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Conceptualising Remote Warfare: The Past, Present, and Future

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Introduction

On 28 February and 1 March 2019 the Remote Warfare Programme and the authors held a two-day conference on remote warfare. We had three goals when organising this event:

- to provide a forum for a more holistic study of remote warfare;
- to promote greater dialogue between different stakeholder communities working in or researching remote warfare;
- and to encourage reflection on the recent debates on remote warfare.

Our goal was to lay the groundwork for a richer understanding of the past, present, and future of remote warfare to help better inform academics and practitioners.

This essay captures the beginning of this conversation. It addresses the three major questions asked in our call for papers:

- What is remote warfare?
- What are the historical roots of remote warfare?
- What is the future of remote warfare?[1]

Our analysis is selective, and we do not offer an exhaustive summary of the entire conference. Podcasts are available on most of the panels, and we did not wish to reproduce information which is available for you to listen to elsewhere.[2] To this end, this essay also aims to stimulate the development of remote warfare scholarship by identifying gaps within the conference proceedings. Some potential areas for future research are listed in the conclusion.

What is Remote Warfare?

Our conference was organised around existing debates that speak to a perceived shift in the character of warfare in the twenty-first century. According to some, there is "a deep and widespread feeling that war has entered a new era, significantly different from what we have known in the past".[3] In defining this shift, scholars have entered into what Jolle Demmers and Lauren Gould have labelled "something of a coining contest" as they grapple with "the spatial and temporal reconfiguration of war" in the contemporary era.[4] Remote warfare forms part of this larger debate, although its exact relationship to liquid warfare,[5] proxy warfare,[6] surrogate warfare,[7] and vicarious warfare[8] remains unclear.

As it relates to some of the specific practices of remote warfare, drone warfare was a major theme of our conference.[9] Serious questions remain regarding the purported precision of drone strikes, at least as it relates to civilian causalities.[10] These, in turn, have generated legal and humanitarian concerns.[11] When coupled with the use of other remote warfare practices, drones have contributed toward what some see as the "myth" that "it is possible to do remote warfare cleanly".[12]

The discussion of drones was also related to a broader discussion about the of the "intimacies" of remote warfare which was another major theme of our conference.[13] Several studies have examined the perspectives of drone operators, including conference participant Alex Holder.[14]Peter Lee, who embedded with UK drone pilots as part of his research, has written in detail about the "distance paradox" which drone operators face. The very same technology which allows MQ-9 Reaper pilots to fly the craft from thousands of miles away has also compressed the emotional and psychological distance between drone operators and their targets to a level comparable to World War One fighter pilots.[15] The psychological challenges experienced by drone operators have also been previously studied by Joseph Chapa, who argued that they have generated new forms of military sacrifice and ethics.[16]

Somewhat paradoxically, however, as warfare has become more "intimate" for some, it has become increasingly distant for others. This seems to be as true for drones as other types of warfare. Malte Riemann has previously argued that the use of private military security contractors has reshaped modes of remembrance, duty, and sacrifice, thereby making war appear less visible within democratic societies.[17] The study of remote warfare therefore raises important questions about who pays the costs of warfare in democratic societies, and what this means for the accountability and oversight of the use of military force.[18] Likewise, as Yvonni Efstathiou of the International Institute for Strategic Studies explored, it also raises the question of whether there is a relationship between regime type and the use and non-use of remote warfare.[19]

In fact, one major theme of our conference was the use of other practices of military intervention which, like drones, have enabled Western states to manage security challenges overseas from a greater strategic distance. As Foeke Postma of Pax for Peace noted in his post-conference summary, "[d]rones are used in concert with special forces, private military corporations, local armed groups, the transfer of arms, the sharing of intelligence, and other forms of security assistance".[20] This broadened focus on the practices of remote warfare is not new, and does not mean that the debate on drones is now redundant. From the term's recent inception, the practices of remote warfare were recognised to consist of more than drones.[21]

Many at the conference emphasised the importance of including building partner capacity operations in this debate, including Martijn van der Vorm and Ivor Wiltenburg of the Netherlands Defence Academy, CIVIC's Dan Mahanty, and the Oxford Research Group's Emily Knowles and Abigail Watson. According to Mahanty, partnered operations have "come to represent the preferred method of achieving national security objectives for the United States and several European countries".[22] Similarly, van der Vorm and Wiltenburg argued that "[w]hen large scale deployments are practically unfeasible or politically unpalatable, interventions focus on assisting local partners with enhancing their security forces in order to help them

resolve security issues without large commitments".[23] Despite the continuing uncertainties about the military effectiveness of these practices, many areas in the world – such as the Sahel and Horn of Africa – have seen an increase in these partner-building activities, as multiple conference participants discussed.[24]

