

New Book – Remote Warfare: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Written by Alasdair McKay

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ALASDAIR MCKAY, FEB 14 2021

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Modern warfare is becoming increasingly defined by distance. Today, instead of deploying large numbers of boots on the ground, many Western and non-Western states have limited themselves to supporting the frontline fighting of local and regional actors. To counter non-state armed groups like Boko Haram, al-Shabaab and Islamic State, states have engaged mostly through the provision of intelligence, training, equipment, airpower and small deployments of special forces. This is remote warfare, the dominant method of military engagement employed by states in the twenty-first century.

However, despite the increasing prevalence of this distinct form of military engagement across Africa, Asia, the Middle East and parts of Europe, it remains understudied as a topic and considerable gaps exist in the academic understanding of it. This, in part, explains why it is also a subject clouded by several dangerous myths. There are assumptions and common narratives in certain political and military spheres that remote warfare is politically risk-free and does not produce significant civilian harm (see Knowles and Watson 2017, 20–28; Walpole and Karlshøj-Pedersen 2019, 2020). This edited volume seeks to start filling those gaps, challenging the dominant narratives and subjecting remote warfare to greater scrutiny.

The chapters in this volume come from papers presented at an academic conference entitled *Conceptualising Remote Warfare: The Past, Present and Future* which was hosted at the University of Kent in April 2019.[1] Co-organised by the Oxford Research Group, an international security think-tank, and the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent, the event brought together a diverse range of participants from various academic disciplines and professional backgrounds, including the military, civil society and non-governmental organisations.

The event was organised to help foster a more holistic understanding of this trend in military intervention; to promote greater dialogue between different research and practitioner communities working in remote warfare; and to encourage reflection on the recent debates surrounding remote warfare. Following three days of presentations and panel discussions, the key takeaways from the symposium were that the intellectual and professional pluralism of 'remote warfare scholarship' is one of its strongest attributes and that the inclusion of diverse viewpoints in debates surrounding its use will be crucial to understanding this phenomenon going forward (Watts and Biegon 2019).

Showcasing some of the conference's intellectual diversity, this book includes contributors from various backgrounds and disciplines who critically engage with the key debates and themes surrounding the use of remote warfare. There are fourteen chapters in the book, which are bound together by three interlocking themes.

The first theme is the opacity surrounding the practices associated with remote warfare and its implications for democratic states. Remote warfare essentially allows military operations to be conducted mostly away from mainstream public and political discussion. But this has serious consequences because it can undermine democratic

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controls designed to hold to account decisions to use force abroad. This also has ramifications in the theatres where remote warfare is conducted. Several of the chapters attend to the lack of transparency and accountability surrounding the use of remote warfare.

The second, and related, theme of the book concerns the long-term implications of remote warfare for peace and stability in states where it is used. Several chapters in the volume demonstrate how, despite occasionally yielding some forms of short-term tactical success, remote warfare can be detrimental to long-term peace and stability in several places where it is employed.

This dovetails into the third theme – the relationship between remote warfare and civilian harm. While remote military interventions are often portrayed as ‘precise’ and ‘surgical’, the various facets of remote warfare can, and often do, lead to civilian casualties. Empowering local partners – who may not have the capacity or sufficient interest in implementing strong protection of civilian mechanisms – and relying on airpower creates significant risks for local populations. Several of the chapters question the belief that it is possible to do remote warfare ‘cleanly.’ They highlight the various consequences that utilising remote warfare can have on civilian populations.

The civilian harm issue in remote warfare is also closely connected to debates about how the growth of technology impacts warfare. The final chapters look at how the dawn of future technologies such as artificial intelligence may shape remote warfare in the years ahead.

Although the book is designed to bring together a wide range of views, it should not be thought of as the ‘encyclopaedia of remote warfare’, covering every case of this phenomenon across time and space. After all, there is only so much that can be done in a text of this kind and there are always interesting angles and case studies left unexplored in every book. Rather, the long-term goal of this book is to create a text that students and scholars can learn from, critically engage with and potentially build upon in future work.

Book structure and chapter summaries

The opening chapter, written by the book’s editors, is intended to serve as a primer on remote warfare and provide some conceptual clarity on the subject. It sketches out an overview of the concept, the broader debates surrounding its use and the problems that this type of engagement can yield. It serves as both an introduction for readers unfamiliar with some of the thematic areas and as a critical analysis.

The chapter by Jolle Demmers and Lauren Gould continues the discussion. It fleshes out the reasons why several liberal democracies have turned to remote warfare as an approach. The authors posit three key reasons for the turn to remote approaches to intervention: democratic risk aversion, technological advancements and the networked character of modern warfare. It then outlines some of the major consequences of this shift. The chapter explores how the secrecy surrounding remote warfare, and the way its practiced, attempts to remove war from public debate and potentially makes states more violent rather than less violent.

