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What's Got You So Worried? The Replicator Initiative and US Techno-Anxieties in an Age of Great Power Competition

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Focusing on the case of the Replicator Initiative, first announced in September 2023, this paper (re)examines the drivers behind the Pentagon's push to accelerate the development and deployment of AI systems in support of its focus on great power competition with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Despite experimenting with AI associated technologies since the 1950s, it has only been since the institutionalization of great power competition as the focus of American defense planning during the first Trump administration that "attributable" autonomous systems have been prioritized in the Pentagon's military innovation efforts. This paper generates new insights into this apparent puzzle by drawing from the International Relations (IR) literatures on military innovation, emotions, and ontological security. This provides a framework for developing the study of techno-anxiety as a constitutive feature of American foreign and security policy - one that is mirrored by, but analytically distinct from, the techno-opportunism highlighted in many existing accounts. Through this intervention, this study traces how American military anxieties about AI extend beyond fears of "killer robots" to encompass a broader set of geopolitical and affective concerns about the future—specifically, apprehensions about the unknowable effects of technological development on the combat effectiveness of the American military, the durability of the rules-based international order, and existing understandings of American national identity. These findings suggest that the Replicator Initiative is not merely intended to deter a potential PRC military attack on Taiwan by 2027. It is also rooted in a deep unease about what the rapid pace of technological change could mean for America's place in the world and perception of self.

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International Relations

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No

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