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Iran's First Military Satellite and US-Iran Tensions

Iran successfully launched its first military satellite called 'Noor 1' on 22 April 2020. According to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the launch vehicle named 'Qased', which is Iran's first three-stage satellite launcher, placed the satellite in orbit at an altitude of 425 kilometres.

Iran's space agency was established in 2004, and Iran emerged as a space faring nation in 2008 when it sent a rocket to space. Since then, the Iranian space programme has had a mixed record, with some launches attaining suborbital heights and even carrying live monkeys, while others failed. The most recent partial success occurred on 9 February 2020 when the communication satellite 'Zafar 1' was launched but could not be placed within the expected orbital parameters.



While Iran has denied the allegation that its space programme is a cover for developing ballistic missiles, there are only minor differences between rockets lifting satellites into orbit and ballistic missiles tracing a parabolic arc through space to targets on ground. Further, the very launch of the military satellite 'Noor 1', that too under the aegis of the IRGC, indicates the existence of a military dimension to the Iranian space programme.

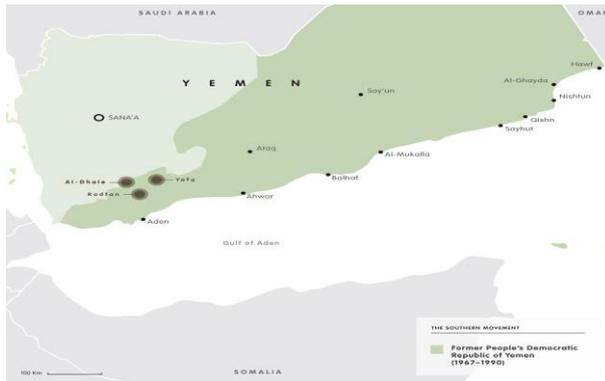
Finally, the launch of 'Noor 1' by the IRGC confirms that Iran is indeed pursuing the Roadmap drawn up in 2013 envisaging not only military imaging satellites but also missile deterrence.

Iran's launch of the military satellite has contributed to the heightening of tensions with the United States. On the same day that Iran launched its military satellite, President Donald Trump instructed the US Navy through a tweet "to shoot down and destroy any and all Iran gunboats if they harass our ships at sea." In response, General Hossein Salami, head of the IRGC, stated: "I have ordered our naval forces to destroy any American terrorist force in the Persian Gulf that threatens security of Iran's military or non-military ships." This mutual baring of teeth was triggered by a naval incident in the Persian Gulf between American and Iranian vessels during which the latter allegedly carried out dangerous and threatening manoeuvres. The linkage between the tense situation at sea and Iran's space launch was brought out by the Vice Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff who categorised them as examples of Iran's "malign behavior". While there is an expectation that the COVID 19 pandemic may prevent a full blown crisis, the fact remains that US-Iran tensions have been building up since President Trump's revocation of the nuclear deal and imposition of sanctions on Iran.

*Source of Picture: <https://en.mehrnews.com/>

Separatists Declare ‘Self-Rule’ in South Yemen

The Saudi Arabia-led military coalition against Houthi insurgents in Yemen is in disarray after its partners in the south of the country decided to break away from the coalition and establish ‘self-rule’ in regions under their control. In a statement released on 26 April, The Southern Transitional Council (STC) declared a state of emergency and declared that it would “self govern” from the port city of Aden and other southern provinces.



The STC, which is said to have close ties with the United Arab Emirates, blamed the Saudi-backed government of exiled President Abd-Rabbu Mansur Hadi of corruption and mismanagement. Until recently, the southern separatists (mainly the STC) and Saudi-led forces loyal to exiled President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi had fought together in the war against Shiite Houthi rebels since 2015.

* Source of Map: <https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/yemen>

However, the STC turned on the internationally recognised Hadi government in August 2019 and seized the interim capital of Aden. After difficult parleys, the two groups reached a deal in Riyadh in November 2019 under which the STC was to be part of a new national cabinet and had to place its forces under the charge of the Hadi government. The STC’s latest move towards ‘self-rule’ is viewed as a withdrawal from the Riyadh agreement. The move of the southern separatists raises concerns that Yemen could slide into further violence and chaos.

Russia Conducts ASAT Test

Russia reportedly tested its direct-ascent anti-satellite (DA-ASAT) missile system on 15 April. The missile is capable of destroying satellites in Low Earth Orbit (LEO). Experts believe that Russia tested the Nudol ballistic missile. Russia has been testing this missile since 2014 and this was probably the 10th test. The latest test was carried out in the ‘hit to miss test’ configuration, in which the missile does not intercept and destroy an object in space thus avoiding the creation of unnecessary space debris.



