

Nuclear Disarmament Even More Critical in New Age of “Hypersonics”

By Ernie Regehr and Douglas Roche

The danger posed by the existence of 13,865 nuclear weapons held by nine countries is not enough, it seems, to demonstrate political power. Now science and technology are giving us faster, more precise methods of destroying “the enemy.” The name of this new danger is “hypersonic” missiles.

The U.S., Russia and China are leading the development of hypersonic missiles capable of travelling at more than 15 times the speed of sound to strike any target in the world in a matter of minutes. They will be powerful enough to penetrate any building with the force of three to four tons of TNT.

Though intended to carry conventional explosives, as distinct from nuclear, that’s not the real point of the expanded danger. Hypersonic missiles, conventional or nuclear, will be capable of striking at an adversary’s nuclear arsenal. Given the very short warning times of such attacks, nuclear weapon states will be driven to place their nuclear weapons systems on even higher levels of alert, reducing times available for attack assessment, consultation, and decision to mere minutes – creating pressures to bypass altogether political consultation in the decisions whether to launch nuclear weapons in response to warnings of attack.

And, of course, it is highly unlikely that hypersonic weapons will stay “conventional.” Indeed, Russia is already boasting that it can place nuclear warheads on its hypersonic missiles.

Catastrophic destruction with unimaginable speed. What kind of world are we heading into? If the world is getting to be a better place, as so many indicators of progress reveal, how can we tolerate the constant modernization of the killing process? Is our struggle ultimately against particular weapons systems, or is it against humanity’s more fundamental lust for perfecting the art of killing?

These are questions that are made new and relevant again with the emergence of what *The New York Times Magazine* recently called “unstoppable hypersonic missiles.” As *Times* writer R. Jeffrey Smith reminds us, there are currently no international agreements on how or when hypersonic missiles can be used, nor are there any plans to start such discussions. Instead, he says, the world now faces a new arms race with Russia and China, “one that could...upend existing norms of deterrence and renew Cold War-era tensions.”

One thing that hypersonic weapons should highlight is the growing urgency of reconstructing a reliable nuclear arms control regime that has as its explicit objective the political will and the legal obligation on all countries to pursue and complete comprehensive negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons. Stunningly, the reverse is happening as the US and Russian continue to violate their disarmament obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and abandon other treaties.

Immediate steps are necessary: at a minimum, keep nuclear warheads off hypersonics; remove all nuclear systems from high-alert status to prevent false alarms from triggering nuclear catastrophe; commence negotiations to control

hypersonic weapons before the emerging hypersonic arms race swings into a no-holds-barred contest among an ever widening circle of countries.

Of course, the dismal state of nuclear disarmament in this new and chaotic period of world history sometimes raises doubts of our effectiveness, but the arrival of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which buttresses the nearly 50-year-old Non-Proliferation Treaty, highlights the deepening humanitarian concern about the massive evil of nuclear weapons. Focussing only on nuclear disarmament is not enough to ensure sustainable world peace, but as long as nuclear weapons exist, there can be no world peace.

The new age of hypersonics reminds us that the agenda for peace is very large. It already includes curbing global warming, controlling cyberwarfare, promoting sustainable development, and an ever-expanding understanding that human rights includes the right to be free of warfare.

Hypersonics is another milestone in the development of instruments of warfare. We must respond by building a new architecture for peace. And one cornerstone of that architecture remains the abolition of nuclear weapons.

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