

# Strategic Analysis Paper

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## A New US Persian Gulf Strategy?

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### Summary

The United States recently announced moves to improve its defensive capabilities in the Persian Gulf. This involves stationing additional Patriot batteries and Aegis-equipped warships in the Gulf and upgrading the defensive capabilities of Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf allies.

The timing and reasons for these moves are interesting.



### Analysis

At the heart of these developments is the failure of the US and the other three members of the Group of Six (France, Germany and the United Kingdom), to convince Russia and China to force Iran to cease uranium enrichment – which could lead to the development of nuclear weapons – and to allow the process to be fully verified.

Western countries, in particular, continue to believe that Iran is developing nuclear weapons while Tehran rejects such claims and states that it is simply attempting to develop nuclear power for commercial reasons.

Diplomacy and the imposition of sanctions have not deterred Iran. The US, for instance, has considered the use of “crippling sanctions” that would see Iran deprived of up to 35 percent of its refined oil requirements. But such moves were considered by some analysts as likely to result in ‘catastrophic humanitarian consequences’ that could even increase the authority of the regime and gain no support from any opposition leader in Iran.

As it is, the UN Security Council has adopted five resolutions, three of which involved sanctions. Recently the US Senate passed a bill advocating tough sanctions on any

individual, company or even country which provides refined petroleum to Iran. But these sanctions are just as unlikely to be effective, particularly as China has made it quite clear that it is not prepared to participate. Beijing has lucrative business deals with Iran, especially in the oil and gas sectors.

Nor is major conventional conflict with Iran likely. A limited strike would not destroy Iran's nuclear facilities. These are scattered, numerous, deeply buried, surrounded by air defence units and, in some cases, close to large cities.

Limited strikes, based largely on air and missile strikes, may also result in Iran using its proxies. Hezbollah and Hamas stand out. But Iran, through its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, has sought to arm and train Shiite factions in other parts of the Middle East, including – most recently – Yemen. And even where it may not have a significant military foothold, the threat to develop one has concerned countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan for some time.

There is also the threat to close the Strait of Hormuz. This has been publicly considered by Iran on several occasions. Again, whether it has the capability, particularly in light of the US naval capabilities in the region is problematical. But the threat could have a major destabilising impact on world oil prices if nothing else.

It is also possible that limited strikes have every potential of escalating, leading eventually to a major ground war. In the cold, hard light of logic, such an outcome would seem to be far from what the United States, in particular, would want.

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American political and military leaders are painfully aware that the United States is stretched thin in conventional military terms with Iraq and, to a greater extent, Afghanistan consuming a significant portion of capabilities, especially those related to ground forces. The US simply does not have the force needed to defeat, occupy and administer a country that has three times Iraq's population and is four times as large. Nor is there a significant force in-country that would be prepared to support an invader. Equally, a sizeable part of the population would not only oppose the invasion, but also the occupation.

Some analysts suggest that Israel has seriously considered the option of attacking Iran's nuclear sites. Israel is, of course, within range of Iranian missiles and President Ahmadinejad has said Israel should be destroyed. But what could the Israelis do when the United States, with its vastly superior military force, is doubtful of doing?

Israel does not have the conventional force to conduct a several day operation. Certainly, it might destroy some of the facilities, but it can also expect a major campaign across its northern border from Lebanon and from Hamas, in the Gaza Strip to the south.

It has been suggested that Israel's best option would be to use its nuclear capability, possibly striking from its nuclear capable submarines. Even assuming Israel has such a capability and

that it is able to accurately target nuclear facilities, there is still the problem of collateral damage. Israel could expect a significant backlash from within the region if there were extensive civilian casualties.

Of course, the state of Iran's nuclear developments is a significant consideration. This has not been verified although there are widely different claims. Some analysts believe Tehran has no intention of developing a weapon, as Iranian spokesmen are quick to claim. Others suggest that such a weapon is one to two years away. This, of course, is understandable depending on the perceived threat; Israeli commentators would suggest an imminent threat while those in the US would not necessarily be so concerned.

What is clear is that Iran has yet to test a nuclear device. This also suggests that it has yet to master the deliverable aspects of such a weapon. Over recent years, Iran has very publicly shown its abilities to launch increasingly more capable rockets. In its most recent launch, a Kavoshgar-3 rocket purportedly was capable of carrying a 60-kilogram satellite 800 kilometres into space. Even assuming that Iran were capable of developing a nuclear capability, it would need to consider the consequences of launching such a strike. Nations that have acquired such capabilities soon realise the implications of the counter strike.

Given the above, the defensive implications of the recently announced deployments now start to make sense.

