Interview – Tom Watts

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other young scholars.

Tom Watts is a Teaching Fellow in War and Security at Royal Holloway University. Tom's research interests include American foreign policy, American counterterrorism policy, and the changing practices of Western military intervention in the global south. He is currently researching remote warfare and US security cooperation programmes. Tom was the 2018 winner of the BISA Postgraduate Excellence in Teaching International Studies Prize and the 2017 winner of the University of Kent Social Sciences Seminar Leader Teaching Prize. His thesis on the Obama administration's military response to al-Qaeda's affiliates passed without corrections in January 2019.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

My journey toward researching American foreign policy and the changing practices of Western military intervention in the global south was set in motion by the interplay of chance, events and people. I had originally chosen to study Business Management at university. During my A-levels however, two events happened which have fascinated me ever since: the Global Financial Crisis and Obama's presidential election. During my formative years, the popular narrative on American foreign policy had centered around the idea of a 'New American Century'. The United States, I remember hearing on television during the run up to the Iraq War, was not only an empire, but the most powerful state since Ancient Rome. I was puzzled about how, in the space of less than a decade, the landscape of American foreign and domestic politics could have apparently changed so much. It seemed strange, so I transferred via clearing to a joint honours degree in History and International Relations.

Originally, I had only wanted to study history. As it turned out however, the only way I could feasibly do this was if I also studied International Relations. Perhaps because of this, I was somewhat of a theoretical nomad during my undergraduate degree. It was not until my MA degree at the University of Kent that I began to settle theoretically. This was largely the result of Ruth Blakeley's Terrorism and National Security module, and her book*State Terrorism and Neoliberalism: The North in the South.* From here, I began to engage with more critical, historical materialist approaches to American foreign policy. What attracted me to the scholarship of researchers like Ruth Blakeley, Sam Raphael, Doug Stokes, Alejandro Colás and Richard Saull was its combination of detailed empirical, historically informed study with an examination of larger questions about American power and empire. One of the major aims of PhD was to apply this framework to Obama's presidency, coming as it did after the 'crisis moment' triggered by the Global Financial Crisis and the perceived failures of the Iraq War.

How is security cooperation an instrument of remote warfare?

The United States maintains a complex 'patchwork' of military assistance programmes which it uses to provide military equipment, training and advice to its partners overseas. Security Cooperation encompasses all Department of Defense interactions, programmes and activities with foreign security forces to build relationships that promote US interests; enable partners to provide the US access to territory, infrastructure, and resources; and/or to 'build and apply their capacity and capabilities consistent with US defense objectives'. These programmes, which have both

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military and political dynamics, are a key tool of American policy. As Defense Secretary Robert Gates insisted in 2007, '[a]rguably the most important military component in the War on Terror is not the fighting we do ourselves, but how well we enable and empower our partners to defend and govern themselves'.

Remote warfare is a more elastic term, whose exact meaning is yet to be settled within International Relations scholarship. I understand the term to mean the delegation of the bulk of combat operations on the ground to foreign partners in order to increase the strategic, physical, political distance between Western militaries and the sites of their intervention. If conceptualised properly, I believe that it can provide a more holistic framework for understanding how the United States has recalibrated its entire approach to military intervention in the global south post-Iraq and the Global Financial Crisis. Drones have of course been an important innovation here, but so has the greatly expanded use of Security Cooperation. At the forefront of the debate on remote warfare has been the Remote Warfare Programme. If you haven't read any of their work, I would strongly recommend checking it out. They have published reports on the political, legal and strategic implications of the British use of remote warfare.

As part of the Remote Warfare Programme's Defining Remote Warfare series, myself and Rubrick Biegon have previously written an overview of how Security Cooperation programmes have recently been used as a tool of remote warfare. We have built on this earlier research for a chapter which we are submitting to the Remote Warfare Programme's upcoming E-IR edited collection on remote warfare. We argue that Security Cooperation has been key to how Washington has attempted to manage overseas security challenges within the constraints imposed by the perceived failures of the counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the more recent focus on the return of great power competition. Whilst the 'effectiveness' of Security Cooperation in improving the military capability of foreign security forces has been widely questioned; we nevertheless conclude that greater attention should be given in this debate to how Security Cooperation provides American policymakers at least some means of shaping the security situation on the ground in un-or under-governed states.

Your thesis presents a holistic study of the Obama administration's military response to al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic Maghreb. Can you give us a brief overview of the similarities and differences in these campaigns and the motivations behind them?

The primary aim of my thesis was to critically examine the means, animators and continuity of American counterterrorism operations outside of Afghanistan and Iraq during Obama's presidency. I did so through a structured-focused comparison of the Obama administration's military response to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Shabaab, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Whilst there is a sizeable literature on Obama's foreign and counterterrorism policies, when I began writing my dissertation, much of this debate was empirically focused on what was happening in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Syria. Obama's policies toward these states were of course important and came to define much of the debate on the 'Obama Doctrine'. Nonetheless, I did not necessarily believe that these states were entirely representative of US military intervention in the global south. The 'boots on the ground' occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq were the exception to, rather than the general rule of, these practices. I was interested in what the 2006 Quadrennial Defence Review dubbed, and Maria Ryan has also studied as, "War in countries we are not at war with".

One of the major arguments I made in my thesis was that there was far more to the *means* of U.S. counterterrorism operations outside of Afghanistan and Iraq than a single technological development (drones) and a single practice of statecraft (targeted killings). Security Cooperation programmes, which I have already discussed, were also a major part of how the Obama administration retooled the coercive practices of U.S. military intervention in the global south following the Global Financial Crisis and Iraq War. Whilst there were differences in how Obama's 'small-footprint' approach to counterterrorism was configured, its use was one of the major similarities in the military response to al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. My more recent research on remote warfare is an extension of this.

