



Stop Going Backwards: Reviving Nuclear And Space-Based Arms Control And Abolition Efforts Before It Is Simply Too Late

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This essay is an effort to enhance understanding among ordinary Americans about the perils of nuclear weapons and a new nuclear arms race that will include space-based weaponry.

I have participated in organizing annual commemorations of the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the Chicago area for many years. There is now, after years of effort, growing interest in these subjects. For good reason.

Let me begin by describing what I find most troubling at this time. Unfortunately, the list is a bit lengthy:

1. THE FAILURE OF THE U.S. AND RUSSIA TO EXTEND THE NEW START TREATY BEFORE IT EXPIRES IN FEBRUARY, 2026.

We face the expiration of the last meaningful nuclear weapons agreement between the U.S. and Russia. The New Start Treaty has been credited for successfully reducing the number of nuclear weapons kept by each country.

If this expiration is not successfully prevented, we may be facing another woefully expensive nuclear arms race that will further cripple domestic spending on peacetime needs such as health care, education, scientific research and the needs of the poor.

2. THE RACE TO DEVELOP HYPERSONIC MISSILES.

Russia, China and the U.S. are testing, developing and, in the case of Russia, using hypersonic missiles which can travel at speeds currently known to be between 7 or 8 times the speed of sound.

Hypersonics are very accurate and have a range of about 3,400 miles. They are extremely difficult to intercept because they are highly maneuverable and can be flown at low altitudes. In short, an enemy can be struck before realizing what is going on.

If mounted on long-range bombers or submarines near our nation's coast, hypersonic missiles can have a strategic as well as tactical use. They are capable of carrying nuclear weapons with

multiple warheads. In the recent movie, “House of Dynamite”, the U.S. President is said to have 19 minutes to respond to the launch of a conventional Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (an “ICBM”). If the launch in that movie involved a hypersonic missile shot from a submarine near the U.S. coast, the President’s reaction time would be limited even further and the likelihood of repelling the hypersonic with a U.S. interceptor missile would be nil.

Why? Compare the flight paths of hypersonic missiles with that of ICBMs. The ICBMs are also hypersonic, but their 30 minute-long journey into outer space and return to earth’s atmosphere follow a predictable flight path providing a longer reaction time and perhaps a 50/50 possibility of being hit by a defensive weapon if the attack does not involve a swarm of incoming nukes. In contrast, as indicated above, hypersonics can very quickly navigate low-altitude strike paths and maneuver in ways that evade defensive missile interception.

Putin has already launched two hypersonic missile strikes against Ukraine, one falling within short miles from the Polish border.

Most significantly, Putin and his chief Russian deputies have threatened the use of tactical nuclear weapons on many occasions. These statements should give the entire world great pause. Imagine such a use of hypersonic missiles. It would be unlikely that any nation attacked by nuclear-armed hypersonics could refrain from engaging in its own nuclear strikes and counterstrikes that their systems are designed to deliver.

The time to stop the development of these hair-trigger weapons is now, before it is too late. Can we cope with such weapons? Can Russian, Chinese and American societies afford this multi-faceted arms race as their populations age and domestic economies stagger? The resemblance of our times to the 1930s looms large.

3. THE THREAT TO RESUME ATMOSPHERIC NUCLEAR TESTING.

In October 2025, the American President made vague remarks that because other countries have resumed nuclear testing, the U.S. would resume nuclear testing as well.

The White House has refused to clarify what the President was referring to. If the reference is indeed to atmospheric testing, it would be the first resumption of atmospheric testing by any country in over 30 years.

The President’s vague statement and the White House failure to clarify has renewed fears in the peace and nuclear disarmament communities that multiple countries may embark upon the atmospheric testing that poisoned the earth and its atmosphere in the 1950s.

This of course is a great leap backwards. The 1963 Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, although not formally adopted by requisite countries, has directly and indirectly prevented such lethal testing for decades.

4. THE MILITARIZATION OF OUTER SPACE

There is growing concern about the militarization of outer space, especially in low orbits, where world communications and surveillance satellites are located.

