

Pentagon Developing AI Drone Swarms to ‘Deter’ China

A top US admiral said the weapon could create a “hellscape” for Chinese forces

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The US military is devising a new system designed to field thousands of drones controlled by artificial intelligence, deputy Pentagon chief Kathleen Hicks said on Wednesday, voicing hopes the tech would help to overcome Beijing’s “advantage in mass.”

Speaking at the yearly Defense News conference in Arlington, Virginia, Hicks [outlined](#) the Pentagon’s new “Replicator Initiative,” which aims to develop a fleet of low-cost, AI-powered drones that will operate in ‘swarms’ in the air, land and sea.

“With Replicator, we’re beginning with all-domain, attritable autonomy, or ADA2, to help us overcome the PRC’s advantage in mass: more ships, more missiles, more forces,” she said, adding that the military plans to deploy the drones “at a scale of multiple thousands, in multiple domains, within the next 18-to-24 months.”

The official did not specify costs for the new project, but insisted the Pentagon would not draw any additional funds from Congress. Instead, she said Replicator would use “existing funding, existing programming lines, and existing authorities,” although she offered few other details.

While Hicks said conflict with China “is neither imminent nor inevitable,” she went on to stress the need for “deterrence” against the People’s Republic – including “across the Taiwan Strait,” in Beijing’s back yard.

“Our goal always is to deter, because competition does not mean conflict. We must 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, now and for the

foreseeable future," she continued.

The Pentagon deputy proposed several potential uses for the new drone system – including for surveillance and reconnaissance, missile defense, logistics support, and combat itself – saying the UAVs could be deployed in “constellations” or “flocks” to overwhelm enemy defenses.

Hicks first [unveiled](#) the Replicator program at another military conference in Washington, DC last month, where she told attendees the Pentagon would “counter the PLA mass with mass of our own.” At the same event, US Indo-Pacific Command head Admiral John Aquilino said the military is seeking the capability to identify and strike 1,000 targets in 24 hours, adding that the drone system would create a “hellscape” for Chinese troops in the event of a conflict.

Earlier this year, the US, UK, and Australian militaries held a “capabilities trial” to demonstrate new AI-powered drone systems, which were used as a “collaborative swarm to detect and track military targets,” the Pentagon said. While it is unclear exactly how artificial intelligence will factor into the Replicator program, the three allies have placed increasing focus on Beijing in the Indo-Pacific, repeatedly pledging to deploy new military capabilities in the region to counter China.

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