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US Still Refuses to Come Clean About Its Hypersonic Programs Failures, Despite US Congress "Watchdog Report"

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In about a week, it'll be a full month since the latest hypersonic test by the US military and we're yet to see any reports about the results. Immediately after the test, there was either silence or pointless bureaucratic mumbo jumbo about the US military learning "valuable lessons" during testing. At the time, a US defense official told The War Zone that "this test was an essential benchmark in the development of operational hypersonic technology" and that "vital data on the performance of the hardware and software was collected that will inform the continued progress toward fielding hypersonic weapons". In other words, the chances that the launch was successful are quite slim. Considering the long history of American failures in this field, there's strong empirical evidence that casts serious doubt on the "success" of last month's test and that's precisely what I argued in my previous analysis about the launch and the general state of US hypersonic weapons programs.

The latest reports only reinforce this notion. Namely, **Under Secretary of the Army Gabe Camarillo** informed the media that the Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (LRHW), a joint venture with the US Navy's Conventional Prompt Strike (CPS), was supposedly "scheduled for fielding". According to Janes, at the Emerging Technologies Institute conference of the National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) on August 8, Camarillo said that "we look forward to its eventual fielding", as it's a "critical part of us fielding our multidomain task forces in the future". The very fact that the high-ranking US official went from "scheduled" to "eventual" fielding is very telling. There have been numerous "scheduled fielding" dates in the last several years, none of which turned out to be true. This clearly implies there will be more delays and also indicates that the latest test was not "unclear", but simply yet another failure.

Right around the time of the launch, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), **a key US Congress (GAO) watchdog accountability report, stressing just how unhappy it is with the snail pace of US hypersonic weapons programs, pointing out key technological gaps in the US Army's LRHW** (better known as the "Dark Eagle"). (click below to access full report)

Hypersonic Weapons:
DOD Could Reduce Cost and Schedule Risks by Following Leading Practices

GAO-24-106792
Published: Jul 29, 2024. Publicly Released: Jul 29, 2024.

> The Department of Defense is working to quickly develop hypersonic weapons, which are capable of moving at least 5 times the speed of sound and have unpredictable flight paths that could give the military a tactical advantage.
>
> Most of DOD's efforts to develop hypersonic weapons aren't using modern digital engineering tools, such as virtual representations of physical products. By not following this leading practice, they won't benefit from the tools' advantages, such as speeding up the schedules for prototypes and making it easier to incorporate changes based on user feedback.
>
> We recommended addressing this and applying other leading practices."

Since this project aims to save costs by using the Common-Hypersonic Glide Body (C-HGB) for both the US Army's LRHW and US Navy's CPS, it can be argued this is a warning to both branches of the US military, particularly as failures continue to pile up. Although the US Army is still talking about "nearing completion of its final testing", GAO suggests it won't be that easy and that the entire US military (all branches included) could "gain from industry's best practices". In simpler terms, GAO thinks the Pentagon is still lagging far behind and that it could (or more precisely should) do a lot better.

According to GAO, digital engineering is not commonly used by the Pentagon, causing delays and cost overruns. And yet, the US Army is also actively refusing to use the latest methods. The branch even told the GAO that it doesn't intend to employ digital twin technologies (virtual representation of a product that is yet to be physically manufactured). Four of the six current weapons programs that were reviewed by GAO don't fully utilize modern and advanced technical methodologies.

> "Years of effort and billions of dollars spent on hypersonic weapon development have yielded considerable progress, but DoD [Department of Defense] has yet to field its first operational hypersonic weapon system. Yet even fielding these prototypes will not ensure an effective or affordable capability," GAO stated.

The watchdog report also stressed the importance of communication between the Pentagon and the Military Industrial Complex (MIC), as well as between various service branches. GAO thinks that the lack of feedback from the end users is also contributing to delays and cost overruns. However, this is only the tip of the iceberg of America's growing inferiority in hypersonic weapons, as it's still using coping mechanisms and continues to live in an illusion that there's an ongoing hypersonic race it can still win.

Namely, approximately half a decade ago, I argued that Washington DC is lagging decades behind Moscow, the top player in hypersonic weapons. Namely, Russia is still the only military superpower on the planet with hypersonic weapons on a tactical, operational, strategic and doctrinal level. Its military has approximately two dozen types of various hypersonic weapons in service or about to be inducted. This stands in stark contrast to the entire political West, which fields exactly zero hypersonic weapons, despite running dozens of programs simultaneously. In addition, the Kremlin keeps upgrading these weapons, resulting in a continuously widening gap between the Russian and American military when it comes to hypersonic strike capabilities. In addition, other multipolar superpowers, such as China and India, are also ahead of the US, as well as strong regional players such as North Korea and Iran.

On the other hand, the US is not only unable to match its rivals in terms of capabilities, but it simply cannot field a working weapon. Worse yet, despite (ab)using the NATO-orchestrated Ukrainian conflict to sell more weapons to its numerous vassals and satellite states, America's MIC is increasingly incapable of producing even basic ICBMs and other critically important weapon systems. These continually sinking capabilities might be the reason why the US wants to start a global conflict as soon as possible. Perhaps Washington DC thinks it could be "too late" a decade from now.

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Featured image: Hypersonic missile concept art. Photo: Raytheon

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