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Iranian Missile Tests Boost International Tensions and Proliferation Concerns

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Yesterday Iran launched nine missiles as part of military exercises designed to accomplish the following:

- Deter military action against its accelerating nuclear program;
- Undermine the international coalition seeking to dissuade Iran from attaining a nuclear weapon;
- Intimidate its neighbors; and
- Boost President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's flagging domestic political support.

While the missile display revealed little in the way of new Iranian military capabilities, it underscored the willingness of President Ahmadinejad's belligerent regime to resort to brinksmanship as part of its hostile foreign policy. Iran's missile-rattling provides one more reminder—if any were needed—that the United States and its allies need to cooperate more effectively to contain Iran's rising power, put a higher priority on missile defense and prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Iran's missiles threaten not only Israel, U.S. military forces, and other allies in the Middle East but also Europe, where Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice traveled to sign a missile defense agreement with the Czech Republic the day before Iran's missile launches.

Missile Messages for Multiple Audiences. Iran's missile tests were not unprecedented. Iran periodically conducts military exercises involving the types of missiles launched yesterday: the Fateh (with an estimated range of 100 miles), Zelzal

(estimated range of 250 miles) and the Shahab-3 (which Iran claims has a range of more than 1,200 miles). Yesterday's "Great Prophet" military exercise was similar to two "Great Prophet" exercises held in 2006.

The timing, location, and official Iranian rhetoric explaining yesterday's war games were highly significant. This military muscle-flexing comes at a time of growing regional tension and heightened international efforts to end Iran's stubborn defiance of U.N. Security Council resolutions aimed at compelling Iranian compliance with its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Iran's military exhibition was designed to impress several different target audiences.

Target: Israel and the United States. Last month, Israel, which has repeatedly been threatened with destruction by the Iranian regime, signaled its growing frustration with stalemated international diplomatic efforts to secure Iranian compliance by staging a military exercise that involved over 100 warplanes maneuvering over long distances. This operation was widely interpreted as a trial run for possible air strikes on Iran's nuclear weapons program. Israel's Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz,

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a former Chief of the General Staff of the Israeli Defense Forces and Minister of Defense, warned on June 6 that “if Iran continues with its program for developing nuclear weapons, we will attack it. The sanctions are ineffective.”

Iran’s military exercise came less than one day after President Ahmadinejad dismissed speculation that Israel or the United States would launch a preventive military strike to disable Iran’s nuclear weapons program, calling such reports “a funny joke.” But many Iranian officials were not laughing. General Hossein Salami, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards’ air force, proclaimed that yesterday’s exercise would “demonstrate our resolve and might against enemies who in recent weeks have threatened Iran with harsh language.” He warned that “our fingers are always on the trigger and our missiles are ready for launch.” Significantly, one of the missiles involved in the military exercise, the Shahab-3, is capable of targeting Israel, as well as other allies and U.S. military forces in the Middle East and parts of Europe.

Target: Oil-Importing States. In addition to threatening to retaliate with missiles for any attack on Iran’s prohibited nuclear weapons program, Tehran signaled that it would broaden the war to include attacks on oil exports flowing out of the Persian Gulf. Yesterday’s war games were focused on operations along the Strait of Hormuz, the strategic waterway through which passes approximately 40 percent of global oil exports. Iran’s saber-rattling helped to boost the price of oil on the skittish world market, where it had been sliding down in recent days. This was a welcome economic bonus for the Ahmadinejad regime, which receives about 85 percent of its revenues from oil exports.

The threat of an Iranian-sponsored oil disruption also reinforces Iran’s attempts to drive a wedge between the United States and its European and Japanese allies, which are much more dependent on Persian Gulf oil exports. This potential economic blackmail, in tandem with Iran’s demonstrated willingness to risk war with Israel, and possibly the United States, strengthens Iranian bargaining leverage in the long-simmering dispute over Iran’s nuclear program. Undoubtedly, Tehran will attempt to exploit this leverage when Javier

Solana, the European Union’s foreign policy chief, arrives in Iran next week as part of yet another effort to coax Iran back into negotiations over its nuclear program.

Target: Arab Neighbors. Iran’s missile messages are also meant to intimidate its neighbors. Iran first released video footage of the missile tests on its Arabic language news channel, a sign that the mullahs wanted to hammer home the message of Iranian military strength to an Arab audience. Such chest-thumping may rattle Iran’s smaller and weaker neighbors, but it will do little to reduce the growing Arab resentment of Iranian meddling in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories, as well as Iran’s occupation of three islands in the Persian Gulf claimed by the United Arab Emirates.

Target: Iranian Public Opinion. Finally, the Iranian military exercises are aimed at a domestic Iranian audience. These maneuvers give President Ahmadinejad—who faces increasing criticism at home for his disastrous economic policies and strident foreign policy—an opportunity to rail against foreign enemies and exploit Iranian nationalism. The military exercises also showcase Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, the elite military organization in which Ahmadinejad spent most of his career and that controls Iran’s ballistic missiles as well as key components of Iran’s nuclear program.

Proliferation Concerns and the Axis of Evil. Iran’s missile demonstrations also reinforce concerns about the proliferation of missile and nuclear technology by North Korea. The Shahab-3, like many other Iranian missiles, is based on technology provided by North Korea’s rogue regime. The revelation that North Korea was involved in constructing the Syrian nuclear facility bombed by Israel last September has raised suspicions that North Korea also could be assisting Iran’s nuclear program. Iran’s oil and cash resources are a major enticement to the bankrupt and energy-poor Korean communists. Moreover, North Korea has provided tunneling technology for hardening Iranian missile production and nuclear sites. Clearly, the Axis of Evil is alive and well long after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Yesterday’s missile launches are one more troubling sign that Iran is on a collision course with the

United States and its allies. Such military exercises underscore the need for more forceful action to stave off Iranian nuclear efforts and the increasing importance of missile defense, not only for the United States but also for its allies in Europe and the Middle East.

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