

BOOK REVIEW

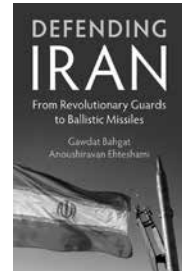
Defending Iran: From Revolutionary Guards to Ballistic Missiles

Author: Gawdat Bahgat & Anoushiravan Ehteshami

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In their book *Defending Iran: From Revolutionary Guards to Ballistic Missiles*, the authors Gawdat Bahgat and Anoushiravan Ehteshami discuss the organisational structure of Iranian military and the structural changes in various military divisions since the Iranian revolution (1979). The book discusses the contemporary issues and challenges that Iranian military faces in the changing geopolitical and strategic scenario in the West Asian region which has been hostile towards Iran since 1979. The evolution of asymmetric threats has led Iranian military to also evolve as well and acquire techniques and capabilities that can enhance its influence and strategic competency in the region. The book provides an outlook of Iranian military through substantial information, linking past military experiences to current force structure and strategy. It also discusses in detail the

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origins of Iranian defence planning, strategic thinking and the impact of contemporary developments on the evolution of Iran's defence doctrine. Further, the book also discusses the use of growing Iranian arsenal of indigenous weapons systems in its armoury related to the future of warfare.

Iran's hostile neighbourhood has evolved following the 1979 revolution enhancing its threat perceptions and thus leading to evolution of various military doctrines and strategies to make its military capable in the changing regional scenarios. Following the revolution, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) has been imprinted on Iranian psyche even though it ensured the *Artesh's*¹ survival. However, it also made clear the necessity of professional military training for both the *Artesh* and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Although, faced with severe restrictions and sanctions, Iran's military can neither be considered as weak or small in size, it still lacks in conventional military capabilities which makes it inadequate to counter conflicting situations from external threats such as the United States. Consequently, Iran has focused on developing deterring capabilities to counter the threats emanating from regional competitors; as well as developing nonconventional strategies to defeat the American forces, particularly by means of its naval tactics, nuclear efforts or ballistic missile capabilities. Faced with the emerging threats, cyber warfare and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) have also become part of Iran's unique military and defence strategy. In this context, analysing Iranian military structure through the prism of realism, structuralism or constructivism helps in explaining Iranian behaviour as a defiant state in the volatile West Asian region. The authors have analysed Iran's defence and security doctrine through a theoretical framework in building the case for analysing Iranian threat perceptions. They discuss in great detail Iranian military strategies to counter and, if required perpetrate asymmetric warfare in order to avoid direct confrontation with a superior side. Further, considering the US to be Iranian nemesis for the past four decades and its overwhelming conventional military capabilities has led Iran to acquire asymmetrical warfare capabilities. However, it cannot be ignored that Iran has become America's top adversary in the region.

1. Iranian Army is often referred to as *Artesh*.

Iranian military doctrine is deeply affected by the western resistance and domination through sanctions in its thinking vis-à-vis its military planning and strategy. It can be said that Iranian thinking is essentially related to limiting, deterring or reverse domination.² The authors argue that like any other “rational” actor in international politics, Iran as a nation state also formulates its policies based on its “ideological” orientation and perceived national interests. Further, the regional geopolitical realities have forced Iran to think pragmatically. Tehran has been increasingly spending on expanding its maritime, space, missile, drone and cyber capabilities. The authors also scrutinise the drivers that have shaped Iran’s long-term strategic planning which include geopolitics, nationalism, religion, geo-economy as well as changing security dynamics. Geographically, Iran’s positioning in the region along with its geographical features and large demography plays in its favour. In these terms, the authors argue that the role of ideology has diminished in Iranian policymaking with pragmatism and national interests taking precedence over ideology.

Iran is trying to maintain good relations with Russia and China which are also two major arms suppliers and comprehensive strategic partners with Iran. The changing security dynamics across the globe also factor in Iranian defence policymaking in order to counter the major American allies in the region like Israel and the Arab nations. So, considering the pressure from the US and its allies in the region, Iranian military strategy is working.

Iran had started working on enhancing its missile capabilities in the 1970s by establishing relations with the US, Israel and several European manufacturers to develop its missile arsenal. Following the revolution, Iran has developed its arsenal to an extent that it can be considered to be one of the largest in the West Asian region, debarring the strength and capability of this arsenal. Further, the missile capabilities developed by Iran have two important factors—historical experiences related to the perceived military value and national pride. In fact, it can be said that missiles have become the “weapons of choice” for Iran, eventually playing a prominent role

2. In reverse dominance, the actor acts in unison with other allies to diminish the influence of a powerful adversary who tries, even in an incipient way, to dominate them.

in Iranian defence and deterrence strategy. The sanctions imposed on Iran in the past four decades have resulted in the lack of financial resources or the strategic options to acquire or maintain the advanced weaponry including missile of military jets. Iran has also been investing in missile defence systems. It cannot be ignored in the West Asian region is that the GCC nations have sophisticated missiles and missile defence systems and in the changing geopolitical regional scenario with a common threat in the name of Iran, Israel and some of the Arab nations have initiated a dialogue. However, both sides keep investing in enhancing their offensive and defensive military capabilities which might lead to technological race in this already volatile region. At the same time, the presence of Iranian missile capabilities should neither be over-estimated or under-estimated. They provide moral and psychological value to Iranian military psyche and thinking.

A transformational development has taken place in the realm of the cyber world. Digitisation has been associated mostly with progress and empowerment, however with a dark side related to cyber-crime or cyber warfare. In such a scenario, threats related to compromise of digital infrastructure—both civilian and military, are paramount and not unheard of in recent times. In such a scenario, cyber threats have become the new forms of asymmetric warfare which are low-risk and comparatively more rewarding. In the case of Iran, cyber warfare plays a key role in their asymmetric defence strategy. And Tehran is utilising all possible means to build its cyber capabilities. This is despite the fact that it lacked the resources to counter the cyber-attacks by its adversaries in the past. However, these kinds of attacks have motivated Iran to develop indigenous cyber capabilities—both offensive and defensive.

Iranian strategic doctrine has crucial roles for proxies and partners in the region(s) which serves its interests following the Iranian revolution (1979). Since then, proxies have been utilised as an effective tool of deterrence by Iran. These also form part of Iran's "passive deterrence" strategies with the aim to inflict maximum damage—both physical and psychological—to its adversaries. So, these can be considered to be Iran's effective balance which Tehran can mobilise at any time against its adversaries. At the same time,

through this passive deterrence strategy, Tehran also aims to deter any foreign involvement in the nations which are in proximity. Iran employs these proxies as its forward defence providing retaliatory or passive deterrence or act as force multipliers against its adversaries in the region.

The book discusses various facets related to Iranian military capabilities and strategies in great detail and tries to establish that the confused mindset of the regime is also visible in the psyche of Iranian military, i.e., whether it is a normal nation-state or a revolutionary nation-state with a cause. However, the pragmatic thinking in the development of its military doctrine and strategy cannot be ignored which results due to the changing strategic environment and its aspirations related to power projections in the West Asian region. The underlying significant factor responsible for the present-day military strategy of Iran remains its threat perceptions. In this context, IRGC has emerged as the linchpin of its defence strategy along with the development of its maritime, space, missile, drone and cyber capabilities and with maintaining strong support to its proxies or allies in the region. At present, according to the authors, Iranian strategy includes countering the threats in a manner which can be costly to its enemies. This has also become the main tenet of asymmetric warfare to not be engaged in an arms race with an adversary that has more capabilities than Iran. Tehran needs to bear this in mind while engaging or developing relations with the West Asian region or beyond.