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Iran Test Launches New Satellite Launch Vehicle

Iran recently test-launched a new domestically designed and manufactured Satellite Launch Vehicle (SLV) named *Zuljanah*. Named after the horse of Imam Husayn ibn Ali, the SLV was launched from the central Semnan province to conduct a suborbital test. With a thrust of 750 tonnes, the SLV is Iran's most powerful rocket. Experts are of the opinion that it could double as a nuclear missile.



The *Zuljanah* is a three-stage rocket, with a solid-fuel engine in the first and second stages and a liquid-fuel engine in the third stage. It needs to complete a few more tests to become fully operational. When that happens, the SLV would be capable of launching satellites weighing up to 220 kilogrammes to an altitude of 500 kilometres above the earth's surface. It

would not need a fixed launch base and can be launched from a mobile platform.

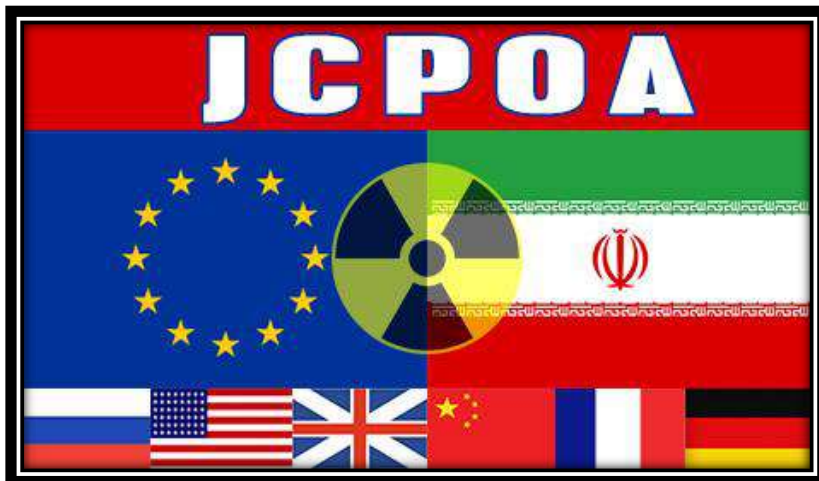
The Iranian Space Agency was established in 2003, and Iran became a space-faring state in 2009. The country has launched a few satellites into space and has two operational launch vehicles – the *Safir* (Ambassador) and the *Simorgh* (Phoenix). It has also conducted some experiments by sending animals to space and retrieving them. Iran had also initiated work on a human spaceflight programme, before putting it on hold in 2017. There is a possibility of Iran joining China's forthcoming space station programme, although details are rather sketchy in this regard.

Since it was initiated, the Iranian space programme has been a source of international unease. There is strong opinion mostly in Western countries that the programme, and particularly Iran's development and tests of launch vehicles, indicates a growing ballistic missile capability.

The Biden Administration and the Iran Nuclear Deal

The Iran nuclear deal — formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – is interestingly poised, with the new Biden administration and the Iranian leadership jockeying to see who will blink first. In an interview on

February 7, President Joe Biden asserted that the US will not lift sanctions unless and until Iran returned to compliance with its nuclear commitments. On the same day, Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei insisted that the US must first lift sanctions.



Source: worldpublicopinion.net

Donald Trump had formally withdrawn the United States from what he referred to as a “very bad deal” in May 2018 and imposed additional sanctions on Iran. He also authorised punitive military strikes that took out the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, in January

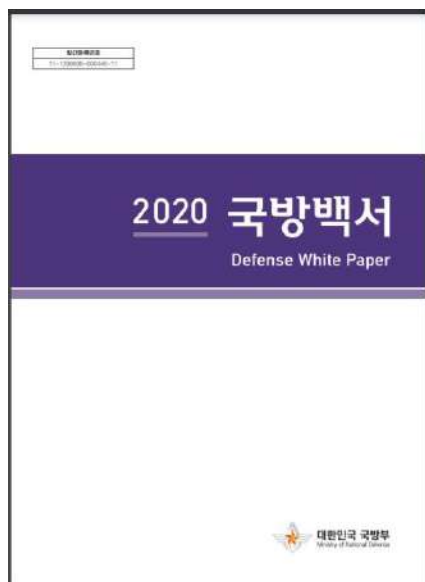
2020. The killing of nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakrizaheh in November 2020 — blamed on Israel — was another escalation, which prompted the Iranian Parliament to pass a legislation threatening to ramp up nuclear activities if sanctions relief was not granted by the incoming Biden administration.

