging powers with limited resources and technology bases. Missiles are relatively inexpensive, and do not require a high-technology infrastructure to maintain and operate. They can be used to threaten nuclear, chemical, and biological strikes, can be maintained (even concealed) on secure sovereign territory, do not require expensive personnel such as pilots to operate, can provide a lucrative commodity for export, do not need to be accurate, operationally safe or reliable to "work," and most important, even the most advanced states have limited defenses against them. Indeed, the United States has only modest defenses against short-range missiles and no defense whatsoever against long-range missile threats to U.S. territory.

For purposes of deterrence and coercion, the capacity to strike is seen as secondary to the capacity to threaten, to gain the psychological leverage over others, including the United States, that missile threats can provide. Missile accuracy is not necessary, nor are operational considerations of utmost concern because the great value of missiles is as a withheld threat. The capacity for deterrence and coercion can come from the threat to inflict terror strikes against Western cities; actually engaging in such strikes in many ways is unrelated to the goals of deterrence and coercion, and could lead to a devastating Western response. But the leverage of a withheld threat on the will of Western leaders requires only that those leaders anticipate the possibility

of a missile strike. And, because Western powers generally place a high value on the lives of their citizens, many emerging powers consider a small number of missiles capable of terror threats to be "good enough" for the purposes of deterrence and coercion. In short, a relatively modest and obsolete missile can provide great value for deterrence and coercion.

This point is critical to understanding the threat posed by missile proliferation and the likely pace of that proliferation because the reason for having those missiles shapes their development and deployment process and the role they subsequently will play. The missile development and deployment pattern for emerging powers does not need to include many of the expensive and time-consuming elements of past U.S. practice because operational precision and mass production are not the goals, coercive leverage is.

A typical response that demonstrates a misunderstanding of this point is that the missiles of emerging powers are of little consequence because "they'd never dare to strike us." Perhaps, perhaps not; the assertion misses the point: the coercive leverage emerging powers may have over us is courtesy of a withheld missile threat, and that leverage could be substantial.

Emerging powers seeking missiles and terror weapons are not "rogues" in the sense of being cavalier, irrational or less-than-serious. These are serious powers that know what they want. Their quest for missiles and weapons of mass destruction reflects a well-thought-out strategy to "trump" the Western capability to project overwhelming conventional power into their regions. They cannot compete with the West on the conventional force playing field, but they can threaten to inflict so much pain on Western civilians via even an obsolete missile arsenal, that Western leaders "will not dare" to project power into those regions. This is a serious threat to America's strategy to protect regional stability when necessary through force projection and allied military coalitions, and it is likely to emerge more rapidly than past intelligence estimates have suggested.

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