

The imperative for hypersonic strike weapons and counterhypersonic defenses:

Toward integrated comprehensive layered defeat

Key findings and recommendations for policymakers

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well as Stratolaunch, X-Bow Systems, Cerberus Capital Management, Karman Space and Defense, Textum, MIT Lincoln Laboratory, JHU/APL, ACMI, and Riverside Research, all of which are involved in hypersonic capabilities.

As part of the research process for this report, the lead author conducted several dozen interviews and consultations with members of the Atlantic Council's Hypersonic Capabilities Task Force, current and former officials in the US Department of Defense, congressional staff members, and industry representatives. The full task force convened several times over the course of the project to develop the findings reflected in this report, but the report's analysis and recommendations do not necessarily reflect the views of all individuals consulted. This effort was conducted under the leadership of task force director Stephen Rodriguez, former *Forward* Defense director Clementine G. Starling-Daniels, deputy director Mark J. Massa, and program assistant Jonathan Rosenstein.

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Executive summary

Potential US adversaries such as China and Russia are creating an increasingly contested anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) environment, posing a severe challenge to US battlefield dominance on land, at sea, in the air, and in space. It is imperative that the United States develop and field hypersonic strike weapons, in substantial numbers, as part of an integrated comprehensive layered defeat strategy that delivers left- and right-of-launch defeat of each adversary A2/AD capability through integrated kinetic and nonkinetic effects to defeat vulnerable kill-chain elements of the adversary's warfighting capability. Hypersonic strike systems enable delivery of timely, survivable, lethal effects from outside of an adversary's defensive perimeter in a timescale of relevance and are essential to ensuring future US warfighting preeminence on a highly contested battlefield. It is also imperative that the United States aggressively pursue defense against adversary hypersonic strike systems to combat the growing number of such systems being fielded.

To address these hypersonic imperatives, it is essential that the US Department of Defense pursue and Congress fund: robust acquisition of the current generation of hypersonic weapons and counter-hypersonic interceptors; block upgrades to these systems to field advanced capability and significantly improve affordability; accelerated development of next-generation systems to achieve affordable capacity; technology maturation to increase capability and affordability for hypersonic strike weapons, hypersonic interceptors, and future reusable hypersonic aircraft; critical workforce initiatives; expansion of the nation's test infrastructure and modeling and simulation capabilities to accelerate advanced concept development; robust long-range kill webs to allow for effective employment of hypersonic capabilities; and cooperation with allies and partners to coproduce these weapons and interceptors and integrate them into whole-of-alliance defense strategies and plans.

Beyond closing the immediate missile gap, this report also recommends a dedicated effort to mature reusable hypersonic aircraft. These systems offer a transformational capability for persistent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and responsive strike missions in highly contested environments, ensuring enduring US leadership in the next generation of warfare.

ENTERPRISE CHALLENGES

Challenges (“As-Is”)	Outcomes (“To-Be”)
A growing asymmetry exists as adversaries aggressively field hundreds of hypersonic and high-speed weapons, while US fielding has been delayed.	The United States closes the capability gap by fielding a family of hypersonic strike weapons at scale, restoring battlefield advantage and credible deterrence.
Legacy US strike systems lack the speed, range, and survivability to be effective against modern A2/AD environments created by peer adversaries.	Hypersonic weapons “de-contest” the battlefield by holding high-value, heavily defended adversary systems at risk, enabling the effective use of the entire joint force.
US missile defense capabilities are challenged by the sheer number, advanced tactics, and maneuverability of adversary hypersonic threats.	An Integrated Comprehensive Layered Defeat (ICLD) architecture is implemented, using kinetic and non-kinetic means to disrupt adversary kill chains before and after launch.
The current US defense industrial base is not incentivized or equipped to design and build affordable hypersonic weapons in mass.	The industrial base is energized and expanded, embracing innovation and commercial practices to deliver affordable capacity for hypersonic systems.
National test infrastructure and workforce development have not kept pace with the accelerated need for hypersonic system development and fielding.	A robust, integrated national enterprise for testing, technology development, and workforce development accelerates learning and enables the rapid transition of new technologies.
Allied collaboration on high-speed weapons development and production remains limited, hindering opportunities for burden-sharing and interoperability.	The United States aggressively pursues co-development and co-production with key allies (e.g., AUKUS Pillar 2), fielding capabilities in more meaningful numbers and integrating forces.