Iran had begun to gradually take steps in contravention of its JCPOA obligations a year after Trump withdrew from the deal. These included enriching uranium beyond the 3.67 per cent enrichment levels prescribed by the JCPOA and having uranium stockpile beyond 300 kgs. In its November 2020 report on Iran's nuclear programme, the IAEA stated that Iran had in its possession 2,442.9 kgs of enriched uranium, out of which 2,227.8 kg was enriched up to 4.5 per cent. This amount is nearly ten times beyond the limit prescribed by the JCPOA. On January 4, 2021, Iran started enriching uranium to even 20 per cent. Further, on February 8, 2021, the IAEA stated that it had verified 3.8 grams of uranium metal at the Fuel Plate Fabrication Plant at Esfahan. Iran had earlier conveyed to the IAEA in December 2020 that it intended to work on uranium metal — an activity prohibited by the JCPOA — to produce fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR).

Iran has in the recent past flagged the need for the US to economically compensate it for the damage caused after the Trump withdrawal from the JCPOA. Iranian lawmakers are calling on their government to enforce the February 21 deadline mandated by Parliament for denying access to IAEA inspectors, if sanctions relief is not given by that date. In September 2020, Biden had asserted that ‘there's a smarter way to be tough on Iran’. Even as most analysts believe that the US will return to the JCPOA and that Iran will return to compliance eventually, the process by which that will happen is getting murkier.

South Korea's Biennial Defense White Paper

On February 2, South Korea's Ministry of National Defense released the 2020 edition of the Defense White Paper. Keeping with existing practice, the White Paper does not directly refer to North Korea as an enemy despite Pyongyang's increasingly aggressive posture in recent times including the demolition of an inter-Korean liaison office. The White Paper has also downgraded Japan's status from the position of a partner to a mere neighbour.



With respect to North Korea, the White Paper notes that the strength of the People's Army Strategic Force has gone up to 13 missile brigades, up from nine in 2018. Missiles operated by these units include short-range Scuds, Rodongs with a range of about 1,300 km, and the 3000-km Musudans which can reach Guam. North Korea is estimated to possess 50 kilogrammes of weapons-grade plutonium as well as significant stocks of highly enriched uranium. On the conventional front, the White Paper notes that North Korean forces enjoy a 2.3:1 numerical advantage over the South. While the forces of the North are superior in field artillery and multiple rocket launchers, South Korea fields a more technologically advanced force. North Korea

has also strengthened its Special Forces with modernised equipment.

South Korea's troubled relations with Tokyo on the issue of Japan's treatment of Korea in the early half of the 20th Century has spilled over into the security and trade domains. The White Paper has omitted a previous reference to Japan as a partner. While the 2018 edition referred to Japan and South Korea as "geographically and culturally close neighbors and partners," the latest edition refers to Japan only as a neighbour with which cooperation is necessary "for peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia and the world." It also suggests that bilateral cooperation has been adversely affected due to Japan's continued claim to the contested Dokdo/Takeshima Islands and the radar lock-on incident in December 2018 involving a Japanese maritime aircraft and a South Korean naval vessel.

The new US administration under Biden has emphasised the importance of continued cooperation between Japan and South Korea for regional security and stability. It is also moving to reinforce its commitment to the US-South Korea alliance and resolve at the earliest the cost-sharing negotiations that had become contentious during the Trump presidency.