

Opening Statement, Ranking Member Seth Moulton

Strategic Forces Subcommittee Hearing; U.S. and Adversary Hypersonic Programs

10 March 2023

Thank you, Chairman Lamborn. I also extend a welcome to our distinguished panel of witnesses today.

I am thankful we are holding this hearing on hypersonics, not only to understand our adversaries' capabilities and intentions when it comes to these weapons, but also to gain a better understanding of how the Department envisions the employment of our own hypersonics in a future conflict.

In 2020, I chaired the House Armed Services Committee Future of Defense Task Force. In our many discussions with Department officials, academia, industry, and various think tanks, we learned that hypersonics were a capability both Russia and the People's Republic of China had prioritized in their modernization efforts, mainly due to their asymmetric capability to avoid detection by existing U.S. air and missile defense systems. As Dr. Freisthler's testimony starkly lays out, those investments have resulted in at least 4 different types of hypersonic weapons systems being fielded today that can reach targets anywhere on the globe.

While our adversaries have been developing these weapons systems for years, the Department has watched and done little to negate their asymmetric advantages over our systems, especially our domain awareness. Congress has had to come in repeatedly to solve this problem, authorizing in the FY19 NDAA and then appropriating the hypersonic ballistic missile tracking space sensor. Launches of the operational satellites are still two years away. Despite General VanHerck's

consistent warnings of his inability to detect and track these types of threats, it took a high-altitude balloon from the PRC for many to fully understand the severity of the gaps in our domain awareness architecture.

One of the top conclusions of our Future of Defense Task Force is that it's not enough for the department to pursue technology for technology's sake: we need to develop the operational concepts for how that technology will actually be employed. Indeed, the operational concepts should come first, and then we should develop whatever technology is needed to best address the need. Otherwise, you can waste a lot of money and time developing technology you don't need or technology that's not best suited to what we do need.

Seen through this lens, U.S. hypersonic weapons development is troubling. We re-started hypersonic weapons development because our adversaries were developing them, without having a clear operational concept ourselves for how they will be employed. Last year, I asked this simple question of department officials: how will you use these weapons that are costing taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars? I was met with blank stares. This week, I asked the question again: Why are we developing them and how will they be employed? The answer I received was that we are developing them because our adversaries have them. Again, exactly the wrong answer. There are plenty of weapons our adversaries are developing that we are not, such as the Russian nuclear-powered missile that blew up and killed its own test crew not long ago. What matters is how we will use them, not chasing after what our adversaries have just because they have it.

But there is an even deeper level at which our development of hypersonics is troubling, and that is that they may well be fundamentally destabilizing weapons. Since, after years of development, the department can't even make a clear case to our committee for how these weapons will be employed, we also have not

seriously examined the results of whatever that employment might be. Many theorists believe hypersonics will be fundamentally destabilizing to our national security and, indeed perhaps to humanity. This is in stark contrast to the other legs of our triad that have helped keep the peace between superpowers for decades. If a nation cannot tell whether an inbound hypersonic missile is a strategic nuclear weapon or not, or simply where it is aimed, that nation could feel compelled to launch a full nuclear response and nuclear holocaust could be the result.

During a hearing this week, there was clear disagreement among the four stars on that panel about whether these weapons are stabilizing or destabilizing. That is troubling not just for the American taxpayer, but for humanity itself.

The bottom line is that we have a lot of work to do, and I have not even mentioned the successive technical failures in our programs to date as we chase our adversaries' more advanced programs. I hope that the hearing this morning will, for the first time, help answer some of these fundamental questions and gain better insight into whether they are stabilizing in conflict, or as I fear, are inherently destabilizing because they increase the risk of miscalculation, particularly if our strategy and planning is lagging behind our development efforts.