Moving forward, one major area of research identified at the conference was the need to amplify the voices of the communities in which remote warfare operations are conducted. Whilst there are obvious data limitation problems given the difficulties in conducting fieldwork in these countries, examining the non-Western experience of remote warfare offers the prospect of a more comprehensive analysis of its costs, consequences, and effectiveness. As Norma Rossi and Malte Riemann argued, by destabilising the temporality and spatiality of war,[25] remote warfare has undermined the traditional dichotomy between war and peace. One effect of this has been to create "privileged spaces of exception" in Western states where the conditions of war are absent.[26] Yet, whilst remote warfare may be "remote" in some aspects from a Western perspective, it is "immediate" and "ever present" for some communities in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.[27]

During the conference, Baraa Shiban and Camilla Molyneux helped bring these currently marginalised voices into clearer focus. Drawing on fieldwork in Yemen, they demonstrated that the harm generated by remote warfare operations must be measured in more than just civilian casualties. These operations also have significant economic, educational, and mental health implications for impacted communities.[28] On this theme of non-Western experiences, Anicée Van Engeland has also begun to "decolonise" the study of remote warfare by examining how its practices are understood in Islam and how they may reinforce perceptions of "otherness".[29]Both of these studies make particularly timely contributions to the wider debate on the character and implications of remote warfare.

What are the historical roots of remote warfare?

The concept of remote warfare is widely used to "periodise" the current slate of global conflicts ranging from the Middle East and the Sahel to the Horn of Africa. At the conference, it was commonly used as a shorthand to capture the effort by Western states – principally the UK and the US – to move away from the counterinsurgency (COIN) model associated with recent "large footprint" campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. As Paul Schulte has previously argued, for a variety of strategic and political reasons, Western policymakers pledged "never again (to) big interventionary COIN".[30]

According to some at the conference, contemporary practices of remote warfare have their roots in the military campaigns fought by the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War. Emil Archambault, for example, examined the use of strategic and tactical air power during the Vietnam War as a key moment in the history of remote warfare.[31] During the Cold War, the superpowers regularly engaged one another via locally trained and equipped forces partly to reduce the risk of direct confrontation.[32] Some analysts go back further; John Alexander, for instance, traces the modern origins of remote warfare to the British use of airpower during the inter-

war period. It could be argued that the concept has origins in imperial policing operations.[33]

Some of the practices of remote warfare – intelligence sharing, private military contractors, security cooperation, special forces – have roots in the twentieth century (if not before). It will not be difficult for scholars to find historical case studies to document this.[34] Others, such as drones and cyber, are more novel and are the result of more recent technological developments. Can this tension be reconciled, or is the history of remote warfare best studied as a response to the failure of large-scale overseas intervention?

In this respect, it remains unclear how far back we should trace the historical roots of remote warfare beyond Afghanistan and Iraq. It could be, to paraphrase Hew Strachan, that we have generally treated remote warfare as being "'new' because in part we have not been addressing [it] properly".[35] As he reminds us:

The challenge for the historian is much harder than the identification of continuity. That is the easy bit. The next stage is to use that as the bedrock from which to identify what is really new, as opposed to what merely seems to be new, to distinguish the revolutionary and evolutionary from the evanescent and ephemeral.[36]

In his keynote address to our conference, Strachan grounded contemporary practices associated with the "remote warfare" label in a much longer historical trajectory. Without discounting recent political and technological changes, he suggested that the dynamics linking strategy to domestic factors can be traced to the time of Clausewitz, if not before. In a contemporary setting, the strategic "distance" of more limited forms of war must be seen in light of democratic considerations "at home".[37]

What is the future of remote warfare?

As conference participants repeatedly stressed, for the immediate future, remote warfare is here to stay. Notwithstanding a major unforeseen security catastrophe, and despite the Trump administration's renewed emphasis on Great Power rivalry, it is unlikely that Western states will resume large-scale COIN campaigns in the immediate future.

In the longer term, the potential development of autonomous weapons systems (AWS) could change the fundamental character of warfare itself. An autonomous weapon can be broadly defined as "a machine, whether hardware or software, that, once activated, performs some task or function on its own".[38] The development of autonomous weapons have formed a central component of the Third Offset Strategy in the United States which aims to leverage advances in artificial intelligence to offset vulnerabilities elsewhere.[39] Whilst the Ministry of Defence has insisted that "[t]he UK does not possess fully autonomous weapon systems and has no intention of developing them"[40], the UK is investing (if on a much smaller scale and for different reasons) in similar technologies. Robert Clark described how, as part of Exercise Autonomous

Warrior 2018, a British Army Battlegroup conducted four weeks of combat trails and testing with unmanned ground systems on Salisbury Plain.[41] Whilst barriers may still remain to their integration into British Armed Forces, autonomy is likely to become an increasingly important part of combat operations, surveillance, and logistics in the future.[42]