The US and Israel are not prepared to take military action against Iran, either because they do not have the capabilities to do so, or recognise the consequences of such an action. They also recognise that diplomacy and sanctions have either failed or are not possible.

As an alternate strategy, the US has been deploying and developing additional capabilities in the Persian Gulf region for some time. These have included arms sales to Saudi Arabia and a number of Gulf State countries. Part of these capabilities has resulted in improved security for key infrastructure, including oil terminals.

The most significant recent deployments have included Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) capable Aegis-equipped warships in the Persian Gulf, where they are capable of shooting down missiles in flight. The Aegis/Standard Missile 3 (SM-3) successfully brought down an out-of-control US satellite in 2008.

BMD-capable Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) batteries have been deployed in Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Oman. This system is a far more capable variant of the original Patriot that was deployed in the First Gulf War of 1990-91. A recent exercise with the Israeli Defence Force named Juniper Cobra further refined its employment.

Both the PAC-3 and SM-3 are untried, however, against Iran's Shahab-3s. This adds an element of uncertainty to the strategy espoused by their recent deployment. This is particularly felt by Israel.

Nevertheless, this defensive strategy, from an American perspective, makes sense. By destroying Iranian missiles shortly after their launch, the risks of not having precise

intelligence are overcome. Nor is there a need for a pre-emptive strike with the attendant risks of collateral damage.

There is even the possibility that an effective shield that destroys Iranian missiles may convince Tehran to abandon its pursuit of a nuclear capability that has to be delivered by missiles.

While neighbouring Arab countries can probably live with this situation – they are unlikely to be primary targets – the same cannot be said for Israel where a single nuclear strike, or several conventional strikes, could result in serious damage.

This leads to the issue of timing.

For some time, Israel has regarded February as the decisive month for sanctions to make an impact. If this does not happen, then either a more aggressive strategy is required, or there is an international acceptance that Iran will develop a nuclear capability.

Therefore, the US Administration's announcement just before the start of February of a defensive strategy is set, at least in part, to mollify Israel. Equally, the Obama Administration needs to reassure the American public that, although Iran has refused to be influenced by diplomacy and the imposition of sanctions, there is another strategy in place that neutralises the Iranian threat.

So where does the US go from here?

Future options are not made easier by Tehran's launch of its latest missile. But Iran has also played one of its most favoured strategies. Ahmadinejad has publicly announced that Tehran is prepared to accept a proposal that would see the bulk of its partially enriched uranium processed in France and Russia, thus ensuring it could not be used for weapon purposes. At the same time, he was "hopeful" concerning the release of three detained Americans.

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Again, this has had the desired effect. Some Western politicians have characterised Ahmadinejad's remarks as an Iranian "retreat", indicating that Tehran is prepared to reduce tensions over the nuclear issue. Others, however, are not nearly so convinced. They see nothing new in his statements, which are not dissimilar to what he has said before, when nothing has happened. This sentiment is possibly best summed up by French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, who said he was 'perplexed and even a bit pessimistic' about the proposal which he interpreted as 'buying time' ahead of possible new United Nations sanctions.

Uncertainty on how to handle Iran is still a dominant feature. One aspect that receives considerable attention is the so-called Green Movement. Many Western analysts believe

that this is the main challenge for the Iranian government. Certainly the country has witnessed widespread protests against perceived fraud in the elections of 12 June last year.

Some commentators claim that these developments have seriously limited the ability of Tehran to govern effectively. They suggest that Iran's leaders may decide to compromise with the international community over the nuclear problem so they can concentrate on domestic issues. There is also a suggestion that international outrage over repressive measures will further isolate Tehran leading to increased condemnation of Iran and thus strengthening the move for more effective sanctions.

There is little doubt that Western countries, and the United States in particular, are increasingly frustrated by Iran. This disappointment is reflected in the more aggressive tone of the proposed courses of action. There is also the hint of regime change being back on the agenda.

But is regime change a viable option? Much of the coverage of Iranian discontent is limited to the larger cities where urban middle classes and students seem to dominate. The government, on the other hand, is able to organise significantly larger demonstrations and there is every indication that many, if not most, Iranians are not prepared to support a mass uprising. This situation is not helped by the repressive nature of Iran's internal security forces.

So the new defensive strategies in the Persian Gulf may well be the only available option to deter, or at least control, Iran's developing nuclear capability. Certainly this strategy increases pressure on Iran, reassures Arab countries they do not have to acquire nuclear weapons, attempts to convince Israel that it does not need to attack Iran and reassures the American public that Washington does have a viable strategy with which to confront Tehran.