

KEITH B. PAYNE

DECEMBER 5, 2011 4:00 A.M.

The Looming Middle East Security Crisis

The immediacy of Iranian nuclear and missile proliferation allows little room for delay.

An international-security train wreck appears imminent. The outlines of this emerging crisis have been visible for almost a decade. The George W. Bush administration found no solution to it. And the Obama administration has made matters worse with its arms-control, defense, and deterrence policies.

THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM

What is this looming crisis? A November 2011 report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that Iran has a nuclear-weapons program underway and is working on a nuclear warhead for its Shahab-3 ballistic missile — a missile with a reported range of 2,000 kilometers. Nuclear weapons and missiles are a potentially deadly combination. If deployed, they will provide the Iranian leadership with the capability to make severe coercive threats against its neighbors, and eventually against the United States. If actually employed, the combination could destroy undefended nations in a matter of hours. Everyone hopes, but nobody knows, that Iran, a state-sponsor of terrorism, will behave prudently if it acquires these deadly capabilities. Numerous statements by Iranian leaders suggest otherwise.

The November IAEA report concluded that Iran is developing “an indigenous design of a nuclear weapon including the testing of components.” Just how close Iran is to having nuclear weapons is not precisely clear from available public information. But in early 2011, then-U.K. defense minister Liam Fox said Iran could acquire nuclear weapons in 2012. The IAEA report suggests that Iran may be only months away from nuclear weapons. If so, this crisis will emerge in full form under President Obama’s watch. This situation is alarming for the United States and may pose an immediate and existential threat to Israel and some moderate Arab states.

Nuclear weapons aren’t the only concern. Iran is capable of producing chemical weapons of mass destruction, and also of weaponizing them via delivery systems, according to a report from the U.S. deputy director of national intelligence for analysis. Also according to the report, “Iran probably has the capability to produce some biological warfare (BW) agents for offensive purposes. . . . Iran continues to seek dual-use technologies that could be used for BW.” A 2005

report by the U.S. State Department concluded that “Iran is in violation of its CWC [Chemical Weapons Convention] obligations because Iran is acting to retain and modernize key elements of its CW [chemical weapon] infrastructure to include an offensive CW R&D capability and dispersed mobilization facilities”; it also found that “Iran has an offensive biological weapons program in violation of the BWC [Biological Weapons Convention].” Even the Obama administration, typically eager to promote and praise multilateral arms-control agreements, [does not conclude](#) that Iran is in compliance with either of these treaties.

Equally important, there is no doubt that Iran today is able to attack its neighbors and parts of Europe with ballistic missiles. Iran’s missile arsenal is growing both in numbers and sophistication. By 2008, according to the official public estimate of the U.S. government, Iran had several hundred short- and medium-range missiles. While the official count has not been updated publicly since then, some unofficial estimates now put the number of Iranian missiles at twice that level. Commenting on a possible missile strike against Israel, Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim-Safavi, a senior adviser to Iran’s supreme leader, recently said, “There is no point out of range of and no limit on the number of our missiles.” More disturbing still, Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper recently warned that Iran’s “ballistic missiles are inherently capable of delivering WMD.”

MAKING MATTERS WORSE

How has the Obama administration exacerbated this security crisis? First, during its initial years in office, the administration attempted something of a soft-glove approach to Iran — an “engagement” that Iran rebuffed. While the president attempted to engage Iranian leaders, they reportedly continued marching forward with their nuclear and missile programs, including taking steps to protect them against attack. Consequently, this has not simply been a matter of wasted time: The Iranian nuclear and missile threat appears now to be closer, larger, and more protected than before.

The administration also sent the wrong message in its treatment of Libya. There rightly was no Western sympathy for Moammar Qaddafi’s regime. But Qaddafi had agreed to give up his WMD under Western pressure, and the Obama administration’s decision to help dismantle the regime — a decision it almost certainly would have been more reluctant to make if Libya had sustained its WMD programs — could serve only to reinforce Iran’s determination to hold on to its own WMD programs. Iranian leaders poured scorn on Qaddafi for giving up Libya’s nuclear program. Now Qaddafi is dead and his regime is gone, proving their point.

The Obama administration's unprecedented arms-control and nuclear policies also are making matters worse. For decades, many U.S. allies facing dire threats have been protected by the U.S. "extended nuclear deterrent," also known as the U.S. "nuclear umbrella." It is intended to provide allies with a fundamental level of security; before attacking, their opponents must consider the possibility of an American nuclear response. Extended deterrence is one of the key reasons countries seek to become, and choose to remain, allied to the United States, and the basis on which they can safely choose to remain non-nuclear themselves. Absent a credible U.S. nuclear umbrella, key allies facing hostile and lethal neighbors would be under much greater pressure to "go nuclear" themselves.

Yet, just as Iranian nuclear and missile developments converge to pose an imminent security crisis to U.S. allies and highlight their need for credible extended deterrence, the Obama administration has championed nuclear disarmament, moved unilaterally to reduce America's stock of nuclear weapons, and attempted to scale back their role in extending deterrence. The administration has taken this policy direction on the argument that the United States should set a good example to help move the world away from nuclear weapons. The policy goals of nuclear zero and non-proliferation are "two sides of the same coin," according to Under Secretary of State Ellen Tauscher. The administration also argues that the United States can prudently rely less on nuclear forces because America's other weaponry — advanced conventional forces and missile defenses — increasingly can provide credible extended deterrence and assure vulnerable allies.