The development of such systems is the subject of considerable controversy. Multiple civil society groups, leading scientists, and some states have called for a pre-emptive ban on such weapons due to ethical and legal considerations.[43] According to Ingvild Bode and Hendrik Huelss, the development of weapon systems with autonomy in their critical functions may create novel logics of appropriateness which challenge the existing norms governing the use of force.[44]Furthermore, as Bode discussed at the conference, the potential development of weapon systems with autonomy in their critical functions raises questions about the issue of meaningful human control in technologically-mediated forms of remote warfare.[45]

Others, however, are more optimistic. Used under the right conditions such systems have potentially "virtuous" uses.[46] Larry Lewis, director of the Centre for Autonomy and Artificial Intelligence, argued that the proper use of machine learning algorithms can help minimise civilian casualties during armed conflict.[47] As he has previously argued:

AI could review imagery and other intelligence to reduce the number of civilians mistakenly identified as combatants. They could monitor areas and provide a double check of existing collateral damage estimates, particularly as things can change over time. AI-driven unmanned systems would allow those systems to take on risk and use tactical patience, which can reduce risk to civilians.[48]

Given the uncertain trajectory concerning the development of autonomous functions, it is difficult to precisely anticipate how they may change the practices and study of remote warfare.

Conclusion

Our conference aimed to lay the groundwork for a richer understanding of the past, present, and future of remote warfare to better inform academics and policymakers. In order to help further develop the study of remote warfare, we have identified a series of potential areas for future research:

What is remote warfare?

- Does remote warfare encompass different conceptualisations of the changing character of warfare, or is it distinct? What is the relationship between remote warfare and the debates on grey-zone warfare, hybrid warfare, liquid warfare, proxy warfare, surrogate warfare, and vicarious warfare?

- Who are the users of remote warfare? Are these exclusively Western democratic states like the UK, the US, and France, or is there a non-Western approach to remote warfare?
- How are remote warfare operations experienced by different communities in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia?

The history of remote warfare:

- How far should we trace the historical roots of remote warfare beyond the end of the counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq?
- Has remote warfare often been treated as a "new" development because its historical roots have not been properly addressed, or does the use of new technological practices, such as drones and cyber warfare, make it genuinely novel?
- How should the historical roots of remote warfare be studied: as a set of practices or as a nexus of technological, security, and political developments?

The future of remote warfare:

- Is remote warfare here to stay? If so, how should we approach elements of change and continuity?
- What consequences would the development of AWS have for the "remoteness", oversight, and practices of contemporary warfare?

Given its breadth and complexity, we recognise that the study of remote warfare is likely to remain fluid for some time. It will continue to be shaped by shifts in the global security landscape *and* the patchwork of different professional, normative, and analytical perspectives of those involved in its study.

This presents both challenges and opportunities. At times, tensions emerge between those focused on the technical and operational dimensions of remote warfare, and those seeking to scrutinise its effects on human security and democratic accountability. All stakeholders would do well to reflect on their own positions in the study of remote warfare. A commitment to open dialogue and analytical reciprocity remains essential if remote warfare scholarship is to continue to grow. For some, "mentioning theory has long been a sure way to make policy makers' eyes glaze over"[49]. As our conference demonstrated, however, theory can add considerable depth to our understanding of the drivers, characteristics, and implications of remote warfare. Likewise, the first-hand experiences and perspectives of the military personnel conducting remote warfare operations are vital if we are to avoid a circular and inaccurate discussion of its practices.[50]

The intellectual and professional pluralism of remote warfare scholarship represents one of its greatest strengths. Participants may face different professional cultures and incentive structures, but the inclusion of diverse voices remains crucial if we are to realise a more holistic understanding of remote warfare. This briefing represents the beginning of this process, not its end, and we hope to organise similar events in the future. As remote warfare scholarship continues to develop, our collective commitment to reaching beyond our professional silos and working collaboratively remains paramount.

Acknowledgements

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Tom Watts is a Teaching Fellow in War and Security at Royal Holloway, University of London with research specialisations in American foreign policy, military assistance programs, and Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems. His PhD thesis asked what the Obama administration's military response against al-Qaeda's regional affiliates in the Arabian Peninsula, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel tells us about the means and goals of contemporary U.S. military intervention in the global south. Working within the historical materialist tradition, it advances a more critical reading of these processes which places military assistance programs and the reproduction of 'closed frontiers and open-doors' at the centre of its analysis.

Rubrick Biegon is an associate lecturer and research administrator in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent. His research interests include US foreign policy, international security and inter-American relations. He is the author of US Power in Latin America: Renewing Hegemony (Routledge, 2017).

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