



Why Russia covets hypersonic weapons

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Russia's ongoing development of hypersonic weapons proves nuclear weapons are in fact warfighting weapons — contrary to conventional wisdom in the West.

In December 2018, Moscow successfully tested the Avangard and Tsirkon hypersonic missiles. The former travels at speeds up to 20 times the speed of sound and is supposedly invulnerable to any missile defenses. It can carry a nuclear warhead and allegedly hit any spot on the globe within 30 minutes of launch. Therefore, it can be considered a “strategic” nuclear weapon.

The *Tsirkon*, meanwhile, can be deployed on submarines, ships and airplanes, including long-range bombers. It possesses a range of approximately 310 miles and is expected to be a particularly lethal anti-ship weapon.

Another mature Russian hypersonic missile, the *Kinzhal*, can travel 1,800 miles at up to 10 times the speed of sound. Russian President Vladimir Putin displayed it in 2018 in a simulation that modeled the destruction of Florida.

Moreover, these represent just some of the new generation of weapons that Moscow is developing. By 2024, Moscow expects its submarine fleet to be able to launch hypersonic missiles that are capable of carrying either conventional or nuclear warheads.

Russia's larger military modernization effort encompasses its entire triad of air, sea and land-based nuclear weapons, from short- to intermediate- to long-range nuclear weapons, along with counter-force and counter-value weapons. According to General Paul Selva (USAF), vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Russia is also developing new tactical nuclear weapons to tailor its forces to virtually any contingency. Thus, Russia is currently working on over 20 nuclear programs, including nuclear-capable hypersonic weapons.

Equally disquieting is the fact that in the recent Vostok-2018 exercises Russian forces and the Ministry of Energy conducted large-scale exercises to restore electric grids and power supply after an attack. In other words, Russia rehearsed an EMP (electromagnetic pulse) operation, and its aftermath strongly suggesting that it either expects or intends to launch one. Significantly, Moscow sought to conceal the purpose of that exercise and divorce it from Vostok-18. Russia has also rehearsed nuclear operations in the past – such as simulating a nuclear strike against Sweden back in 2013.

Clearly, Moscow sees nuclear weapons as usable instruments of war. In this context, hypersonics are valuable for the Kremlin because they are allegedly invulnerable to U.S. missile defenses. Without any basis in fact or science, Russia has long contended that American missile defenses in the U.S., Europe and Asia threaten its nuclear deterrent. Despite innumerable briefings, scientific facts and the admission of Russian experts that these “threats” are fantasies, the Kremlin persists in seeing nuclear weapons as warfighting instruments against American and allied missile defenses.

And whatever Moscow declares in its doctrine or rhetoric, its procurements and exercises strongly suggest not only that, in the Russian view, nuclear weapons are warfighting weapons, but also that they will be used in a first-strike against purely conventional strikes. Accordingly, Russian officials informed then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis last year that defending the Baltics would lead to nuclear war — a clear statement of Russia's intent to use nuclear weapons first.

At its core, Russia's development of hypersonic weapons reflects its refusal to accept mutual assured deterrence among the superpowers and the self-generating paranoia of a state bent on rebuilding its empire by inhibiting NATO from defending its allies and partners. They embody both the Kremlin's global ambitions and its own inherent paranoia (including the belief that nuclear weapons can and will be used against it).

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