A call for action

The DOD and Congress can, and should, take numerous additional actions to rapidly and efficiently field warfighting capability based on hypersonic strike systems, and to bolster capabilities for defense against rapidly proliferating adversary hypersonic strike and, more broadly, growing A2/AD capabilities. Recommended actions include the following.

1. Create a munitions czar to oversee weapons development and procurement

Problem statement

The US military services are platform-centric, with weapon programs often having lower priority than development and procurement of current and next-generation platforms. These platforms are notoriously expensive, with delays measured in years and consistent cost overruns totaling billions of dollars. Services historically defund weapons programs to pay for these overruns, while also slow-rolling advanced weapons activities that might in any way compete politically with the advanced platform budget allocations.

Recommendation

The DOD should create a direct reporting program manager (DRPM) for weapons, a “weapons czar,” reporting directly to the deputy secretary of defense, and elevate the principal director for hypersonics to be a direct report to that DRPM, with responsibility and authority for defining the vision, strategy, and execution plans for all high-speed weapons programs, including defense against adversary high-speed weapons, in close coordination with the DRPM handling the proposed “Golden Dome” missile shield. The weapons czar should have authority over advanced weapon budget allocations and be held accountable for program execution.

2. Aggressively field and evolve first-generation hypersonic systems

Problem statement

The United States has made good progress developing its first generation of hypersonic strike weapons. However, fielding has been delayed by technical challenges, budget battles, and shifting priorities, while adversaries continue to expand their arsenals. These initial systems, designed as accelerated prototypes, are also not yet optimized for affordability or high-rate production.

Recommendation

The DOD and Congress should ensure stable funding and priority to aggressively field first-generation hypersonic weapons across air, land, and sea launch platforms at the earliest possible dates, and fully equip units at levels consistent with the DOD’s analysis of warfighting needs. The DOD must work with industry to drive down costs as production rates increase. A block-upgrade strategy should be implemented for each system to rapidly insert advanced capabilities and enhance affordability, allowing them to service a broader set of targets and be procured and fielded in the necessary numbers.

3. Prioritize next-generation hypersonic systems designed for affordable capacity

Problem statement

While first-generation systems are critical for closing the immediate capability gap that adversaries have opened regarding expendable hypersonic missiles, the initial cost of first-generation US systems will limit the capacity that the United States can affordably field. To counter the sheer number of targets presented by the A2/AD strategies of peer adversaries, the United States requires a next-generation family of long-range, high-speed strike systems designed from the outset for affordable, high-rate production and broad launch-platform compatibility. The current industrial base is not structured or incentivized for this kind of rapid, cost-effective innovation.

At the same time, focusing solely on mirroring adversaries’ approach surrenders the strategic initiative. An opportunity remains to lead in the next transformational capability: reusable hypersonic aircraft for responsive ISR and strike missions. As space becomes increasingly contested, hypersonic aircraft could decisively counter adversary A2/AD strategies by enabling persistent, survivable operations from within contested zones.

Recommendation

The DOD should robustly fund two distinct but complementary lines of effort for affordable capacity:

(a) Next-generation expendable missiles: Pursue a family of lower-cost, high-capacity missiles for affordable capacity designed to service a broad set of A2/AD targets. This should be done through competitive programs that incentivize traditional companies

to deliver affordable capacity, and inspire new and innovative companies, including nontraditional commercial firms, to compete against the traditional defense industrial base. These programs should set firm cost requirements and a trade space of performance objectives, with the goal of achieving optimal affordability. High-capacity designs must be integrated with air, land, and sea launch platforms that allow for delivery of high-capacity effects on a highly contested battlefield.

(b) Foundational reusable aircraft programs: Aggressively fund technology maturation and demonstrator programs for reusable hypersonic aircraft. While the initial investment is higher, these platforms offer the prospect of significantly lower cost per sortie for persistent ISR and strike missions over their lifecycle, representing the most viable path to truly affordable and sustainable capacity. Affordability must be a key driver to the design process at the earliest stages of this effort.

