AI Goes to War. Will the Pentagon's Techno-Fantasies Pave the Way for War with China?

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*On August 28th, **Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks** chose the occasion of a three-day conference organized by the National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA), the arms industry's biggest trade group, to announce the "Replicator Initiative." Among other things, it would involve producing "swarms of drones" that could hit thousands of targets in China on short notice. Call it the full-scale launching of techno-war.*

Her speech to the assembled arms makers was yet another sign that the military-industrial complex (MIC) President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned us about more than 60 years ago,tttttttttttttttttttttttttttt is still alive, all too well, and taking a new turn. Call it the MIC for the digital age.

Hicks described the goal of the Replicator Initiative this way:

> "To stay ahead [of China], we're going to create a new state of the art… leveraging attritable, autonomous systems in all domains which are less expensive, put fewer people at risk, and can be changed, upgraded, or improved with substantially shorter lead times… We'll counter the PLA's [People's Liberation Army's] with mass of our own, but ours will be harder to plan for, harder to hit, and harder to beat."

Think of it as artificial intelligence (AI) goes to war — and oh, that word "attritable," a term that doesn't exactly roll off the tongue or mean much of anything to the average taxpayer, is pure Pentagonese for the ready and rapid replaceability of systems lost in combat. Let's explore later whether the Pentagon and the arms industry are even capable of producing the kinds of cheap, effective, easily replicable techno-war systems Hicks touted in her speech. First, though, let me focus on the goal of such an effort: confronting China.

Target: China

However one gauges China's appetite for military conflict — as opposed to relying more heavily on its increasingly powerful political and economic tools of influence — the Pentagon is clearly proposing a military-industrial fix for the challenge posed by Beijing. As Hicks's speech to those arms makers suggests, that new strategy is going to be grounded in a crucial premise: that any future technological arms race will rely heavily on the dream of building ever cheaper, ever more capable weapons systems based on the rapid development of near-instant communications, artificial intelligence, and the ability to deploy such systems on short notice.

The vision Hicks put forward to the NDIA is, you might already have noticed, untethered from the slightest urge to respond diplomatically or politically to the challenge of Beijing as a rising great power. It matters little that those would undoubtedly be the most effective ways to head off a future conflict with China.

Such a non-military approach would be grounded in a clearly articulated return to this country's longstanding "One China" policy. Under it, the U.S. would forgo any hint of the formal political recognition of the island of Taiwan as a separate state, while Beijing would commit itself to limiting to peaceful means its efforts to absorb that island.

There are numerous other issues where collaboration between the two nations could move the U.S. and China from a policy of confrontation to one of cooperation, as noted in a new paper by my colleague **Jake Werner** of the Quincy Institute: "1) development in the Global South; 2) addressing climate change; 3) renegotiating global trade and economic rules; and 4) reforming international institutions to create a more open and inclusive world order."

Achieving such goals on this planet now might seem like a tall order, but the alternative — bellicose rhetoric and aggressive forms of competition that increase the risk of war — should be considered both dangerous and unacceptable.

On the other side of the equation, proponents of increasing Pentagon spending to address the purported dangers of the rise of China are masters of threat inflation. They find it easy and satisfying to exaggerate both Beijing's military capabilities and its global intentions in order to justify keeping the military-industrial complex amply funded into the distant future.

As **Dan Grazier** of the Project on Government Oversight noted in a December 2022 report, while China has made significant strides militarily in the past few decades, its strategy is "inherently defensive" and poses no direct threat to the United States. At present, in fact, Beijing lags behind Washington strikingly when it comes to both military spending and key capabilities, including having a far smaller (though still undoubtedly devastating) nuclear arsenal, a less capable Navy, and fewer major combat aircraft. None of this would, however, be faintly obvious if you only listened to the doomsayers on Capitol Hill and in the halls of the Pentagon.

But as Grazier points out, this should surprise no one since "threat inflation has been the go-to tool for defense spending hawks for decades." That was, for instance, notably the case at the end of the Cold War of the last century, after the Soviet Union had disintegrated, when then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff **Colin Powell** so classically said:

> "Think hard about it. I'm running out of demons. I'm running out of villains. I'm down to [Cuba's Fidel] Castro and Kim Il-sung [the late North Korean dictator]."

Needless to say, that posed a grave threat to the Pentagon's financial fortunes and Congress did indeed insist then on significant reductions in the size of the armed forces, offering less funds to spend on new weaponry in the first few post-Cold War years. But the Pentagon was quick to highlight a new set of supposed threats to American power to justify putting military spending back on the upswing.