Another similarity in these campaigns were their goals. I argued that there was more animating the military response to al-Qaeda's affiliates than just counterterrorism and national security concerns. Working within the historical materialist tradition, I traced how al-Qaeda's affiliates also challenged two core practices of American imperialism:

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the reproduction of open-doors and closed frontiers. In doing so, I advanced an alternative perspective on al-Qaeda's challenge to American power 'from below' which teased out its political-economy dimensions.

You recently organised a conference on remote warfare with the Remote Warfare Programme. What did you learn it?

In war, it is said that '*amateurs talk about tactics, but professionals study logistics*'. Organising a large academic conference is somewhat similar, as our four-person team of Abigail Watson, Rubrick Biegon and Megan Karlshøj-Pedersen discovered. Our two-day Conceptualising Remote Warfare Conference, which received generous financial support from the British International Studies Association Foreign Policy Working Group, brought together over sixty stakeholders from academia, civil society, and the military. Our keynote lecture was delivered by Sir Hew Strachan and can be listened to here. Organising an event of this scale requires a lot of coordination, not only between organisers but across funders, host institutions, and participants. Presenters, catering and equipment all need to be in the right place at the right time, and these all have a large logistical footprint. Ultimately, the conference was very well-received. Nonetheless, one of the major lessons I took away from the experience was that there are always going to unforeseen challenges which you need to respond to on the day, regardless of how much you plan ahead.

Intellectually, one of the defining characteristics of our conference was the breadth of debate. To put this into some perspective, the conference was organised around eight themes: (1) theorising remote warfare (2) oversight and accountability (3) building partner capacity (4) the outsourcing of remote warfare (5) issues of legality and transparency (6) the geographies and intimacies of remote warfare (7) the cost and consequences of remote warfare, and (8) artificial intelligence and the future of remote warfare. One of the major aims of the conference was to provide a forum for a more holistic study of remote warfare, and we were very successful in that regard. Remote warfare is a very vibrant area of study, both in terms of its interdisciplinarity and its scale. This added significantly to the richness of our conference.

Another big take away from the conference, which you can read about in more detail in this essay, is that the study of remote warfare will continue to be shaped by shifts in both the global security landscape *and* the patchwork of different professional, normative, and analytical perspectives of those involved in its study. Remote Warfare's epistemic community – what Peter Hass defined as its "network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy relevant knowledge" – is broad. This presents both challenges and opportunities for organising a conference in the way we did. At times, friction emerged between those focused on the technical and operational dimensions of remote warfare and others, particularly those working from more critical perspectives, who scrutinised its effects on human security and democratic accountability. These exchanges speak not only to the vibrancy of the debate on remote warfare, but the unwritten dynamics which shape how contemporary issues of international security are studied.

What are you currently working on?

I am currently working on multiple projects. In addition to the chapter we are co-authoring on Security Cooperation as remote warfare, Rubrick Biegon and I are also currently writing an article examining the continuity in Trump's counterterrorism policy. Working within the historical materialist tradition, we document how the hegemonic imperatives of the American state are key to categorizing and measuring continuity in the US military response to transnational terrorist organisations.

Alongside this, I am also currently working on two single-authored articles which I am hoping to send out for review before September. The first article advances its own conceptualisation of remote warfare and situates it within the larger scholarly debate on the changing character of Western interventionism. This is with the goal of developing a richer understanding of remoteness in war. The second, article examines the role of security cooperation programmes within contemporary American counterterrorism policy and explains their use in relation to the particular geographies of the American empire.

After submitting these articles for review, I am going to begin the process of hopefully turning my thesis into a book.

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After my viva in January, its been refreshing to let this project breathe, and I will also benefit from the new scholarship which is being published on Obama's presidency. Longer term, I am not sure. The period after passing your viva is very liminal; it's a period of both beginning and ends, so let's see.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

The analogy I use to understand the academic job market, paying homage to Susan Strange's research, is Casino Careerism. The supply of new PhD students far outstrips the number of post-doctoral and full-time academic positions which are being created. Only a small percentage of PhD students will end up in a full-time academic jobs. Now, not every newly minted PhD wants a career in academia, but a lot do. Many people will thus work incredibly hard for several years, making significant financial and personal sacrifices, to essentially 'spin the wheel' and end up disappointed. There are of course things which you can do to improve your employability: publish, become involved with grant applications, gain some teaching experience. Yet, even doing these things may not be enough. From what I have been told, securing a full-time academic position is oftentimes being in the 'right-place, at the right time'. The point here is not to be defeatist, and nor should it be read as some clumsy attempt at gatekeeping. Serious attention needs to be given to the underrepresentation of female, BME and working-class academics. Nonetheless, for what it is ultimately worth, the most important piece of advice I would give to young scholars is to approach the PhD as a pathway to multiple careers, not simply academia.

With that in mind, I would also encourage young scholars to approach academia as a team sport rather than a marathon. The UK Higher Education Sector is an increasingly precious space, and it can be very difficult to navigate from a mental health perspective. Many feel under a relentless pressure to not only submit their PhD's, but publish, teach, begin working on grant proposals, develop professional networks and disseminate their research. Whilst some truly exceptional scholars will be capable of doing all of this, for the majority, pursuing all of these things at once is not sustainable. Burnout appears to be a problem at all levels of academia and needs to be guarded against. The more you can collaborate with others, the more you can alleviate some of the pressures you are likely to face. Even if you ultimately chose not to pursue a career in academia, this way, you will also hopefully make many friends along the way.