Ballistic missile defense security in the Middle East through foreign military sales; the key to develop a robust combined air missile defense strategy

By Maj. Angel Rios-Pelati

The ballistic missile activity in the Middle East has almost doubled in the last two years, prompting countries within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to develop strategies to defeat potential missile threats. From early warning radars to ballistic missile defense platforms, GCC countries often resort to the United States via Foreign Military Sales (FMS) to fill the air and missile defense operational gap.

However, the military threats in the Middle East are not a new phenomenon. In 1981, GCC was formed to promote the interests of the Gulf States and protect them from the threats posed by the Iraq-Iran War. The war presented a security threat to the states due to the possible proliferation of missiles from either of the two nations. After the war, another danger occurred through the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq. It is during the Iraq-Kuwait that the U.S. deployed Patriot batteries with the aim of protecting their bases in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. After the Iraq-Kuwait war, the emergence of terror groups mixed with battles in Syria and Yemen (between the government and rebels) has exposed the region to a new layer of missiles threats. It is worth noting that most of these countries do not have stable governments as they are struggling to recover after the Arab spring led to collapse of their governments.

The U.S. military concerns in the Middle East has been focusing on Iran’s advances in nuclear program and the possibilities of the nuclear proliferation and its potential harm in the region and the globe. As result, ballistic missile defense is gaining momentum in the gulf region with countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates; procuring cutting-edge air and missile multi-level defense structure, attributed to the immense support these countries received from the U.S. via FMS. Other nations are also showing interest to venture in the ballistic missile defense in the future due to Iran already advancing their ballistic missile defense (BMD) technologies. The growing demand for the BMD technologies in the gulf region is attributed particularly to China, Russia and the U.S. as they are the main players as collaborator, suppliers and advocators of the Integrated Missile Defense (IMD) infrastructure in the GCC region.

FMS refers to the program by the Arms Export Control Act (AECA) under the Department of Foreign Policy. Section three of the Arms Export Control Act provides the President of the United States with an opportunity to approve the sales of arms to any foreign countries if it will help in strengthening the security of the U.S. FMS are products of government-government agreement that allows the U.S. to offer military support to their allies. The military supports include both the technical and the physical Army wares. The technical aspect involves the military training. The government-to-government agreement is referred to as the Letter of Offer and Acceptance (LOA).

There are several cases of FMS that has helped improve the security across the Middle East which is the core responsibility of the U.S. as a superpower. Some of the cases include the sale of air defense platforms to GCC countries. FMS presents a significant advantage to both the U.S. and the client as it creates a win-win situation for both countries. The U.S. wins by getting a market for their military hardware and promoting interoperability whereas the receiving nation gets the equipment and support to maintain their security and stability.

Developing an effective air defense strategy, especially in complex terrains like the gulf region, requires a combination of interoperable platforms, field experience and technical skills. A multilateral framework is the best way to develop interoperable and integrated regional air and missile defense. Nations are stronger-not weaker but stronger when they work together. The GCC can greatly benefit from integrated missile defense framework to provide a robust capability to respond to potential crisis; offset and deter potential threats and lead to a more stable and secure region.

When a country procures a platform via FMS, it creates an interoperable architecture that maximizes the possibility for combining resources and increases overall capability. Integrated missile defense is accomplished by synchronizing sensors and linking the equipment that passes data to weapons systems between the U.S. and the GCC country so that we can respond effectively and efficiently. However, an effective command and control will be necessary to bring this altogether.

Countering the ballistic missile defense and cruise missile threat will require dedicated and determined knowledgeable professionals throughout the GCC and U.S. force. To be successful countering missile threats is critical to achieve unity of effort. Achieving a multilateral effort will create a synergy of combined integrated
efforts that will allow the GCC to successfully defend and prevail against an attack.

AMD FMS cases provide a focus for integrated air and missile defense cooperation within the customer and the U.S. which allows them to define individual national defense requirements, priorities, and policies while establishing clear expectation for augmentation of the current air and missile defense in the Middle East.

The FMS process greatly enhances partner nations interoperability opportunities to improve regional integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) capabilities and by constructing common standard operating procedures at the strategic, operational and tactical level for effective command and control of IAMD operations between the country and the U.S. The FMS provides an interoperable opportunity for the U.S. and the country the opportunity to execute air and missile defense as an integrated team; armed with a common air and missile defense understanding and enhanced interoperability effort across the Arabian Gulf area of operation.

In conclusion, FMS plays a critical role in developing new strategies in the combined air missile defense in the GCC. Some of the successful cases include the procurement of the Patriot and THAAD systems which were the result of collaboration between GCC countries and the U.S. government.

The FMS is critical in this process as it enhances cooperation between the U.S. government and the potential buyer country. The FMS process involves the client asking for equipment that can perform specific tasks within a particular environment. The incorporation of the expertise of the U.S. forces with experience of the ground Soldiers of the GCC countries provides the best opportunity to not only design and implement effective equipment but also come up with the best air and missile defense strategy against security threats in the vast gulf region.

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