Earth to space and space to space weapons systems are being developed and tested by several countries. A Russian test successfully destroyed a low orbit target satellite, adding more space debris among the flight paths of the satellites which hold the world communications and financial systems together.

Once again, this is a great leap backwards, at least in terms of previous international intent. The 1967 Outer Space treaty banned nuclear weapons in space but does NOT address conventional weaponry. Of course, the intricate and vulnerable system of communications satellites which now are an essential part of the infrastructure of contemporary civilization did not exist in 1967.

This dangers posed by anti-satellite weapons are similar to the premise of the “House of Dynamite” movie, where panic sets in among U.S. defensive weapons systems analysts because their equipment failed to detect the nation of origin that has launched an ICBM against Chicago. If a nation loses its communications and surveillance satellite systems due to the use of anti-satellite weaponry, the victimized nation will be more inclined to panic and make mistakes regarding its use of nukes in a possible first strike.

5. A PROPOSED NEW MISSILE DEFENSE SYSTEM.

Remember ABMs, anti-ballistic missile systems? President Reagan initiated their development, nicknaming it “Star Wars”. Russia entered the race to build an ABM system, further weakening its economy.

Our current President was much impressed by the performance of Israel’s “Iron Dome” anti-missile system, although its performance was not perfect. Also, the Israeli system is distinguishable because it defends a significantly smaller land area and does not defend against either ICBMs or hypersonics.

Nonetheless, our President wants to construct at massive cost a “Golden Dome” missile defense system to protect the entire U.S. No matter how much money is spent on it, a “Golden Dome” will not provide effective protection against a nuclear swarm attack of ICBMs, hypersonics, and drones attacking the U.S. in quick succession raids.

ADDITIONAL HELPFUL BACKGROUND

In short, there has been bad recent news regarding the development and use of nuclear weaponry.

Many citizens may wonder how we got to this point.

It’s helpful to further explore post-World War II developments in this area to gain a reasoned, sobering perspective and discern the chances for success in regulating and eventually disarming nuclear weapons.

Let's start with the problem caused by our fading memories about the lethality of these weapons.

Many U.S. baby boomers were required to read a masterly piece of journalism on this subject while in high school. I am of course referring to John Hersey's "Hiroshima", originally published as a lengthy article in an oversized issue of The New Yorker magazine.

Within a few months after the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 31 year old war correspondent John Hersey went to Hiroshima, interviewed survivors, and wrote his book. The book does not treat the first use of a nuclear weapon as an abstraction; instead, it personalizes the nature of the resulting injuries to six survivors caused by the attack in ways left unexplored by the recent hit movie, "Oppenheimer".

For many years, Hersey's book became required summer reading on high school mandatory summer reading lists.

Less so, today.

Our fading memories of the catastrophic impact of these weapons has helped us fail to notice the ominous developments described above. It would be helpful if movie producers, artists and musicians could be further encouraged to use their artistic talents to place the fearsome nature of these weapons front and center in public consciousness throughout the world. Everything we love can be destroyed in a short time if either malice or uncertainty and panic unleash these weapons.

I wish we could discern an arc of much progress in the efforts to regulate and eventually abolish nuclear arms. But the arc is going in the wrong direction.

Consider this recent history:

— As stated above, the New Start Treaty between the US and Russia is expiring. Russia has already suspended its participation but has not formally withdrawn as yet. New Start successfully achieved verifiable large reductions in the number of nuclear weapons from 50,000 to approximately 1,700 deployable warheads each between the U.S. and Russia.

If New Start is not renewed, and if China is not involved in its renewal, the U.S. may feel compelled to exceed New Start limits due to China's nuclear weapons build up. China has more than doubled its nuclear arsenal from 200 warheads in 2010 to an estimated 600 today; the Pentagon estimates its number may grow to 1,500 by 2026.

Also, both the U.S. and Russia have walked away from the separate 1987 INF Treaty, which sought to eliminate intermediate-range nuclear missiles. Nuclear-equipped hypersonic missiles would fall into this category.

