Wars of Imaginaries? Sino-American Strategic Competition and U.S. Practices of Loitering Munition Development

This paper brings recent advances in critical security studies and Science and Technology scholarship into greater dialogue with the more established International Relations (IR) literature on military change to highlight the role that shared social "imaginaries" of war can play in mediating how shifts in the external threat environment impact the development and fielding of new military technologies. This intervention helps address two shortcomings within existing IR accounts of military change: first, an inattention to the geopolitical animators of technological design practices within recent Critical Security Studies and Science and Technology scholarship; second, the calls for a more radical 'critical turn' in the study of military innovation that reaches beyond positivist explanatory models. Drawing from a range of primary and secondary sources, these insights are developed through a case-study analysis of the evolution of the U.S. Department of Defense's practices of developing and fielding loitering munitions since its earliest experiments with these technologies during the 1970s. This analysis spans four different strategic contexts: (1) the (late) Cold War; (2) the 'unipolar moment' during the 1990s; (3) the Global War on Terror; and (4) the Trump administration's institutionalisation of great power competition as the primary concern in U.S. national security. This paper argues that whilst the recent strategic focus on Sino-American strategic competition has impacted how loitering munitions are designed and what battlefield roles they are envisioned as having, these changes have been bounded within more durable shared "imaginaries" about how wars ought to and could be fought. In addition to extending the empirical study of loitering munitions as a key domain of Sino-American strategic competition, this paper thus makes a wider contribution to IR scholarship by highlighting the importance of further research into the social construction and implications of technological design practices.

What discipline or branch of humanities or social sciences do you identify yourself with?

IR

If you are submitting an Open Panel proposal, have you included all four abstracts in attachment?

Yes, I have included all required information (see below).

Are you a PhD student or early-career researcher?

No

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