

The Use of “Remote” Warfare: A Strategy to Limit Loss and Responsibility

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When referring to “remote” warfare this paper refers to both the usage of drones and the growing trend “in which countries like the United Kingdom choose to support local and regional forces on the front lines rather than deploying large numbers of their own troops” (Knowles and Watson, June 2018). Following long and costly military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Western military powers such as the United Kingdom and the United States have adapted their defense and security strategies to minimize losses and ensure political survival for those in power. There are incentives for governments to quell terrorism and democratize weakly governed countries that threaten the fine balance of the state of International Security. It is no longer politically and socially viable in Western societies to place large numbers of troops on the ground because of the public backlash it is likely to cause. Politicians, however, want to be able to claim some responsibility for the peace that the world or their country is experiencing at any point in time, so they needed to reconsider their approaches to national defense and security. The increase in the usage of remote warfare as a legitimate strategy of warfare by big western governments is one such strategy. A consequence of the use of remote warfare will likely be an increase in proxy wars in the Middle East and elsewhere as western governments become entangled in the ethnic conflicts of other states. As militaries become more professional and specialized in their operations, the maintenance of remote warfare becomes easier because a “lighter footprint” is needed to do so—less, but more specialized troops will have to be present in the country in which the conflict is taking place (Knowles and Watson, June 2018). This can also be achieved by maintaining air superiority using drones.

The United Kingdom has invested in not only research on remote warfare but also into its application in the Middle East and elsewhere (Knowles and Watson, July 2018). The “remoteness” that is referred to when speaking about the support of foreign regimes or the usage of drones to minimize risk is something that by definition precludes the deployment of large numbers of a country’s own ground troops and that a country’s military planners and policymakers are one step removed from the frontline of the conflict (Knowles and Watson, May 2018). Western powers have relied heavily upon fighting forces like the “Iraqi National Army, the Kurdish Peshmerga, or the Royal Saudi Airforce who have shouldered the bulk of the frontline fighting in contemporary theatres” (Knowles and Watson, May 2018). What is important to consider is that remote warfare in terms of the direct or indirect support of foreign regimes or militaries, state or non-state, has been a strategy of war since antiquity (Knowles and Watson, May 2018). Referring to more recent events, during the Cold War, proxy wars were fought by allies that were armed and supported by each superpower. These proxy wars enabled the superpowers to clash indirectly and one crucial element of these proxy wars was that they occurred below the threshold that called for nuclear retaliation (Knowles and Watson, May 2018). This indicates that proxy wars and “remote warfare” has been used to limit losses and ensure political survival for quite some time and is by no means a new concept.

Drone warfare is also not necessarily a new concept. The first “drone” aircrafts were radio-controlled biplanes intended as bombers developed during WWI (Gusterson, 2016a). While these were both inaccurate and unreliable, development continued and in the 1930s the Royal Air Force developed a radio-controlled version of their Tiger Moth biplane for target practice without killing pilots. They called it the Queen Bee and the word “drone” seems to have had its origins in this name. Twelve “drones” were developed and even painted with black bee-like stripes on their tails (Gusterson, 2016a). The first time drones were used for surveillance purposes was in the 1960s by the U.S. Military, these drones, unlike the drones of today were preprogrammed and jet powered (Gusterson, 2016a). While

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the development of these weapons started in the early 20th century, per Gusterson (2016b), their regular usage has only been in effect for the last decade and a half.