— There are now at least 9 countries with nuclear weapons, stockpiling 13,000 of them.

— There have been United Nations resolutions and treaties (such as the 2022 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons) pledging countries to forego and abolish them. This is a highly admirable effort, but the nine nations who possess nuclear weapons haven't signed.

The 1970 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons helped limit the number of states possessing nuclear weapons, and pledged good faith efforts on the nations possessing nuclear weapons to negotiate their disarmament. However, these negotiations among the nuclear powers have not progressed. The limited success of this treaty may end soon if Iran and other countries proceed vigorously to obtain a bomb in the wake of the recent U.S./Israeli attack on Iran, in the wake of European concerns about the reliability of America's "nuclear umbrella" given its unsteady foreign policy, and in the wake of recent border violations by Russia in Ukraine and the U.S. in Venezuela.

— U.S. peace and justice groups have been pushing hard for the US to forego first use of nuclear weapons, but the legislative resolutions stall in a toxically divided Congress pre-occupied with elections and culture wars.

— Peace group efforts have also tried and failed to regulate the U.S. President's sole authority to authorize and launch a nuclear attack. Apart from verifying that the order to launch comes from the President, U.S. protocols do not require discussion or review of the order to attack by any other U.S. official. This is obviously dangerous if autocratic or unstable individuals occupy the Oval Office. Senator Tim Kaine's recent effort to regulate the president's authority was recently defeated in a 53 - 47 Senate vote.

— As you can glean, a new, incredibly costly arms race reminiscent of the 1930s, 1950s and 1960s may soon break out into the open. The cost to refurbish the U.S. "Sentinel" land-based missile system ALONE has escalated from 78 billion to 140.9 billion, and according to 2023 estimates the total cost of nuclear refurbishment already underway will cost \$756 billion dollars between 2023 and 2036. PLUS, as indicated above, the U.S. President has announced his interest in a new, doomed-to-fail uber-expensive Golden Dome missile defense system, likely triggering a costly anti-missile arms race.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Let's not assume the U.S. public is very familiar with the story told above. Let's instead build a dialogue that uses plain language to avoid future Hiroshimas and Nagasakis. People can be encouraged to:

— learn more about the situation, using resources such as Arms Control Today magazine and frequent seminars offered by the Peace Action network;

— work together to retain the life of the New Start Treaty;

—work together to support pending House Resolution 317, the so-called "Back from the Brink" resolution which calls for the U.S., Russia, China and other nuclear-armed states to negotiate to reduce their arsenals and cancel replacement plans; renounce first use of nuclear weapons from high alert status; and end the President's sole authority to launch a nuclear attack, all with the goal of eventually abolishing nuclear weapons systems;

— with resolve, urge Congress to support the proposed Nuclear Testing Without Approval Act (HR 5951) which requires Congressional approval of any explosive nuclear tests and, in

addition, the proposed Restrain Act (HR 5894) which bans such tests and restricts their funding;

— above all, join other groups in your community such as Chicago Area Peace Action, teachers unions, religious congregations, local officials and others and get folks involved in anti-nuclear proliferation efforts. You'll learn a lot from others by doing so and they will appreciate your insights and talents. Seasoned groups know how to work with governmental officials and their staffs, elevating the effectiveness of your individual efforts enormously. As suggested above, it's high time for these efforts to also work toward the abandonment of hypersonic, missile defense, space-based weapons systems, and any plans to resume atmospheric nuclear tests.

Finally, it's time to explore a new greater cooperation with like-minded grass roots peace and justice groups in other countries on a coordinated international basis. Chicago Area Peace Action has already met with a like-minded group from South Korea.

The time for making these efforts may be right. A recent poll indicates that the overwhelming majority of Americans favor extending the New Start Treaty, and that a majority are more inclined to vote for candidates who take this position.

Let's ponder all of this with the curiosity of a young John Hersey and work together to prevent future Hiroshimas and Nagasakis.