4. Mandate and resource an ICLD strategy

Problem statement

Fielding offensive hypersonic weapons is only one part of the solution to defeating complex A2/AD environments created by adversaries. Battlefield dominance will require both an architecture and approach that is holistic. Relying solely on postlaunch kinetic interceptors (like Patriot or THAAD) is insufficient due to challenges of overwhelming numbers, sophisticated tactics, and the unique flight characteristics of adversary cruise, ballistic, and hypersonic missile threats.

Recommendation

The DOD must formally integrate the fielding of offensive and defensive hypersonic systems into an integrated comprehensive layered defeat architecture. This framework should be adopted and must be resourced to include robust pre- and post-launch kinetic and nonkinetic capabilities. It should be an underpinning of both homeland defense (such as the proposed “Golden Dome” missile shield) and theater warfighting strategies, leveraging hypersonic strike as a critical left-of-launch enabler to disrupt and destroy adversary systems before they can be used while defeating every other element of the adversary kill chain through the integration of kinetic and nonkinetic capabilities.

5. Accelerate learning through an integrated national test enterprise

Problem statement

The pace of developing and fielding hypersonic systems is directly tied to the ability to test them early and often in a development cycle. The nation’s once-robust hypersonic ground- and flight-test infrastructure, while improving, continues to be a bottleneck, slowing down the development cycle for next-generation hypersonic systems.

Recommendation

The United States must continue to enhance its hypersonic ground and flight tests and its modeling and simulation (M&S) capabilities to enable accelerated learning and development. This enterprise must be resourced to support both rapid iteration of expendable missile designs and the more complex, sustained flight test campaigns required for reusable air-breathing aircraft. The progress made by the TRMC in ground testing, flight testing, and enhanced test-range telemetry should be embraced and robustly funded. The HyperCorr program, emphasizing ground and flight test efforts tightly coupled to high-fidelity M&S, should be accelerated. Greater emphasis should be placed on tightly coupling these TRMC investments to the overarching objectives of the DOD hypersonics program portfolio, with emphasis on accelerated development of affordable capacity for future hypersonic capability.

6. Energize allied codevelopment and coproduction

Problem statement

The United States will likely not face an adversary alone in any future major conflict. Collaboration with allies on the development and deployment of advanced high-speed systems has been limited by information-sharing challenges, missing key opportunities to share costs, leverage innovation, and together build a more integrated and capable coalition force.

Recommendation

The United States must work diligently with allies to cooperatively develop, produce, and deploy advanced and affordable hypersonic strike capabilities. Cooperative programs, such as AUKUS Pillar 2, which focuses on developing and delivering emerging technology, should be nurtured and expanded to advance alliances, foster innovation, and field capabilities in more meaningful numbers.¹ Collaboration should be enhanced with all allies pursuing advanced high-speed systems, and with the removal of barriers to information and technology sharing, wherever it is possible.

¹ “Defense Official Statement on AUKUS Pillar 2 and Exercise Maritime Big Play,” news release, US Department of Defense, October 24, 2024.

7. Modernize theater and strategic nuclear delivery options

Problem statement

Adversary integrated air defenses and nuclear-modernization efforts are challenging the survivability of legacy nuclear delivery systems. For example, the F-35A dual-capable aircraft, central to NATO's nuclear mission, is not likely to remain sufficiently survivable in the 2030s against peer defenses in all relevant scenarios.²

Recommendation

The DOD should pursue hypersonic delivery options for future strategic and tactical nuclear weapons to ensure enduring deterrence. A high-speed, air-delivered standoff weapon should be considered to augment and then replace B61 gravity bombs for the NATO mission. The United States should consider new nuclear capabilities that would be delivered by highly responsive systems, like hypersonic weapons, capable of penetrating advanced defenses with high reliability.

8. Bolster layered defenses against hypersonic threats

Problem statement

Defending against adversary hypersonic strike weapons is exceptionally difficult. These threats challenge all aspects of the defensive fire-control loop, from detection to engagement, due to their speed, range, altitude, and highly maneuverable and unpredictable trajectories.

