

Mideast missile madness

Why are the Saudi Arabians buying Chinese CSS-2 missiles? This is the question military experts from Washington to Tokyo have been asking for the past 10 days.

There seems little doubt the first shipment of the Chinese intermediate-range ballistic missiles will soon arrive—or may already have landed—in Saudi Arabia. The CSS-2 is a liquid-fueled missile with a range of 1,200-2,100 miles, capable of carrying a 2,000-lb. high-explosive warhead or up to a 2 megaton nuclear warhead. Don't confuse it with the anti-ship Silkworm missile that China has supplied to Iran.

I suspect the Saudis will probably place these rather cumbersome missiles near Taif, in the hills southeast of Jeddah, or further south toward the border with Yemen. That is, if the Israelis don't destroy the missiles before they're unpacked.

Not surprisingly, the Israelis have already begun growling about "taking out" the Saudi missiles. No one should doubt Israel's well-defined policy of expunging potential threats, no matter how remote or preliminary. The destruction of Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor by the Israeli Air Force is a case in point.

And Israel may have reason to worry. With a conventional warhead, the CSS-2 is not a very useful weapon. Its inertial guidance system, which is obsolete even by Chinese standards, has a margin of error of at least .5 kilometres. The Soviet Scud missiles used by Iran and Iraq in their "war of the cities" are somewhat more accurate—but even they are capable of only hitting an urban area, not a specific target.

The CSS-2 with a conventional warhead would only be of use to cause damage to civilian targets in Tel Aviv or Haifa—a deadly nuisance but certainly not a mortal threat.

It's possible the Saudis may want the CSS-2 to help deter potential Israeli air attacks on Saudi

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refineries or oil facilities. Or, as likely, to counterbalance the threat of Iranian missile attacks on such vital targets—or Saudi cities.

Still, such inaccurate missiles are the modern military equivalent of the medieval trebuchet, those wooden contraptions that hurled great chunks of rock at the enemy. With nuclear or biological warheads, however, they become potent weapons. So the question now becomes: Will the Saudis somehow get such warheads?

Frankly, I find this whole business most curious. The Saudis are noted for their extreme caution. They are so afraid of Israeli attack they don't even station their best troops or aircraft at Tabuk, the Saudi base closest to Israel. The Saudi Army is tiny and immobile, and the air force was aptly described to me by someone who once ran it as "a rich boy's polo club."

Are the timid Saudis really about to challenge Israel's might? A nuclear-armed Israel, at that. Washington just might be able to deter Israel from attacking the missiles so long as they have conventional warheads—Syria and Iraq also have artillery missiles capable of reaching Israel.

But the minute nuclear warheads arrive in Saudi Arabia, an event that would not likely escape U.S. or Israeli intelligence, attack would be swift.

The superb Israeli Air Force has demonstrated its ability to fly low, refuel in the air, and strike targets as distant as Iraq and Tunisia. The long arm of the Israeli Air Force could certainly reach Taif or any other part of the Saudi kingdom and destroy the missiles on their vulnerable, above-ground launch pads.

And who is going to supply the nuclear warheads? I can't imagine China doing so. Perhaps the wealthy Saudis have bought some elsewhere. But you don't just buy nuclear components and stick them together like Lego, particularly not the Saudis whose technological abilities are limited.

Which makes me believe the Saudi missiles are intended to deter Iran, not to scare the Israelis. Yet we can't be sure. Brazil, for example, is developing missiles for Libya and may soon be in a position to supply nuclear warheads. The Brazilians might well sell Libya or Iraq a complete nuclear weapon system if enough cash were involved. India could also enter this market if it decided to export arms. Even South Africa, already a discreet supplier of arms to Iraq, could provide such nuclear weapons.

Given these thoughts, one suspects the Israeli Air Force will be pressing for a strike against the Saudi missiles. Better safe than sorry, the Israelis will say. Unless, that is, the Saudis can somehow convince the Israelis and Americans the nefarious Chinese missiles are pointed at Tehran, not Tel Aviv.