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US-Iranian Relations: A Decade down the Line

Stringent economic and political sanctions notwithstanding, the United States continues to be frustrated in its attempts to curtail Iran's nuclear program. Pursuing strategic missile defense, Sam Rajiv argues, is no solution either — it will merely complicate global and regional security.

By S Samuel C Rajiv for ISN

Iran has been a prime foreign policy concern for successive U.S. administrations since the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the subsequent breakdown of diplomatic relations. Among the policies that are held to be against Washington's geopolitical interests are Tehran's pursuit of ballistic missile technology, its alleged support for terrorist activities and concerns generated by the true nature of Iran's nuclear program. Indeed, U.S. suspicions regarding Tehran's nuclear policies have increased since 2002, when [it was discovered](#) that Iran had secretly developed research facilities at Natanz.

Punitive Measures

In order to address concerns generated by Iran's nuclear program the Bush administration developed a muscular counter-proliferation policy. These include the strengthening of existing non-proliferation-related sanctions measures like [the Iran Non-Proliferation Act](#) (INA) (2000). This was accompanied by multilateral measures like the 2003 Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and [United Nations Security Council Resolution 1540](#) (2004).

The Obama administration has also developed similarly a robust set of counter-proliferation measures. In July 2010, for example, the [Comprehensive Iran Sanctions and Divestment Act](#) (CISADA) was introduced. As Tehran is suspected of using oil revenues to fund its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, CISADA aims to limit investments in Iran's petro-chemical sector. Administration officials like Secretary of State Hilary Clinton also push a '[dual-track](#)' approach to negotiations with Iran. According to Clinton, this entails 'applying pressure in pursuit of constructive engagement' with Tehran.

The latest measures to enforce pressure upon Iran include Section 1245 of the [2012 National Defence Authorization Act](#). This specifically targets the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) and makes financial transactions with it a sanctionable offense. The Act was developed after the Obama administration designated Iran as a '[jurisdiction of primary money laundering concern](#)' under Section 311 of the Patriot Act. The previous instance of a country being categorized as such was Myanmar in 2003. Obama administration officials are convinced that a tough sanctions regime brought Iran back to the

negotiating table on April 2012, when the E3+3 (P5+1) talks reconvened in Istanbul. However, despite two further rounds of talks in Baghdad and Moscow Iran's return to the negotiating table has yet to translate into meaningful diplomatic progress.

Missile Defense: Strategic Hedging

Alongside punitive sanctions and diplomatic initiatives, the United States is also developing a more robust military response to the threat posed by Iran's WMD programs. Washington continues to pursue the development of missile defense technologies that will not only counter Iran's growing missile capabilities, but also reinvigorate US-Russian dialogue regarding missile defense cooperation. However, the United States has only had limited success in meeting these objectives. Efforts to protect the homeland, for example, come in the shape of two ground based interceptor (GBI) sites based in Alaska and California. The [2010 Ballistic Missile Defense Review](#) (BMD Review) – the first ever review undertaken by the US – held these capabilities to be sufficient to deter any future attack involving Iranian inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBM).

Moreover, the development of GBI sites reflects concerns that Iran is rapidly developing its ICBM capabilities. The Department of Defense's most recent report [on Iran's armed forces](#) suggests that 'Iran may be technically capable of flight-testing an intercontinental ballistic missile by 2015'. Meanwhile, Iran's progress in developing short and medium-range ballistic missiles (SRBM/MRBM) has spurred US efforts to offer ballistic missile defense to its NATO and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies. Iran's arsenal of short and medium-range ballistic missiles includes the liquid-fuelled *Shahab-3*, liquid-/solid-fuelled *Ghadr-1*, and currently in development solid-fuelled *Sajjil*. Tehran also claims to have developed supersonic anti-ship ballistic missiles like the *Khalij Fars* and cruise missiles like the *Nasr-1*, whose mass production began in March 2010.

In response, the United States has developed countermeasures like the 'Third Site' plan (2007) and the [Phased Adaptive Approach](#) (PAA) for Europe (2009) was unveiled by President Obama in September 2009. In the case of 'Third Site', the Bush Administration envisaged the deployment of 10 GBI in Poland accompanied by a large, fixed radar installation in the Czech Republic. Obama's PAA involves assets deployed at sea ('Aegis-Afloat' – Aegis BMD system-equipped ships and interceptors) and on the European mainland ('Aegis Ashore' – interceptors at Deveselu, Romania and Redzikowo, Poland). Four Aegis-equipped ships are also to be deployed at Rota, Spain beginning from 2015. These are expected to provide capabilities against MRBM's by 2015, intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBM) by 2018 and early intercept (EI) options by 2020.

As far as GCC countries are concerned, the US has maintained a BMD-capable ship presence in the waters of the Mediterranean since March 2011 when the *USS Monterey* was deployed for an initial period of six months. Two Aegis-equipped ships are also deployed in the waters of the Persian Gulf and X-band radars are currently stationed at Kurecik, Turkey and the Negev desert, Israel (preparations are also under way for the deployment of a third radar in Qatar). The GCC countries have also deployed Patriot anti-missile systems and the [United Arab Emirates](#) (UAE) became the first international partner to buy two theater high altitude area defence (THAAD) batteries along with 96 interceptor missiles from the US in December 2011, in a deal worth \$2 billion.

Strategic Repercussions

The United States' pursuit of missile defense in order to counter the threat posed by Iran has had significant strategic consequences. In particular, Russia and China have expressed serious concerns about what the BMD mean for their nuclear deterrent. Analysts speculate that the weakness of China's 'limited' deterrent would be particularly exposed to US missile defences. In response, Beijing has redoubled its efforts to counter the United States' burgeoning BMD capabilities. According to DoD

reports submitted to Congress, these include the development of [manoeuvring re-entry vehicles](#), [MIRVs Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicles \(MIRVS\)](#) , and anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons.

Meanwhile, Moscow has threatened to deploy *Iskander* tactical missiles in Kaliningrad, the Russian exclave bordering Poland. Russia is also continuing to prioritize the modernization of its nuclear forces and demands that the United States offers '[legal guarantees](#)' that its missile defences are not directed at Russian territory. In 2011, the then-Russian President Dmitri Medvedev even threatened that Russia would [quit the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty](#) (START) if the U.S went ahead with plans to deploy missile defense systems that were deemed to compromise Russia's strategic interests.

Walking a Fine Line

Over the past ten years, the United States has enjoyed only minimal success in its diplomatic efforts to counter Iran's nuclear program. More worryingly, Washington's attempts to develop ballistic missile defenses have had a negative impact on regional and global security, at least in the eyes of Moscow and Beijing. Rather than being a '[convenient, non-violent political hedge](#)' as some have speculated, proposed US missile defenses may have serious strategic consequences that may, in turn, lead to a 'vortex of regional strategic instability'. It could only be avoided if Russian concerns are meaningfully addressed, thereby enabling Washington and Moscow to develop consensus regarding the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program. The possibilities of either of these happening however seem painfully distant even a decade down the line.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Time to Rethink Iran?](#)

[Iran's Nuclear Imbroglia at the Crossroads](#)

[US-Iranian Relations, 1911-1951](#)

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