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Striking Iran's Nuclear Facilities: A U.S. Vital Interest, Not Altruism

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The U.S. strikes on three of Iran's nuclear facilities have generated considerable debate over whether Washington had a compelling national interest to intervene in the latest regional Middle East conflict. What is largely missing from the discussion is what role this action might play in reducing future threats to the U.S. homeland. A more expansive lens is needed to better appreciate the nexus between the Trump Administration's military operation and American vital interests.

Critics of the decision to carry out the limited aerial strikes suggest it served no paramount U.S. strategic imperative. In this view, such strikes either betray the promise to avoid "foreign entanglements," risk another "forever war," or undermine diplomatic efforts. The bombing, from this perspective, was little more than a misguided exercise in regional geopolitical altruism for the benefit of foreign states. This reading misses the forest for the trees. The military action against Iran is consistent with the declared *top national priority* of every Republican and Democratic administration in the post-Cold War era – which is to *defend the homeland*.

Before considering this issue, it should be recognized at the outset that American *regional security interests* in obstructing Iran's nuclear ambitions are not inconsequential. The United States has some 40,000 personnel in the Middle East across roughly 20 sites that would be at increased risk if Iran were to build a nuclear weapon. These troops carry out a range of missions



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that are crucial to preserving American security and economic prosperity here at home. Included are counterterrorism engagements targeting groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda; Freedom of Navigation operations preserving U.S. access to critical maritime chokepoints in the Strait of Hormuz, the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb that ensure the free flow of trade, especially oil and liquified natural gas; and support of close allies like Israel. Moreover, if Iran were to acquire nuclear capabilities it would likely trigger a cascade of regional proliferation pressures. Several Middle East countries would almost certainly race to obtain their own countervailing nuclear arms. The instability arising from the spread of these weapons in one of the most volatile parts of the globe carries the potential for catastrophic outcomes.

Even if there is an inclination to dismiss the ramifications associated with these regional considerations, degrading Tehran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities contributes directly and meaningfully to the objective of defending the American homeland when taking a wider view of the implications of Iran's nuclear and missile activities.

The Islamic Republic's program to develop the technologies, materials and facilities for nuclear weapons dates to at least the mid-1990s. They have steadily built – and rebuilt – a deep bench of expertise. The regime's commitment to a nuclear program is unwavering despite the recurring efforts (of foreign powers) over the last two decades to eliminate the infrastructure and top scientists connected with the nuclear program. Notwithstanding these obstacles, Iran today has amassed a stockpile of highly enriched uranium that is, according to the IAEA, "unprecedented" for a state without nuclear weapons and prior to the U.S. strikes could have produced several bombs in a matter of weeks.¹

Alongside its decades-long determination to lay the groundwork for a nuclear breakout capability, Tehran's leaders have put in place the engineering and manufacturing foundation for long-range ballistic missile systems suitable for delivering a nuclear payload to the United States. As far back as 2015, the Intelligence Community highlighted Iranian progress on an intercontinental-range missile. To date, its leaders have been cautious about moving forward with a full up ICBM test, perhaps out of concern that the U.S. might react by taking military measures. However, its extensive space launch vehicle (SLV) program – which includes the Safir, Qased, Qaem, and Simorgh multi-stage rockets – shares considerable technological overlap with an ICBM. The Intelligence Community has consistently stated that Iran is capable of using its SLV's to mask progress towards an ICBM.² Simply put, an Iranian long-range nuclear missile capable of holding American cities hostage could arise quickly should the regime take the political decision to do so.

Viewed from this vantage point, the bombing of the three facilities degrades and delays Iran's ability to pave the way for nuclear systems to threaten American territory. It also sends an unmistakable deterrent message that for the foreseeable future Tehran will pay a heavy price should it continue to seek nuclear arms with the possibility of further costly repercussions should they move forward with an intercontinental range ballistic missile. Tehran's leaders will have to carefully weigh these risks in their decision calculus over the future of their nuclear-related and long-range missile programs.



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Going forward, the administration is right in making clear that while it prefers a diplomatic solution to removing Iran's weapons-relevant nuclear infrastructure as both a national and international threat, military measures remain on the table to thwart its actions should it continue to follow North Korea's precedent in seeking nuclear-armed missiles. This is, in fact, what prominent national security members of the Democratic party recommended nearly two decades ago, as a measure to prevent Pyongyang from acquiring an intercontinental missile that could deliver a nuclear weapon to the United States.

Ash Carter and Bill Perry, each of whom served at various points as Secretary of Defense in Democratic administrations, advocated in a 2006 *Washington Post* op-ed that President Bush should authorize a preemptive strike on North Korea's then emerging Taepo Dong 2 ICBM while it was still on the launchpad.³ The venture, considered too hazardous, was left unrealized, and today the United States faces a North Korean dictatorship which openly boast of its ability to threaten nuclear strikes on the U.S. homeland.

Iran is on a similar path. And while American leaders always retain the option to eliminate such a threat prior to the initiation of declared combat hostilities, there are formidable political and escalation risks associated with preemption and, most likely, a low probability of operational success given the adversary's ability to conceal, hide and relocate its missiles, especially mobile systems.

In short, relying principally on such a "left of launch" strategy may well increase the prospect of failure to defend American cities from attack. For this reason, the United States must prioritize the development of effective and advanced missile defenses necessary to reliably safeguard the homeland against missile attack

The President's recently announced "Golden Dome" initiative sets out a policy that progressively moves in the direction of this goal. It calls for a "next generation" missile defense system that leverages a mix of defensive interceptors in a "layered architecture" to protect America's citizens, territory, and infrastructure against any opponents' air and missile threats – whether from Iran, North Korea, Russia or China. The approach envisioned under Golden Dome provides more opportunities to destroy enemy missile launches, especially compared to the current posture that relies exclusively on a single layer of ground-based interceptors.

If Washington is to strategically capitalize on the setback in Iran's nuclear program, it must move with urgency to improve and strengthen the current limited national missile defense system, which has failed to adapt to significant changes in the threat environment in recent years. Going forward with Golden Dome will usher in a new era of combined space-, ground-, and sea-based defenses to strengthen deterrence of attack while reducing the nation's exposure to political intimidation and blackmail and the risk of devastating attack on the homeland if deterrence fails.

¹ David Albright, Sarah Burkhard, and Spencer August Faragasso, "Analysis of IAEA Iran Verification and Monitoring Report – May 2025," Institute for Science and International Security, June 9, 2025, available at <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/analysis-of-iaea-iran-verification-and-monitoring-report-may->