With no great power in sight, it began focusing instead on the supposed dangers of regional powers like Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. It also greatly overstated their military strength in its drive to be funded to win not one but two major regional conflicts at the same time. This process of switching to new alleged threats to justify a larger military establishment was captured strikingly in **Michael Klare's** 1995 [book](#) *Rogue States and Nuclear Outlaws.*

After the 9/11 attacks, that "rogue states" rationale was, for a time, superseded by the disastrous "Global War on Terror," a distinctly misguided response to those terrorist acts. It would spawn [trillions of dollars](#) of spending on wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a global counter-terror presence that included U.S. operations in 85 — yes, 85! — countries, as strikingly [documented](#) by the Costs of War Project at Brown University.
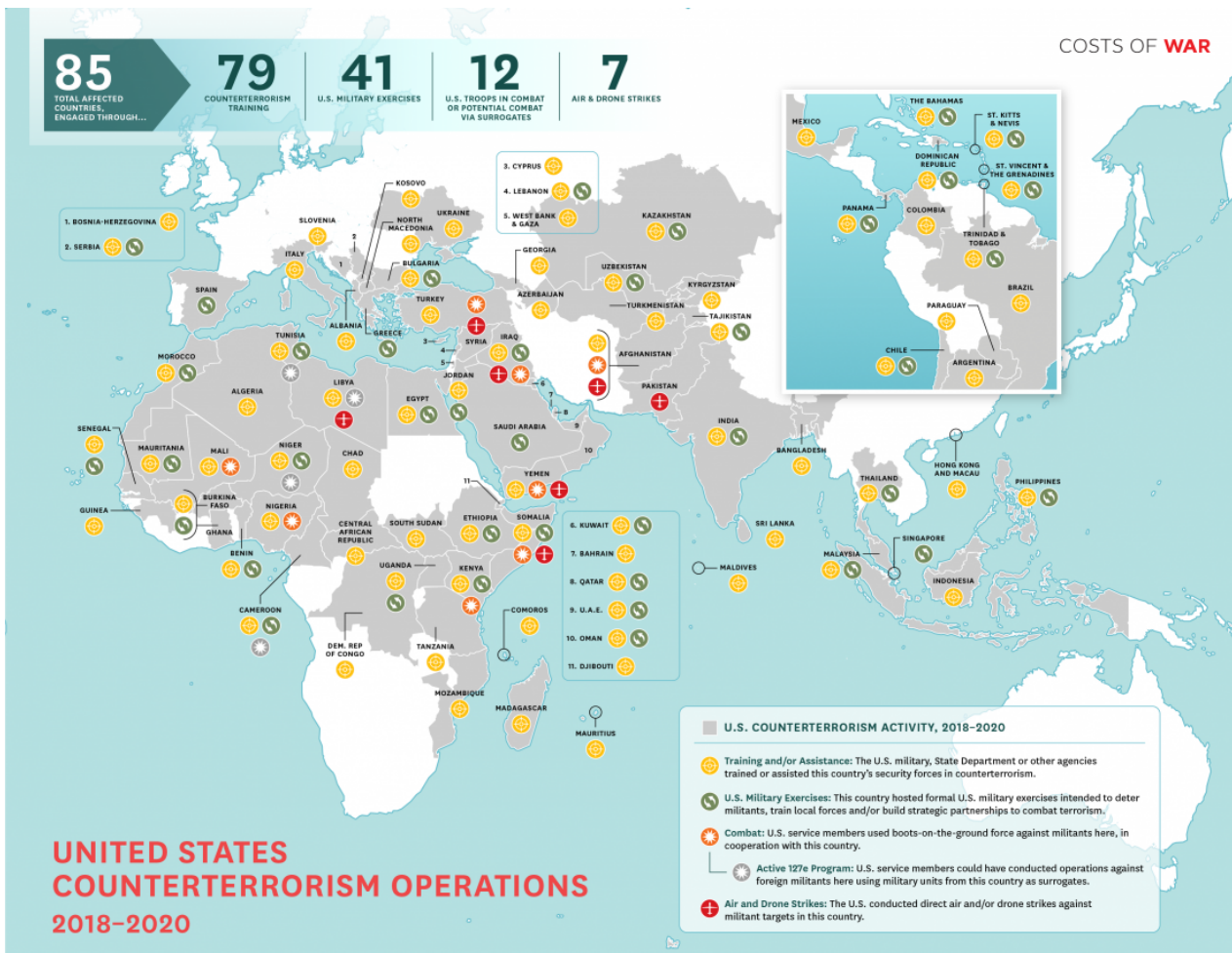
Map from [United States Counterterrorism Operations 2018-2020](#) (2021) by Stephanie Savell (Source: [Costs of War](#))

All of that blood and treasure, including [hundreds of thousands](#) of direct civilian deaths (and [many more](#) indirect ones), as well as thousands of American deaths and painful numbers of devastating physical and psychological injuries to U.S. military personnel, resulted in the installation of unstable or repressive regimes whose conduct — in the case of Iraq — helped

[set the stage](#) for the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) terror organization.

As it turned out, those interventions proved to be anything but either the "[cakewalk](#)" or the [flowering of democracy](#) predicted by the advocates of America's post-9/11 wars. Give them full credit, though! They proved to be a remarkably efficient money machine for the denizens of the military-industrial complex.

Constructing "the China Threat"

As for China, its status as the threat du jour gained momentum during the Trump years. In fact, for the first time since the twentieth century, the Pentagon's 2018 defense strategy document targeted "great power competition" as the wave of the future.

