

A DEFENSIVE BUILDUP IN THE GULF

By George Friedman

This weekend's newspapers were filled with stories about how the United States is providing ballistic missile defense (BMD) to four countries on the Arabian Peninsula. The New York Times carried a front-page story on the United States providing anti-missile defenses to Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Oman, as well as stationing BMD-capable, Aegis-equipped warships in the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, the front page of The Washington Post carried a story saying that "the Obama administration is quietly working with Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf allies to speed up arms sales and rapidly upgrade defenses for oil terminals and other key infrastructure in a bid to thwart future attacks by Iran, according to former and current U.S. and Middle Eastern government officials."

Obviously, the work is no longer "quiet." In fact, Washington has been publicly engaged in upgrading defensive systems in the area for some time. Central Command head Gen. David Petraeus recently said the four countries named by the Times were receiving BMD-capable Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) batteries, and at the end of October the United States carried out its largest-ever military exercises with Israel, known as Juniper Cobra.

More interesting than the stories themselves was the Obama administration's decision to launch a major public relations campaign this weekend regarding these moves. And the most intriguing question out of all this is why the administration decided to call everyone's attention to these defensive measures while not mentioning any offensive options.

The Iranian Nuclear Question

U.S. President Barack Obama spent little time on foreign policy in his Jan. 27 State of the Union message, though he did make a short, sharp reference to Iran. He promised a strong response to Tehran if it continued its present course; though this could have been pro forma, it seemed quite pointed. Early in his administration, Obama had said he would give the Iranians until the end of 2009 to change their policy on nuclear weapons development. But the end of 2009 came, and the Iranians continued their policy.

All along, Obama has focused on diplomacy on the Iran question. To be more precise, he has focused on bringing together a coalition prepared to impose "crippling sanctions" on the Iranians. The most crippling sanction would be stopping Iran's gasoline imports, as Tehran imports about 35 percent of its gasoline. Such sanctions are now unlikely, as China has made clear that it is not prepared to participate -- and that before the most recent round of U.S. weapon sales to Taiwan. Similarly, while the Russians have indicated that their participation in sanctions is not completely out of the question, they

also have made clear that time for sanctions is not near. We suspect that the Russian time frame for sanctions will keep getting pushed back.

Therefore, the diplomatic option appears to have dissolved. The Israelis have said they regard February as the decisive month for sanctions, which they have indicated is based on an agreement with the United States. While previous deadlines of various sorts regarding Iran have come and gone, there is really no room after February. If no progress is made on sanctions and no action follows, then the decision has been made by default that a nuclear-armed Iran is acceptable.

The Americans and the Israelis have somewhat different views of this based on different geopolitical realities. The Americans have seen a number of apparently extreme and dangerous countries develop nuclear weapons. The most important example was Maoist China. Mao Zedong had argued that a nuclear war was not particularly dangerous to China, as it could lose several hundred million people and still win the war. But once China developed nuclear weapons, the wild talk subsided and China behaved quite cautiously. From this experience, the United States developed a two-stage strategy.

First, the United States believed that while the spread of nuclear weapons is a danger, countries tend to be circumspect after acquiring nuclear weapons. Therefore, overreaction by United States to the acquisition of nuclear weapons by other countries is unnecessary and unwise.

Second, since the United States is a big country with widely dispersed population and a massive nuclear arsenal, a reckless country that launched some weapons at the United States would do minimal harm to the United States while the other country would face annihilation. And the United States has emphasized BMD to further mitigate -- if not eliminate -- the threat of such a limited strike to the United States.

Israel's geography forces it to see things differently. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has said Israel should be wiped off the face of the Earth while simultaneously working to attain nuclear weapons. While the Americans take comfort in the view that the acquisition of nuclear weapons has a sobering effect on a new nuclear power, the Israelis don't think the Chinese case necessarily can be generalized. Moreover, the United States is outside the range of the Iranians' current ballistic missile arsenal while Israel is not. And a nuclear strike would have a particularly devastating effect on Israel. Unlike the United States, Israel is small country with a highly concentrated population. A strike with just one or two weapons could destroy Israel.