The opaque world of intelligence sharing, and the dilemmas the practice yields for states in the contemporary security environment, serves as the focus of Julian Richards’ article. Using the UK in the post-9/11 environment as a case study, the chapter looks at the benefits and pitfalls of intelligence sharing in the current era. It considers how far the benefits to be gained for states with international intelligence sharing relationships outweigh the risks to democratic states and societies.

Transparency and accountability, and their importance in democratic states’ use of force, feature heavily in Christopher Kinsey and Helene Olsen’s chapter on the role of military and security contractors in remote warfare. The article provides an overview of the use of security contractors by states in the contemporary international security environment, the rationales for employing them and the potential problems in doing so. It suggests new ways for states to move forwards when using contractors in the future. The authors highlight why a more open debate surrounding the use of contractors will be essential in the future.

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Norma Rossi and Malte Riemann's chapter also looks at the use of private contractors by states and examines the social and political consequences of this for the countries employing them. The article explores how the use of contractors, and remote warfare more broadly, by states has reshaped modes of remembrance, duty and sacrifice in societies. This has made war appear more distant and less visible within democratic societies.

As noted earlier, the lack of transparency surrounding remote warfare can also have significant impacts on the societies where remote warfare is being conducted. Delina Goxho's chapter focuses on a prominent arena of remote warfare, the Sahel. Goxho explores the interventionist footprints in the region, including the use of remote warfare tactics by the US and France. The article illustrates that the clandestine nature of remote warfare used by intervening states places a strain on local communities in the Sahel, who are ill-informed of military operations in the region. This is having a negative impact on peace and stability in the region. Offering some hope for the future, the chapter explores how the European Union could serve as a peace broker in the Sahel.

The realities of remote warfare for civilian communities on the ground are exposed further in Baraa Shiban and Camilla Molyneux's chapter. The chapter focuses on Yemen, where a civil war and several forms of intervention are ongoing. Drawing on their fieldwork in the country, which involved interviewing local populations, they illustrate the harm generated by remote warfare operations, in the form of US Special Forces raids and drone strikes, in the country.

The crisis in Yemen and the broader issue of civilian harm in remote warfare also serves as the prompt for Daniel Mahanty's chapter. Mahanty examines the dangers for civilian populations that can stem from relying on strategic partners. The chapter then sets out a summary of a framework, developed by the Center for Civilians in Conflict, for how militaries such as the US might assess the potential for human rights violations and civilian casualties when undertaking security cooperation activities with partners.

Moving the focus to the Horn of Africa, Rubrick Biegon and Tom Watts' chapter continues the discussion on security cooperation by examining US capacity building activities in the region. By examining the use of 'advise, train and assist' missions by the US in parts of the African continent, with a particular focus on Somalia, the chapter unearths how security co-operation seeks to fulfil both security and political goals. Focusing on this aspect of security cooperation, the authors believe, can help us better understand why security cooperation is still undertaken by the US in the continent despite the high-profile military failures it has caused.

For the past decade, the conflict in Syria has been a prominent arena of remote warfare, where several international actors have supported local forces and militias. Sinan Hatahet's contribution discusses the effects that the use of remote warfare has had on the state and the region. As Hatahet shows, the use of these activities by intervening forces has contributed heavily to creating distrust between domestic and international actors and destabilising the region with disastrous consequences for civilian populations.

While supporting local forces may well be a weapon of choice for states moving forward, drones will undoubtedly play an important role in states' overseas activities. Their use will continue to present all manner of political, legal and moral questions. Jennifer Gibson's paper examines the case of Faisal bin ali Jaber, a Yemeni engineer whose innocent brother-in-law and nephew were killed in a US drone strike. This strike was undertaken using a targeting algorithm which uses metadata to help decide who is a target. The chapter addresses some of the troubling questions that arise as big data and remote warfare converge. It then examines how using algorithms to make life and death targeting decisions relates to international humanitarian law, particularly the protection of civilians in conflict.

As the technology evolves, broader questions arise around how this may impact human control over the use of force. Joseph Chapa's chapter analyses the relationship between armed drones and human judgment, specifically as it pertains to targeting decisions. Drawing upon interviews with armed drone pilots, Chapa argues that, though the physical distance between aircrew and the targets on the ground presents difficult challenges, pilots can still apply human judgment when undertaking strikes. The chapter also warns how the advent of new technologies such as artificial intelligence could challenge this capacity for human judgement in remote warfare.

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Following the chapters by Chapa and Gibson, Ingvild Bode and Hendrik Huelss' contribution investigates the potentially game-changing role of artificial intelligence in autonomous weapons systems (AWS). The authors argue that the development of weapon systems with greater autonomy may challenge the existing norms governing the use of force. This could have highly problematic political and ethical consequences.

To bring these issues together, the book's conclusion opens up a further discussion of what the future of remote warfare might look like. Here, the chapter explores how the rise of great power competition may influence the use of remote warfare and then factors in how the recent COVID-19 pandemic may impact matters. The conclusion then points to several directions that researchers could explore in future studies of remote warfare.

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[1] Podcasts of the event panel discussions can be listened to here <https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/pages/category/event-podcast-conceptualising>

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