

# Hypersonic Panic and Competitive Terror

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*During his eventful time in office, US President Donald Trump took much delight in reflecting about the lethal toys of his country’s military, actual or hypothetical. These included a hypersonic capability which, his military advisors had warned, was being mastered by adversaries. Such devices, [comprising](#) hypersonic cruise missiles and hypersonic boost-glide vehicles, have been touted as opening a new arms race, given their ability not merely to travel at five times the speed of sound – as a general rule – but also show deft manoeuvrability to evade defences.*

Undeterred by any rival capability, Trump claimed in May 2020 that the US military had come up with a [“super duper”](#) weapon that could travel at 17 times the speed of sound. “We are building, right now, incredible military equipment at a level that nobody has ever seen before.” Ever adolescent in poking fun at his rivals, Trump also claimed that the missile dwarfed Russian and Chinese equivalents. Russia, he claimed, had one travelling at five times the speed of sound; China was working on a device that could move at the same speed, if not at six times. Pentagon officials were not exactly forthcoming about the details, leaving the fantasists to speculate.

In 2019, Russia deployed its own intercontinental hypersonic missile, the Avangard strategic system, featuring a hypersonic glide vehicle astride an intercontinental ballistic missile. “It’s a weapon of the future, capable of penetrating both existing and prospective missile defence systems,” claimed Russian President Vladimir Putin at the time. The President [claimed to have reason](#) to crow. “Today, we have a unique situation in our new and recent history. They (other countries) are trying to catch up with us. Not a single country possesses hypersonic weapons, let alone continental-range hypersonic weapons.”

For all of this claimed prowess, nothing quite creased the brows of Pentagon officials quite as China’s July 27 hypersonic missile test. General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint of Chief of Staff, said in a Bloomberg [interview](#) this October that it was “a very significant event” and was “very concerning”. The test was [first reported](#) by the *Financial Times* on October 16, which also noted, without additional detail, a second hypersonic systems test on August 13.

The People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force had already caught the attention of US military

planners in the last decade with advances in the field. The Dongfeng-17 (D-17) hypersonic boost-glide missile, for instance, [made its appearance](#) in 2014 and was found to be dismayingly accurate, striking their targets within metres.

The July test, however, was another matter, even if it missed its target by 19 miles and had been [described](#) by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian as a “routine test” of space vehicle technology. It had used, for instance, [a variant](#) of the Fractional Orbital Bombardment System, a low-orbit missile delivery method pioneered by the Soviets to frustrate detection. It got the drummers from the military-industrial complex all riled up, despite the US having been actively involved in the development of hypersonic weapons since the early 2000s. In the imperial mindset, any seemingly successful experiment by the military of another power, notably an adversary, is bound to cause a titter of panic. Pin pricks can be treated as grave threats, even to a power [that outspends](#) the combined military budgets of the next seven states.

When it comes to the perceived advances of Beijing and Moscow, Alexander Fedorov of the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology [offers a mild corrective](#). Russia had “experience without money, China has money without much experience, and the United States has both, although it revived its efforts later than did Russia or China and is now playing catch-up.”

The US military establishment prefers a gloomier reading, a point they can then sell to Congress that Freedom’s Land is being somehow outpaced by upstarts and usurpers. George Hayes, chief executive at defence contractor Raytheon, [spoke disapprovingly](#) of the US as being a laggard in the hypersonic field, being “years behind” China. Michael Griffin, former undersecretary of defense for research and engineering, [told](#) NPR that “it is an arms race” which “we didn’t start”, thereby providing moral reassurance for future additions to it. Milley was also not averse [to inflating](#) the significance of the July test. “I don’t know if it’s quite a Sputnik moment, but I think it’s very close to that. It has all of our attention.”

*USA Today* [certainly wished](#) its readers to give it all their attention. “That method of delivery also means the US could be attacked by flights over the South Pole. American defense systems concentrate on missile attacks from the north.”

The Biden administration [has already requested](#) \$3.8 billion for hypersonic research for the Pentagon’s fiscal year 2022 budget. This is a sharp increase from the previous total of \$3.2 billion, which was itself an inflation from the \$2.6 billion figure the year before that. In June, Vice Admiral Jon Hill, director of the Missile Defense Agency (MDA), [warned](#) the Senate Armed Services subcommittee on strategic forces of current and impending risks, thereby making the case for more cash to be thrown at the enterprise. As things stood, “US aircraft carriers are already facing risks from hypersonic weapons that are now entering the inventory of American adversaries and the Navy has developed early defences for the threat.”

The prospect of yet another arms race (do they ever learn?) can only cause the sane to be worried. Zhao Tong, senior fellow with the nuclear policy program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [notes](#) that such weapons “introduce more technological uncertainties and ambiguities compared with traditional ballistic missiles, which will increase the possibility of misjudgement and overreaction during military conflicts”. Just the sort of thing a planet troubled by climate change and pandemics needs.

Hypersonic panic is here to stay, and defence contractors are rubbing their hands and hoping to grease a few palms. Hayes is one of them, expecting that the US would “have weapons to challenge the adversaries but most importantly, I think our focus is how do we develop counter-hypersonics. That’s where the challenge will be.” The *National Review* is in full agreement, [encouraging](#) the US to “deploy missile-defense interceptors in Australia and more sensors in space, as well as work toward directed-energy weapons that would be the best counter to hypersonic missiles.” Yet another competitive front for military lunacy is in the offing, even before it has earnestly begun.

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