Therefore, Israel has a very different threshold for risk as far as Iran is concerned. For Israel, a nuclear strike from Iran is improbable, but would be catastrophic if it happened. For the United States, the risk of an Iranian strike is far more remote, and would be painful but not catastrophic if it happened. The two countries thus approach the situation very differently.

How close the Iranians are to having a deliverable nuclear weapon is, of course, a significant consideration in all this. Iran has not yet achieved a testable nuclear device.

Logic tells us they are quite far from a deliverable nuclear weapon. But the ability to trust logic varies as the risk grows. The United States (and this is true for both the Bush and Obama administrations) has been much more willing to play for time than Israel can afford to be. For Israel, all intelligence must be read in the context of worst-case scenarios.

Diverging Interests and Grand Strategy

It is also important to remember that Israel is much less dependent on the United States than it was in 1973. Though U.S. aid to Israel continues, it is now a much smaller percentage of Israeli gross domestic product. Moreover, the threat of sudden conventional attack by Israel's immediate neighbors has disappeared. Egypt is at peace with Israel, and in any case, its military is too weak to mount an attack. Jordan is effectively an Israeli ally. Only Syria is hostile, but it presents no conventional military threat. Israel previously has relied on guarantees that the United States would rush aid to Israel in the event of war. But it has been a generation since this has been a major consideration for Israel. In the minds of many, the Israeli-U.S. relationship is stuck in the past. Israel is not critical to American interests the way it was during the Cold War. And Israel does not need the United States the way it did during the Cold War. While there is intelligence cooperation in the struggle against jihadists, even here American and Israeli interests diverge.

And this means that the United States no longer has Israeli national security as an overriding consideration -- and that the United States cannot compel Israel to pursue policies Israel regards as dangerous.

Given all of this, the Obama administration's decision to launch a public relations campaign on defensive measures just before February makes perfect sense. If Iran develops a nuclear capability, a defensive capability might shift Iran's calculus of the risks and rewards of the military option.

Assume, for example, that the Iranians decided to launch a nuclear missile at Israel or Iran's Arab neighbors with which its relations are not the best. Iran only would have a handful of missiles, and perhaps just one. Launching that one missile only to have it shot down would represent the worst-case scenario for Iran. Tehran would have lost a valuable military asset, it would not have achieved its goal and it would have invited a devastating counterstrike. Anything the United States can do to increase the likelihood of an Iranian failure therefore decreases the likelihood that Iran would strike until they have more delivery systems and more fissile material for manufacturing more weapons.

The U.S. announcement of the defensive measures therefore has three audiences: Iran, Israel and the American public. Israel and Iran obviously know all about American efforts, meaning the key audience is the American public. The administration is trying to deflect American concerns about Iran generated both by reality and Israel by showing that effective steps are being taken.

There are two key weapon systems being deployed, the PAC-3 and the Aegis/Standard Missile-3 (SM-3). The original Patriot, primarily an anti-aircraft system, had a poor

record -- especially as a BMD system -- during the first Gulf War. But that was almost 20 years ago. The new system is regarded as much more effective as a terminal-phase BMD system, such as the medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) developed by Iran, and performed much more impressively in this role during the opening of Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003. In addition, Juniper Cobra served to further integrate a series of American and Israeli BMD interceptors and sensors, building a more redundant and layered system. This operation also included the SM-3, which is deployed aboard specially-modified Aegis-equipped guided missile cruisers and destroyers. The SM-3 is one...of the most successful BMD technologies currently in the field and successfully brought down a wayward U.S. spy satellite in 2008.

Nevertheless, a series of Iranian Shahab-3s is a different threat than a few Iraqi Scuds, and the PAC-3 and SM-3 have yet to be proven in combat against such MRBMs -- something the Israelis are no doubt aware of. War planners must calculate the incalculable; that is what makes good generals pessimists.

