

How to build an architecture of peace, when destruction can rain down in mere minutes

- by Douglas Roche and Ernie Regehr.

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The existence of 13,865 nuclear weapons held by nine countries has not been enough, seemingly, 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: “hypersonic” missiles.

The United States, Russia and China are leading the way on the development of hypersonic missiles, purportedly capable of travelling at more than 15 times the speed of sound and striking 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 tonnes of TNT.

Although hypersonics are intended to carry conventional explosives, as distinct from nuclear, that’s not the main threat right now. 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, states with nuclear weapons will have to assess how to respond to such threats quickly, and may be tempted to bypass political consultation. Their systems will also be placed on even higher levels of alert, increasing paranoia and pressure.

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. We’re looking at a world where catastrophic destruction is possible – and with unimaginable speed.

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 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 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, some experts worry, upend existing norms of deterrence and renew Cold War-era tensions.”

The issue of hypersonic weapons should highlight the growing urgency of reconstructing a reliable nuclear-arms control regime. Such a system should place a legal obligation on all countries to pursue and complete comprehensive negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons. Stunningly, the reverse is happening: The U.S. and Russia continue to violate their

disarmament obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, as they 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 a small but widening circle of countries.

Of course, the dismal state of nuclear disarmament in this chaotic period of world history sometimes raises doubts about the effectiveness of the nuclear disarmament movement. 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. Focusing 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 long. It already includes curbing global warming, controlling cyberwarfare, promoting sustainable development, and continuing to learn that human rights include the right to be free of warfare.

Hypersonic marks 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.