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Iran's Nuclear and Missile Programme

by
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Introduction

Iran is an Islamic Republic that sits in a strategically important and volatile area. Its policies have a significant impact on regional security in the Persian Gulf, the Caucasus and the wider Middle East and South Asia. Since becoming an Islamic Republic 24 years ago, Iran has been grappling with how to redefine itself as an Islamic country; how to strike a balance between its Persian culture and Islamic identity; how to reconcile the tenets of Islamic rule with the demand for democracy; and how to position itself on the international stage without compromising its solidarity with other Muslim and developing countries. These tensions have translated into domestic power struggles between 'traditionalists' and 'reformists', the outcome of which remains ambiguous and uncertain. What is certain, however, is that these tendencies have profound implications for the definition and pursuit of Iran's national security. Of particular importance here is Iran's highly controversial nuclear ambitions and its missile programme.

The Missile Programme

Iran has developed its missile programme quite openly—in contrast to its nuclear aspirations—and considers missiles an essential part of its deterrent strategy. It launched an accelerated missile acquisition programme during the war with Iraq (1980-1990), the main sources being Libya, Syria, North Korea and China. Another spur to develop missiles was a result of its air force being rendered useless because of a US-led arms embargo. At the end of the war, Iran saw missiles as a foundation of a domestic defence industry and as providing it with relative autonomy in security planning. It was also a shortcut to effective deterrence while providing raw destructive power. When Ayatollah Rafsanjani was president (1989-97), he strongly defended Iran's right to missile development as a right to scientific research. For him, such research would include missile, space, biological, nuclear and chemical technology and any attempts by external powers to deny these to Iran would be resisted based on a psychological incentive to show Iran's enemies that it will not be dictated to. Current President Khatami is in broad agreement with this stance, insisting that Iran's military programmes are for purely defensive purposes. In terms of its broader geo-strategic framework, Iran's missile programme is meant to secure a larger role for it in international affairs. In its current defence and foreign policy, missiles serve three functions.

Firstly, they act as a deterrent against Iraq, Israel and the US and any other real or perceived enemy. Secondly, they are powerful symbols of Iran's ascendancy as a regional power and give it authority in shaping a volatile regional terrain.