One particularly influential document from that period was the report of the congressionally mandated [National Defense Strategy Commission](#). That body critiqued the Pentagon's strategy of the moment, boldly claiming (without significant backup information) that the Defense Department was not planning to spend *enough* to address the military challenge posed by great power rivals, with a primary focus on China.

The commission proposed increasing the Pentagon's budget by 3% to 5% above inflation for years to come — a move that would have pushed it to an unprecedented [$1 trillion](#) or more within a few years. Its report would then be extensively cited by Pentagon spending boosters in Congress, most notably former Senate Armed Services Committee Chair **James Inhofe** (R-OK), who used to literally [wave it](#) at witnesses in hearings and ask them to pledge allegiance to its dubious findings.

That 3% to 5% real growth figure [caught on](#) with prominent hawks in Congress and, until the recent chaos in the House of Representatives, spending did indeed fit just that pattern. What has not been much discussed is [research](#) by the Project on Government Oversight showing that the commission that penned the report and fueled those spending increases was heavily weighted toward individuals with ties to the arms industry.

Its co-chair, for instance, served on the board of the giant weapons maker Northrop Grumman, and most of the other members had been or were advisers or consultants to the industry, or worked in think tanks heavily funded by just such corporations. So, we were never talking about a faintly objective assessment of U.S. "defense" needs.

Beware of Pentagon "Techno-Enthusiasm"

Just so no one would miss the point in her NDIA speech, Kathleen Hicks [reiterated](#) that the proposed transformation of weapons development with future techno-war in mind was squarely aimed at Beijing. "We must," she said, "ensure the PRC leadership wakes up every day, considers the risks of aggression and concludes, 'today is not the day' — and not just today, but every day, between now and 2027, now and 2035, now and 2049, and beyond... Innovation is how we do that."

The notion that advanced military technology could be the magic solution to complex security challenges runs directly against the actual record of the Pentagon and the arms industry over the past five decades. In those years, supposedly "revolutionary" new systems like the [F-35](#)combat aircraft, the Army's [Future Combat System](#) (FCS), and the Navy's [Littoral Combat Ship](#) have been notoriously plagued by cost overruns, schedule delays, performance problems, and maintenance challenges that

have, at best, severely limited their combat capabilities. In fact, the Navy is already [planning to retire](#) a number of those Littoral Combat Ships early, while the whole FCS program was [canceled](#)outright.

In short, the Pentagon is now betting on a complete transformation of how it and the industry do business in the age of AI — a long shot, to put it mildly.

But you can count on one thing: the new approach is likely to be a gold mine for weapons contractors, even if the resulting weaponry doesn't faintly perform as advertised. This quest will not be without political challenges, most notably finding the many billions of dollars needed to pursue the goals of the Replicator Initiative, while staving off lobbying by producers of existing big-ticket items like aircraft carriers, bombers, and fighter jets.

Members of Congress will [defend](#) such current-generation systems fiercely to keep weapons spending flowing to major corporate contractors and so into key congressional districts. One solution to the potential conflict between funding the new systems touted by Hicks and the costly existing programs that now feed the titans of the arms industry: jack up the Pentagon's already massive budget and head for that trillion-dollar peak, which would be the highest level of such spending since World War II.

The Pentagon has long built its strategy around supposed technological marvels like the "[electronic battlefield](#)" in the Vietnam era; the "[revolution in military affairs](#)," first touted in the early 1990s; and the precision-guided munitions praised since at least the 1991 Persian Gulf war. It matters little that such wonder weapons have never performed as advertised.

For example, a detailed Government Accountability Office [report](#) on the bombing campaign in the Gulf War found that "the claim by DOD [Department of Defense] and contractors of a one-target, one-bomb capability for laser-guided munitions was not demonstrated in the air campaign where, on average, 11 tons of guided and 44 tons of unguided munitions were delivered on each successfully destroyed target."

When such advanced weapons systems can be made to work, at enormous cost in time and money, they almost invariably prove of limited value, even against relatively poorly armed adversaries (as in Iraq and Afghanistan in this century). China, a great power rival with a modern industrial base and a growing arsenal of sophisticated weaponry, is another matter. The quest for decisive military superiority over Beijing and the ability to win a war against a nuclear-armed power should be (but isn't) considered a fool's errand, more likely to spur a war than deter it, with potentially disastrous consequences for all concerned.

Perhaps most dangerous of all, a drive for the full-scale production of AI-based weaponry will only increase the likelihood that future wars could be fought all too disastrously without human intervention. As Michael Klare pointed out in a [report](#) for the Arms Control Association, relying on such systems will also magnify the chances of technical failures, as well as misguided AI-driven targeting decisions that could spur unintended slaughter and decision-making without human intervention. The potentially disastrous malfunctioning of such autonomous systems might, in turn, only increase the possibility of nuclear conflict.

It would still be possible to rein in the Pentagon's techno-enthusiasm by slowing the development of the kinds of systems highlighted in Hicks's speech, while creating international rules of the road regarding their future development and deployment. But the time to start pushing back against yet another misguided "techno-revolution" is now, before

automated warfare increases the risk of a global catastrophe. **Emphasizing new weaponry over creative diplomacy and smart political decisions is a recipe for disaster in the decades to come**. There has to be a better way.

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