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A sign denouncing nuclear weapons is seen near the White House in Washington Oct. 25, 201

A sign denouncing nuclear weapons is seen near the White House in Washington Oct. 25, 2019. (CNS photo/Tyler Orsburn)

Tom Tracy

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It isn't just the Pentagon taking note of hypersonic weapons development and recent testing reportedly undertaken by China, Russia and North Korea.

Catholic peace activists and policy experts have expressed apprehension that the United States has joined an accelerating rush to perfect new weapons, including those capable of delivering nuclear warheads at speeds that can bypass traditional missile defense systems.

The rapid development of such weapons, they told Catholic News Service, opens the door to a new arms race that will weaken global stability and threaten human life.

"Recent developments are symptomatic of the most precarious nuclear predicament since the height of the Cold War," said Gerard Powers, who directs Catholic peacebuilding studies at the University of Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for

International Peace Studies.

"The new developments in hypersonic weapons are a worrisome continuation of an offensive-defensive arms race that was triggered, in part, by the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002," Powers told Catholic News Service.

The U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty "has not coincided with a move 'to replace mutually assured destruction with mutual cooperation' with Russia, as President (George W.) Bush promised when he announced the withdrawal in 2001," Powers said. "Instead, it has contributed to the very strategic instability and arms race that the U.S. bishops and many others have long warned about."

The U.S., Russia, China and possibly North Korea are believed to have already tested hypersonic missiles that are capable of topping speeds five times the speed of sound. Military analysts believe that China is leading the way in conducting tests, according to a recent account by the Financial Times.

Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Oct. 27 that China's test of a hypersonic weapons system is very concerning and "very close to a Sputnik moment."

The former Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite in 1957, gaining an early upper hand in the space race.

"What we saw was a very significant event of a test of a hypersonic weapon system. It is very concerning," Milley told Bloomberg Television.

Powers and others called for the nuclear powers to step back from a new arms race like the one that emerged during the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

One sign of hope for a cooling off in the global arms race rests in the renewal by the U.S. and Russia of the New START agreement through 2026. It is the sole remaining nuclear arms control treaty between the world's largest nuclear powers. The renewal, however, Powers said, falls short of pursuing deeper cuts in nuclear arsenals and taking a more constructive approach toward disarmament in future negotiations.

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Powers also pointed to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops as one of the few episcopal conferences to consistently address nuclear weapons issues since the end of the Cold War.

The Vatican also has shared its voice on arms control. Archbishop Gabriele Caccia, the Vatican's nuncio to the U.N., told a committee discussing weapons of mass destruction Oct. 13 that it is time for nuclear stockpiles "to be definitively capped."

Quoting Pope Francis' encyclical "Fratelli Tutti, on Fraternity and Social Friendship," Archbishop Caccia stressed that world leaders should never forget the people who "who have suffered the effects of atomic radiation or chemical attacks."

Jesuit Father Thomas Rausch, professor of theological studies at Loyola Marymount University, said the U.S. bishops' 1983 pastoral letter, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response" remains a benchmark statement addressing war and peace in the nuclear age.

"The bishops pushed for nonviolent strategies to deal with conflict, but conceded that nuclear deterrence was only acceptable as a step toward progressive disarmament," Father Rausch said.

"It seems to me the arms race has continued unabated. We are modernizing our nuclear weapons and we are now joining in this race for hypersonic weapons, so where is the serious efforts for disarmament?" Father Rausch told CNS in response to the news accounts about the Chinese tests and the U.S. development of a new generation of ballistic-missile submarines, the Columbia class.

"I think we lived with greater anxiety during the Cold War — we have other worries at the moment — but I think there is a new arms race going on right now as nations spend billions of dollars developing their weapons and even nuclear weapons," Father Rausch said.

Father Rausch credited Pope Francis for continuing to call attention on the need for greater global peacemaking and multilateralism, "which is an important thing and from Catholic social teaching point of view. We think we can go it alone on poverty, immigration and peace," he said.

In New York, Mary Yelenick, Pax Christi International's main representative at the U.N. in New York, told CNS that the world is witnessing yet another escalation of the

"perpetual loop of enrichment of military arms contractors" as nuclear-capable nations feel free to respond to perceived increases in the military capabilities of others with even more deadly capabilities of their own.

Yelenick, who attended a 2017 Vatican conference on nuclear weapons and disarmament convened by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, participated in an online webinar Oct. 27 on "nuclear-conventional entanglement and the advent of hypersonic weapons" sponsored by the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation.

She said she believes China is seeking to gain an upper hand against the U.S. to compensate for its smaller nuclear arsenal by developing new and effective ways of evading the missile defense systems.

"China possesses but a small fraction of the nuclear weapons arsenal of the United States or Russia, though possession of even one such weapon creates an existential threat to the world," she said.

Global security won't be enhanced by creating enemies and ratcheting up the many ways and methods of killing each other, she added.

"It cannot be found in pouring more trillions of dollars into the already-bloated coffers of military contractors. It means the elimination of nuclear weapons; it means embracing the lessons this pandemic is teaching us," Yelenick said.

"Surely this pandemic has made it abundantly clear what true security means. It means health care, a safe place to live, sufficient food and clean water."