Recommendation

The DOD must pursue a defense-in-depth, layered strategy for counter-hypersonic defense. Crucially, this kinetic shield must be integrated with nonkinetic defensive layers, such as capabilities that degrade or deny satellite navigation, communication, and terminal missile seekers, to maximize the probability of defeat. This postlaunch capability is a necessary, but not sufficient, element of the ICLD architecture.

9. Develop robust long-range kill webs for hypersonic strike capability

Problem statement

Current kill webs for effective employment of long-range strike missiles require considerable time and effort and can be brittle. This vulnerability limits the ability to deliver meaningful warfighting capability in a highly contested A2/AD environment. Warfighting effectiveness for long-range strike systems can be significantly enhanced relative to traditional weapon employment by the integration of hypersonic strike weapons. Hypersonic weapons are inherently survivable due to their ability to maneuver unpredictably and fly high-altitude, high-speed trajectories. This characteristic dramatically reduces both mission planning time prior to weapon employment and target custody duration for relocatable and moving targets.

Recommendation

The DOD should significantly enhance the development and fielding of robust long-range strike kill-web capabilities, fully leveraging the advantages of hypersonic strike weapons. An integrated and specific initiative should be funded to enhance time-critical targeting capabilities that would leverage the full spectrum of US and allied ISR and targeting systems.

10. Rapidly transition advanced technology and enhance the workforce to support future hypersonic capability development and production

Problem statement

The JHTO has responsibility for this area of the national strategy. JHTO has, so far, done a good job in creating the University Consortium for Applied Hypersonics. However, JHTO budgets have been limited beyond that. Workforce challenges and resulting technology maturation timelines are bottlenecks to further scaling the development and production of hypersonic capabilities.

Recommendation

The DOD should champion a whole-of-nation effort to address workforce initiatives and science and technology advancements to quicken the pace for future development, production, and fielding. The department and Congress should robustly fund the JHTO to identify and aggressively develop new technology for rapid transition to next-generation systems and to accelerate

² Lockheed Martin, the prime contractor for the F-35A, is among the sponsors of this report and is a client of the lead author's consultancy.

upgrades for existing systems. Initiatives should include the maturation of concepts and technology driven by the need to deliver affordable capacity and advanced capabilities, including future reusable hypersonic aircraft. Finally, the JHTO should more tightly couple its workforce and technology development strategies to the needs of traditional and nontraditional industry to enable accelerated development of future affordable hypersonic systems.

Conclusion

Potential adversaries, particularly China and Russia, are creating an increasingly contested environment that severely challenges US battlefield dominance. A central element of this challenge is their fielding of a variety of high-speed and hypersonic strike systems designed to attack US and allied forces at long range and with overwhelming speed.

To ensure US battlefield preeminence, the Pentagon must develop and field capabilities to enable execution of an integrated comprehensive layered defeat strategy that leverages kinetic and nonkinetic means to defeat adversary capabilities. As part of this strategy, it is imperative for the United States to develop and field its own hypersonic strike weapons in substantial numbers to enable US forces to operate effectively and survive on the modern battlefield by defeating adversary high-end capabilities in a battlefield timescale of relevance.

To that end, the Department of Defense and Congress should aggressively move forward to field first-generation air-, land-, and sea-launched hypersonic strike weapons; develop and field a next-generation family of affordable hypersonic strike systems in meaningful numbers; mature and demonstrate future hypersonic aircraft technologies; and energize the foundational enablers of the industrial base, test infrastructure, technology, and workforce. Simultaneously, the United States must bolster its defenses against adversary air and missile threats through implementation of the full spectrum of ICLD capabilities. The time to act is now to close the growing gap in offensive and defensive hypersonic capability and ensure the United States' ability to deter and, if necessary, win in any future conflict.

Biographies

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Deborah Lee James is an Atlantic Council board director and served as the twenty-third secretary of the US Air Force from 2013 to 2017. James has extensive homeland and national security experience in the federal government and the private sector. In the private sector, she served as president of Science Applications International Corporation's Technical and Engineering Sector, as executive vice president and chief operating officer at Business Executives for National Security, and as vice president at United Technologies. In earlier government positions, James served as assistant secretary of defense for reserve affairs. She served as co-chair of the Atlantic Council's Commission on Defense Innovation Adoption.

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