The Obama administration does not want to mount an offensive action against Iran. Such an operation would not be single strike like the 1981 Osirak attack in Iraq. Iran has multiple nuclear sites buried deep and surrounded by air defenses. And assessing the effectiveness of airstrikes would be a nightmare. Many days of combat at a minimum probably would be required, and like the effectiveness of defensive weapons systems, the quality of intelligence about which locations to hit cannot be known until after the battle.

A defensive posture therefore makes perfect sense for the United States. Washington can simply defend its allies, letting them absorb the risk and then the first strike before the United States counterstrikes rather than rely on its intelligence and offensive forces in a pre-emptive strike. This defensive posture on Iran fits American grand strategy, which is always to shift such risk to partners in exchange for technology and long-term guarantees.

The Arabian states can live with this, albeit nervously, since they are not the likely targets. But Israel finds its assigned role in U.S. grand strategy far more difficult to stomach. In the unlikely event that Iran actually does develop a weapon and does strike, Israel is the likely target. If the defensive measures do not convince Iran to abandon its program and if the Patriots allow a missile to leak through, Israel has a national catastrophe. It faces an unlikely event with unacceptable consequences.

Israel's Options

It has options, although a long-range conventional airstrike against Iran is really not one of them. Carrying out a multiday or even multiweek air campaign with Israel's available force is too likely to be insufficient and too likely to fail. Israel's most effective option for taking out Iran's nuclear activities is itself nuclear. Israel could strike Iran from submarines if it genuinely intended to stop Iran's program.

The problem with this is that much of the Iranian nuclear program is sited near large cities, including Tehran. Depending on the nuclear weapons used and their precision, any Israeli strikes could thus turn into city-killers. Israel is not able to live in a region where nuclear weapons are used in counterpopulation strikes (regardless of the actual intent

behind launching). Mounting such a strike could unravel the careful balance of power Israel has created and threaten relationships it needs. And while Israel may not be as dependent on the United States as it once was, it does not want the United States completely distancing itself from Israel, as Washington doubtless would after an Israeli nuclear strike.

The Israelis want Iran's nuclear program destroyed, but they do not want to be the ones to try to do it. Only the United States has the force needed to carry out the strike conventionally. But like the Bush administration, the Obama administration is not confident in its ability to remove the Iranian program surgically. Washington is concerned that any air campaign would have an indeterminate outcome and would require extremely difficult ground operations to determine the strikes' success or failure. Perhaps even more complicated is the U.S. ability to manage the consequences, such as a potential attempt by Iran to close the Strait of Hormuz and Iranian meddling in already extremely delicate situations in Iraq and Afghanistan. As Iran does not threaten the United States, the United States therefore is in no hurry to initiate combat. And so the United States has launched a public relations campaign about defensive measures, hoping to affect Iranian calculations while remaining content to let the game play itself out.

Israel's option is to respond to the United States of its intent to go nuclear, something Washington does not want in a region where U.S. troops are fighting in countries on either side of Iran. Israel might calculate that its announcement would force the United States to pre-empt an Israeli nuclear strike with conventional strikes. But the American response to Israel cannot be predicted. It is therefore dangerous for a small regional power to try to corner a global power.

With the adoption of a defensive posture, we have now seen the U.S. response to the February deadline. This response closes off no U.S. options -- the United States can always shift its strategy when intelligence indicates -- it increases the Arabian Peninsula's dependence on the United States, and it possibly causes Iran to recalculate its position. Israel, meanwhile, finds itself in a box, because the United States calculates that Israel will not chance a conventional strike and fears a nuclear strike on Iran as much as the United States does.

In the end, Obama has followed the Bush strategy on Iran -- make vague threats, try to build a coalition, hold Israel off with vague promises, protect the Arabian Peninsula, and wait -- to the letter. But along with this announcement, we would expect to begin to see a series of articles on the offensive deployment of U.S. forces, as good defensive posture requires a strong offensive option.

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