THE CONTEMPORARY STATUS OF IRAN'S NUCLEAR MISSILE PROGRAMME AND RUSSO-IRANIAN RELATIONS

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Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran's motivation in developing its own nuclear missile programme may be the relative disparity of the Iranian Armed Forces in modern weaponry with regard to the armies of the adjacent states as well as to Israel and the US military forces in the Persian Gulf area.

Iranian specialists point out two levels of threat to Iran's national security: the threat from conventional weapons and the threat from weapons of mass destruction (WMD), nuclear ones in first place. The nuclear proliferation in the Near East (Israel) and in South Asia (India and Pakistan) has confronted Iran with a completely new geostrategic situations, whereby the probability of WMD being used in regional military conflicts has grown very considerably. The Iranians are sure that the number one nuclear threat for Iran is Israel. Since any Israeli strike on Iranian territory can inflict irreparable damage on the country, Iranian experts indicate three variations of protection:

1) Iran's building nuclear weapons as an efficient deterrent against foreign aggression and unwanted interference.
2) Outside protection using the nuclear umbrella of the world nuclear powers.
3) The nuclear disarmament of Israel and creation of a nuclear weapon-free zone in the Near East.

Although the Iranian experts believe the creation of a nuclear-free zone in the Near East to be highly desirable, it is an arduous task with regard to all aspects of the contemporary regional geostrategic situation.\(^1\)

Therefore, under the current circumstances Iran could potentially be interested in developing a programme either for

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creating nuclear weapons and efficient delivery systems or for acquiring ballistic missiles of differing ranges.

Meanwhile, this programme, directly associated with the issue of proliferation of weapons, both nuclear and conventional WMD, is an indicator showing the status of issues of regional security and stability.

Iran’s Nuclear Missile Programme

Way back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Shah started to deploy the nuclear sector in the Iranian power engineering. Iran endorsed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1970, while in 1974 it started co-operating with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on problems of guarantees, endorsed all International treaties on the peaceful uses of nuclear energy (except the new extended system of IAEA guarantees "92 + 2") thus having by that time secured all necessary legal guarantees for developing its own peaceful nuclear programme.

In 1999 Iran was listed as country number ten in the volume of aid provided by the IAEA. In late 2000 Iran was a partaker in 12 joint projects with the IAEA.

It is, however, common knowledge that the Iran nuclear programme itself, as well as co-operation with other countries in nuclear engineering, is causing serious concern on the part of the USA, Western Europe, Israel and its Arab neighbours with regard to the possible use of nuclear technologies by Iran and the acquired experience for producing nuclear weapons.

The Iranian military nuclear programme was started in the mid-1970s, during the Shah’s rule. Mention is made of the start of the Shah’s nuclear programme, the Shah making a statement, later veiled, on Iran planning to create its own nuclear weapons. However, the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988 stopped these projects. Only around 1987 did a personal order by Imam Khomeini restart the work on creating nuclear weapons.

The probability of Iran’s producing nuclear weapons causes natural concern in all its neighbours as well as other states. However, the assessments of the existence or readiness of Iran’s nuclear missile programmes differ.