In addition, the administration has expressed its commitment to leave behind traditional nuclear deterrence concepts in favor of a new "Mutual Assured Stability." Under this approach, "states would share an overriding interest in peace and stability," and "refrain from precipitate actions, and pursue cooperative solutions to international problems." This initiative may sound attractive to U.S. allies who see no armed, hostile neighbors, but it undoubtedly alarms those who confront real threats and depend on U.S. deterrence power.

The administration has said and demonstrated that this policy direction sits "atop" its "nuclear agenda." In 2010, the administration negotiated a treaty with Russia, the New START treaty, that effectively mandates unilateral U.S. nuclear-force reductions. The administration also decided to eliminate some of America's few remaining tactical nuclear weapons without comparable reductions from Russia. And administration officials have indicated the possibility of further unilateral nuclear reductions. Some allies are alarmed by this behavior, given the immediate

reality of expanding nuclear and missile threats.

There is no credible evidence to support the administration's contention that America's steps to eschew nuclear weapons will inspire others to do likewise, or that conventional forces can provide an adequate basis for extending deterrence and assuring our allies. In fact, backtracking on extended nuclear deterrence now is likely to inspire proliferation among some allies who have previously been assured by a credible nuclear umbrella. Nonetheless, the administration appears ideologically determined to "devalue" nuclear weapons and dramatically shift American deterrence policy.

Given this priority, long-term, well-funded defense budgets for advanced conventional forces and robust missile defenses are necessary. But the administration has cut missile-defense programs over the past three years, in some cases severely, and strong conventional-force budgets appear to be unlikely, thanks to existing and prospective cuts in defense spending. For example, given these budget cuts, rather than an all-stealth force, the U.S. Air Force will be flying legacy F-15s and F-16s for decades. In 2009, the Obama administration killed two promising missile-defense programs, the multiple-kill vehicle and the boost-phase interceptor. In 2011, it unilaterally terminated deployment of the successor to the Patriot defense system, the MEADS, despite appeals from Germany and Italy. It also slowed the deployment rate for the THAAD missile-defense system.

These rollbacks of missile-defense programs have been enacted in the face of large and growing numbers of offensive missiles in opponents' hands. According to the Obama administration, potential adversaries who threaten us, our friends, and our allies have over 6,000 short- and medium-range missiles. This compares unhappily with our defensive-interceptor inventory of 1,154, only a small portion of which (18 THAAD and 87 SM-3 defensive interceptors) reportedly can intercept medium- and intermediate-range missiles or provide defense for wide areas.

American interceptor procurement is supposed to increase in FY2012, but the big question is how much will survive the new budget cuts. These threaten to be much greater than previous cuts, and likely will affect adversely the number of defensive interceptors and radars procured. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced recently that new U.S. cuts could "terminate" the entire U.S. program for missile defense in Europe. Moreover, the U.S. is no longer able to prudently and rapidly [surge](#) its missile-defense assets to the Middle East, as it did in 1991 and 2003. The Chinese missile capability in Asia has become too great a threat to U.S. bases and

naval vessels in the Pacific to allow this.

ALLIES' RESPONSIBILITIES

This confluence of developments creates a security crisis for some U.S. allies. In many cases, offensive missiles might have a free ride to their territories. They would do well to look toward acquiring missile defenses cooperatively with the United States.

Missile defense is not a silver bullet, but it can reduce vulnerability to missile strikes and thereby devalue opponents' offensive missiles and WMD. Perfect defenses are not necessary to introduce uncertainties into an enemy's attack plans. Iran in particular has few reliable delivery options beyond offensive missiles, and reducing those missiles' reliability would be no small advantage. Missile defense also can provide allies with time and a more benign option than executing a pre-emptive strike when an opponent appears to be preparing for a missile strike. This too is no small advantage.

Cooperation with the U.S. on missile defense, including arrangements for the sharing of early-warning information, can reduce the costs and increase effectiveness for all. We are past the point where allies and friends should expect American taxpayers to foot the bill for their missile defense in return for their political support for our international missile-defense efforts. This essentially may be the administration's current modus operandi for missile defense in Europe, but it is not a 21st-century reality.

Several countries in particularly dangerous neighborhoods, notably Japan and Israel, wisely have been contributing to their own missile defense for years. Other countries, particularly moderate Arab states in the Middle East, also reportedly are taking cooperative measures to defend themselves in light of the emerging Iranian threat. The United Arab Emirates has acquired the Patriot PAC-3 and apparently is negotiating a \$7 billion dollar deal with the U.S. for the purchase of THAAD, a sale that Congress has approved. Kuwait has contracted for the upgrade of their Patriots to the more advanced PAC-3 configuration, and Saudi Arabia has signed a \$1.7 billion contract to upgrade its Patriots to PAC-3 and is discussing a purchase of THAAD.

Such missile-defense cooperation certainly is a necessary part of the answer to Iranian nuclear, chemical, biological, and missile threats. Also important is moving past naïve hopes that diplomatic "engagement" will disarm Iran's nuclear program, that experimenting with deterrence and assurance now by retracting the American nuclear umbrella will be an effective way to further the administration's anti-nuclear agenda, and that dramatic cuts in defense spending should be implemented now, given unfolding international threats. Getting these fundamentals

right will be crucial, whether the Obama administration's answer to the emerging Iranian threat is assertive near-term military action or a more benign, long-term policy of containing a nuclear-armed Iran. The immediacy of Iranian nuclear and missile proliferation allows little room for delay.

— *Keith B. Payne, former deputy assistant secretary of defense, is now professor and department head of the graduate school of defense and strategic studies, Missouri State University (Washington, D.C., campus).*