The United States has been expressing concerns about Russia's increasing investments in the development of counter-space technologies. Earlier this year, the chief of the US Space Force claimed that two Russian satellites were stalking an American spy satellite in orbit and had come extremely close, within 100 miles (160 kilometres) to it. The characteristics of the two Russian satellites were similar to what are known as 'inspector satellites'.

* Source of Illustration: <https://www.popularmechanics.com>

The trend towards militarisation of space has been gathering pace for more than a decade. China initiated the trend when it conducted an ASAT test in January 2007, launching a missile to destroy one of its ageing satellites. The United States, which had previously conducted an ASAT test in 1985 during the Cold War, responded with a test of its own in 2008. With India having demonstrated its capability in 2019, Russia has now become the fourth country to join the club. This perhaps sets the stage for forward movement on ongoing efforts under UN auspices to conclude a legally binding international understanding on preventing an arms race in outer space.

Russia to Accelerate Tests of Tsirkon Hypersonic Missile

Russia is accelerating its Tsirkon hypersonic cruise missile programme (NATO classification SS-N-33) by scheduling 10 additional tests during 2020-21 so as to be able to induct the system into service in 2022. Seven of these missile tests will be launched from the "Admiral Gorshkov" frigate, and the rest from the "Severodvinsk" submarine including from a submerged state. This series of tests is meant to address the unspecified teething problems that the missile is reported to have been suffering from.



Conceived in 2011, the missile was first tested in 2015. According to the Russian media, more than 10 test launches have been carried out till date. The missile is being manufactured in accordance with Russia's Universal Vertical Launching System (UKSK), a seaborne missile launcher platform that includes the Kaliber cruise missiles. Tsirkon is designed to fly at a speed of Mach 9 with

a strike range of 1,000 kilometres. It can strike at both naval and ground targets.

In November 2019, Deputy Defence Minister Alexei Krivoruchko had said that the missiles will be deployed on the “Marshal Shaposhnikov” frigate currently undergoing modernisation and on the Project 949A multi-purpose nuclear-powered submarine “Irkutsk”. In December 2019, the head of Russia’s United Shipbuilding Corporation Alexei Rakhmanov stated that it will be possible to deploy the Tsirkon missiles on all new Russian ships.

The development of Tsirkon comes against the backdrop of continuing hostility between Russia and the United States. The US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and a lack of consensus between Moscow and Washington on extending the New START Treaty beyond 2021 highlight a bleak future for the global arms control architecture. Difficult to defend, the hypersonic missiles are seen as game changers in the quest for tilting the balance of strategic stability. Several countries are in a race to develop this formidable capability.

*Source of Illustration: Itar-Tass. <https://tass.com/defense/1148571>

South China Sea Tensions: China Intrudes into Malaysia’s EEZ

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, China has been keeping the South China Sea on slow boil by positioning oil exploration rigs backed by Coast Guard vessels at disputed spaces in the area. Since 16 April, a Chinese survey vessel named the Hai Yang Di Zhi, accompanied by a Chinese Coast Guard vessel and maritime militia ships, have positioned themselves within the Malaysian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), off the coast of the Malaysian state of Sarawak. The location of the Chinese ships is approximately 180 nautical miles from the Malaysian coast and in close proximity to West Capella, an oil rig Malaysia has been operating in its own waters.



China’s intrusion comes in the wake of its creation of two administrative districts and renaming of 80 geographical features in the South China Sea – standard names for 25 islands and reefs and 55 undersea geographic entities. This signalled China’s intention to establish its sovereignty over parts of the South China Sea enclosed within the ‘nine-dash line’, which

is deemed illegal as per international law.

China's intrusion into the Malaysian EEZ is not a lone incident. Earlier this month, a Chinese Coast Guard ship rammed and sank a Vietnamese fishing vessel off the disputed Paracel Islands. Nor are China's assertive actions limited to the South China Sea. On 21 April, the Japanese Foreign Minister registered a protest with his Chinese counterpart regarding Chinese incursions into Japanese territorial waters near the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. Chinese vessels have reportedly intruded into these waters seven times since the beginning of this year.

The United States has responded to these Chinese moves by despatching the amphibious assault ship "USS America" and guided missile cruiser "USS Bunker Hill" to the area, in a signal of deterrence to China and support for China's victims.