

IMPACT FROM CHINA'S HYPERSONIC MISSILE TEST

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China launched a hypersonic missile that caused a global strategic impact and accentuated the suspicion of the United States about the increase in the military power of the Asian country. On October 16, the Financial Times reported the event, which was reportedly acknowledged late by the US intelligence services. It is a long-range missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead and that circled the earth, before heading towards its target. The rocket carried a hypersonic glide vehicle, which flew in low orbit but missed its target by 40 kilometers. According to the newspaper, China's capacity for this type of weapon is far ahead of what US experts estimated.

One of them argued that this achievement would allow the Asian power to bypass US missile defense systems. Washington's Disarmament Ambassador to Geneva, Robert Wood, stated, "We are very concerned about what China is currently doing in the hypersonic realm". This type of missile travels five times faster than the speed of light, which also hinders its detection by the anti-missile systems of Western powers. The US diplomat also said, "We do not know how to defend ourselves against this technology." He added that the launch would trigger an arms race because of the vulnerability that the event represents for the defense of the United States. The hypersonic missile was launched on July 27 and a test was repeated on August 13.

The Chinese version maintains that it was actually "a routine test" of a space vehicle, with the aim of testing the technology in this type of "reusable" artifact. This was the explanation given by Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry. According to US experts, the hypersonic missile is capable of flying at five Mach speed and even faster and is maneuverable like a space shuttle. In 2019, China had already unveiled a hypersonic missile, the DF-17, a 2,000-kilometer intermediate-range weapon, shaped like a "glider" and capable of carrying nuclear warheads. However, the one recently tested is different, in that it could reach space, be put into orbit, and then again flank the atmosphere and head toward its target. Its scope would be much greater than the preceding one.

Specifically, this new hypersonic missile was tested for the first time with a flight that went around the world, which considerably enhances China's military capacity in the nuclear field. Russia has already tested this type of weaponry and North Korea achieved some developments too. China would have used the technology called "orbital bombardment system" to send the vehicle around the planet. The rocket system follows a lower trajectory than that of the ICBM, making detection by early warning systems difficult. Coincidentally, Admiral Charles Richard, Chief of the Strategic Command of the US Nuclear Forces, declared in April, before Congress, that China was developing a "remarkable expansion" in the field of nuclear forces and that it aspired to become a rival of the United States in this area by the end of this decade.

On October 27, the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, compared this launch with that of the Russian Sputnik, the first artificial satellite, in 1957. The military leader maintained that back then, the USSR surprised the United States and the world with this launch, which followed a similar journey, initiating the space race. Speaking in Bloomberg TV, Milley said, "What happened is a very significant technological event that has our full attention" and acknowledged that this test, initially denied by the Pentagon, had taken the US government "by surprise".

The launch of Sputnik mentioned by Milley prompted President John F. Kennedy's declaration that the United States would be the first country to put a man on the moon. This milestone was fulfilled in 1969, twelve years after the launch of Sputnik. The United States had thus achieved primacy in the space race. However, the nuclear race, which unfolded in parallel to the space race, was only contained after 1990, with the dissolution of the USSR. Thirty years later, there is a risk of a new nuclear race linked to space. The American hypersonic project, in which companies like Raytheon are working, is further behind compared to the Chinese one.

Nevertheless, this launch is also an important geopolitical change, incorporating the Southern Hemisphere as a geographical area for the struggle between the great powers. The path of the Chinese hypersonic missile that went around the world and passed the South Pole is in itself a problem for the United States, because its entire anti-missile defense is aimed at preventing and neutralizing attacks from the Northern Hemisphere. The test made it clear that the missile

could be launched to cross Antarctica and the threats anticipated so far came from the west and north, over the Pacific, that is, from the territory of China or Russia.

The combination of space and nuclear races is perhaps the greatest threat to international security as the third decade of the 21st century begins. The rocket called "Long March" - in reference to the march carried out by Mao in the civil war that brought him to power - entered low Earth orbit before the missile at some point dislodged, re-entered the atmosphere and headed at full speed towards its target. All of this takes place at a time when President Biden is conducting a Nuclear Posture Review of his country. Republican lawmaker Mark Gallagher argued that the event should be taken as a warning by the Democratic administration. However, it also coincides with a moment of strong tension in the Indo-Pacific, due to China's conflict with Taiwan and the presentation of the AUKUS alliance, which generated tensions in the western alliance.

In conclusion: on October 16, the Financial Times published that China had tested a hypersonic missile that generated an advantage in the nuclear field over the United States. The Chinese version is that it was a test based on reusable vehicles in the framework of the space race, denying military implications. The US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff stated that this launch implied an impact for the United States similar to the launch of Sputnik in 1957, which started the space race. Finally, the flight of the Chinese rocket circled the Earth - and Antarctica in particular - and in fact brought the Southern Hemisphere into the realm of the struggle for dominance of space.