

AMERICA'S WANING MILITARY EDGE

By Andrew Burt

Just days before the United States launched its first missiles into Libya, the Israeli navy confiscated a cache of Iranian-made missiles bound for the Gaza Strip. The Iranian precision-guided missiles, known as Nasr missiles or C-704s, are deadly to targets both on land and at sea. Revelations of such weapons' dispersion are as striking as they are significant: Just as the technological edge that has come to define America's military power was on full display in Libya, simultaneous events show that the US technological edge is eroding.

There are two sides to this trend, both of which will have a profound impact on the US military and on the global order it has upheld. First, advanced precision weapons are becoming increasingly available to non-state actors, a fact that will make military powers like the United States increasingly vulnerable in the years ahead. Thomas Mahnken, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Policy Planning and a professor at the Naval War College, notes "adversaries are acquiring precision-guided munitions, as well as the vital supporting capabilities needed to wage precision warfare with a minimum investment."

Military planners like Mahnken have already begun to realize that this change is taking place. The wake-up call, they say, occurred in 2006 when Hezbollah fired a precision-guided cruise missile at an Israeli ship during the Lebanon War. In that attack, a missile similar to the C-704 hit, and almost sunk, an Israeli warship equipped with high-tech missile defense systems. The cost of the Israeli ship was \$260 million – the reported price of the missile, a mere \$60,000.

In addition to their pinpoint accuracy, precision weapons place the attacker far from the target, thereby dramatically reducing risk to the attacker. (Some precision missiles are even called "fire and forget" weapons because one can launch the weapons and immediately leave the scene). The armed drones that the US military has pioneered embody this principle, as pilots sitting in Nevada routinely bomb Afghan targets on the other side of the globe.

As advanced precision weapons spread to non-state actors like Hezbollah, or even Al Qaeda, attacks on US and Western targets will carry less risk, and suicide attacks may be rendered obsolete.

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The second aspect of this trend stems from the fact that not only are precision weapons more widely distributed, but traditional military powers are also refining such technology, meaning that future military conflicts will carry much higher risk. The refinement of precision weapons by foreign powers will soon make it “more difficult, if not impossible, to achieve the sort of quick, decisive victory that we did against Iraq in 1991 or 2003, or in Afghanistan in 2002,” says Mahnken. Nowhere is this more apparent than with China’s rapid military development. Indeed, China’s so-called “carrier killer” missile is in many ways the embodiment of this trend. This precision-guided missile, which reportedly reached initial operating capability in late 2010, is said to have the ability to track and hit a moving aircraft carrier, which no previous ballistic missile has been able to do.

Among the major impacts of these new technologies will be the relative ease with which foreign powers can hit America’s largest, and most expensive, military targets — a capacity previously reserved for the Soviet Union. Bases like those the United States maintains in Japan or South Korea, or the US fleet of multi-billion dollar aircraft carriers, will be newly vulnerable. Indeed, Obama administration officials have indicated that they are already reacting to this threat. The United States, they say, is seeking to redistribute its military presence in the Pacific region, reducing the size of its targets and, as a result, limiting the potential damage posed by precision attacks.

According to Patrick Cronin, a senior advisor at the Center for a New American Security, the threat of high-end precision attacks is fast becoming one of the principal issues confronting US military planners in Asia. “The United States,” he says, is “desperately trying to figure out how to posture for the long term so that its forces are not sitting ducks for advanced ballistic missiles.” The good news is that war between the United States and China is unlikely to occur anytime soon. The bad news is that history teaches us that once new military technologies are developed, no country can keep those capabilities to itself for long.

Taken together, the refinement and spread of advanced precision weaponry will serve to limit the US military’s ability to engage in conflicts at all levels. As explained in 2011 by then-Deputy Defense Secretary William Lynn, conflict is evolving from “intense but short periods” to “longer and more drawn-out engagements.”

The question is: Will this make America’s wars any less frequent? If so, perhaps that change won’t be all bad. **Y**

– Heather Hwalek served as Lead Editor for this op-ed.