by James Phillips and Baker Spring

Iran announced yesterday that it had successfully launched its first domestically produced satellite into orbit using an Iranian-built rocket. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad proclaimed in a televised speech that "the official presence of the Islamic Republic was registered in space." This technological milestone, combined with Iran's accelerating efforts to enrich the uranium required for a nuclear weapon, is extremely worrisome. Only ten other countries have successfully launched satellites into orbit. Iran's new satellite-launching capability demonstrates rapid progress toward developing a long-range intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM)--an advancement that would greatly extend Tehran's military reach. Iran's growing missile capability strengthens the case for making missile defense a high priority for the United States and its allies.

Message from the Mullahs

Iran's satellite launch was timed to send messages to several audiences. Occurring amid festivities celebrating the 30th anniversary of Iran's 1979 revolution, this launch should serve to boost the prestige of Iran's unpopular regime in the eyes of both its people and neighboring countries.

Yesterday's satellite launch using the Safir-2 ("ambassador") rocket also occurred the day before a meeting in Germany of diplomats representing the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and China that will focus on coordinating multilateral efforts to dissuade Iran from continuing its suspicious nuclear activities. By engaging in such missile rattling and stressing its technological independence, Tehran trumpeted its continued defiance of the United Nations Security Council resolutions--the very resolutions that the diplomatic meeting in Germany is designed to enforce.

The Path to Space

The Safir-2 rocket is a two-stage rocket. According to analysis by outside technicians, if it were reconfigured as a ballistic missile with a light warhead, the Safir-2 would have a range of roughly 1,500 miles.[1] This range is sufficient to reach most parts of the greater Middle East, including Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Yet, the Safir-2 is not the most powerful rocket in the Iranian inventory: the Shahab-3 is more powerful. Therefore, the critical lesson from yesterday's launch, and one the Obama Administration and Congress should bear in mind, is that Iran is beginning to master the science of staging rockets to deliver larger payloads to longer distances.

Using a Safir-2 to launch a satellite into orbit marks an important milestone in Iran's quest to develop an ICBM capable of delivering a nuclear weapon to all of Europe and at least portions

of the U.S. It also represents a significant step forward in Iranian efforts to use space for purposes hostile to the U.S. and its allies while placing some U.S. satellites at potential risk.[2]

A Disturbing Question

The Iranian launch also raises a disturbing question about the U.S. intelligence community's controversial 2007 National Intelligence Estimate that concluded that Iran ceased its nuclear weapons program in 2003.[3]

Assuming the intelligence community's assertion that Iran has terminated its nuclear weapons program is accurate, yesterday's launch makes it clear that Tehran's missile program is running well ahead of its nuclear weapons program. However, it stretches credulity to assume that Iran is investing its scarce resources so heavily to develop and deploy long-range ballistic missiles merely to arm them with conventional warheads. The disturbing question that the intelligence community needs to answer is: What kind of warheads will Iran put on long-range missiles and how do they plan to acquire these warheads?

On the policy level, the Obama Administration and Congress need to make it clear to the American people that the U.S. will not respond to Iranian development and deployment of long-range ballistic missiles by continuing the Cold War policy of mutual vulnerability to attack. To purposely keep the American people and those of U.S. allies vulnerable to Iranian attack--especially if done so in service to a new application of Cold War deterrence policy--would be enormously destabilizing and morally bankrupt.

This is particularly the case in the context of President Obama's explicit promise to prevent modernization of the U.S. nuclear force and eventually abolish it.[4] The Iranian launch makes it clear that the U.S. must take defensive steps. Continuing to develop and field effective ballistic missile defenses for the protection of the U.S. and its allies must be at the top of the U.S. agenda. Such prioritizing begins with a clear commitment to honor agreements to field long-range missile interceptors in Poland and missile defense radar in the Czech Republic. Ultimately, this "protect and defend strategy" will require defensive systems capable of downing Iranian missiles in the earliest stage of flight--the so-called boost phase--from space.[5]

A Wake-Up Call

Iran's satellite launch is another wake-up call that underscores the urgency of building effective missile defenses and ratcheting up international pressure to halt Iran's nuclear weapons program. Just as the 1957 launch of the Soviet Union's Sputnik satellite signaled surprisingly rapid technological progress that eventually translated into a greater military threat, Iran's satellite launch is a harbinger of future dangers emanating from the volatile Middle East. The Obama Administration must not ignore the warning signs that Iran's hostile regime continues to transmit.

James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs, and Baker Spring is F.M. Kirby Research Fellow in National Security Policy, in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for

International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.