“In the decade and a half since the United States started using weaponized drones, they have already begun to catalyze changes in the nature of war. Drones are redefining what it means to be a combatant, reshaping the sensory experience of war, and leveraging changes in operational tactics and military ethics.” (2016b)

As Gusterson states, the usage of drones has redefined the meaning of war and what it means to be a combatant. Trained drone pilots can be present at a base in the United States on home soil but be playing an active role in a very real war in the Middle East. The argument of this paper is by no means that the pilots or controllers of these remote drones are escaping responsibility for their actions but rather that the employment of technologies such as remote drone warfare and “remote warfare” are strategies to minimize both the casualties and political risks involved with putting boots on the ground in a foreign country. This paper will thus argue that the employment of remote warfare and drone technology as legitimate strategies of warfare in the 21st century indicates the unpopularity of war and the shift towards policies that minimize the political and physical risk that regimes like the United States and the United Kingdom face when engaging in conflicts on foreign soil. The paper answers the question posed at the beginning by analyzing the shift away from transparency that occurred with the rise in usage of specifically drone warfare. The paper problematizes the shift away from conventional warfare to an era of remote assassination. As Gusterson states, “Drone strikes generally take place on the edge of American public awareness” (Gusterson, 2016a). Indicating that very few Americans are actually aware of the actions of their military regarding the usage of drone technology in conflicts across the globe, representing a shift away from transparency. The shift from conventional warfare to remote warfare, by any means, signifies a shift away from war towards “justified” assassination for the sake of less political responsibility and loss of life.

Analysis

The lack of transparency relating to the use of remote drone technology in the United States became apparent under the Obama administration and was frustrating to even those who considered themselves a part of the program of drone warfare. For example, Harold Koh, the Yale Law School dean, who became one of the principal architects for the government’s legal justifications for targeted killings, complained in a speech after his resignation as a legal advisor to the State Department about the Obama administration’s “persistent and counterproductive lack of transparency” which he believed was responsible for “a growing perception that the [drone] program is not lawful and necessary, but illegal, unnecessary, and out of control” (Gusterson, 2016b). What is important regarding the use of drones in the post 9/11 world is that Obama presented drones as a key technology in the struggle against a new kind of adversary. Referring to terrorists, who do not fight on regular battlefields, but hide in remote places beyond the normal reach of the military, Obama pointed out that, “They take refuge in remote tribal regions. They hide in caves and walled compounds. They train in empty deserts and rugged mountains” (Gusterson, 2016b). Indicating that a new strategy of war was needed to conquer this new enemy. The use of drones was also not confined to a battlefield in one specific country because the enemy was “a stateless enemy, prone to shifting operations from country to country” (Gusterson, 2016b). Which then, in turn, required, the United States to fight a war against a non-state entity in multiple states, which poses a slew of legal implications. The Obama administration presented drone strikes as a “minimalist, restrained, judicious way of dealing with threats—a scalpel rather than a hammer—compared to the blunt force often used by the George W. Bush administration” (Gusterson, 2016b). This “minimalist, restrained, judicious” way of dealing with threats limit the amount of responsibility that the acting government faces for collateral damage incurred during the conflict in regard to International Humanitarian Law, a Law that many invoke as justification for their involvements in the conflicts in question. Shalini Satkunanandan adds,

“He [Obama] distinguishes between a potentially endless war threatened by conventional (non-drone) approaches to killing or otherwise disabling high-level terrorists, on the one hand, and the discrete tasks of targeted drone-killing of high-level terrorists, on the other” (2015).

The Obama administration of the United States of America thus posed remote drone warfare as a solution to the apparently endless war threatened by conventional approaches to neutralizing high-level terrorists, this illustrates

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how remote warfare tactics and technology is used for political survival as a political tool, not just a military one.

What motivates the use of remote warfare? Roberto Bonfatti would argue that economic reasons motivate states to intervene in foreign conflicts when he articulates, “First, the Western countries did not intervene at random around the world, but rather tended to focus on specific areas, often called their “spheres of influence” (Bonfatti, 2017). It is thus relevant to bring into question where Western powers like the United States and the United Kingdom intervene. Bonfatti (2017) argues that there is an inherent economic reason for intervention rather than just a humanitarian reason or purely for the sake of national security. Reasoning comparable to that of Bonfatti engages with realism as economic power is one of the key forms of power that realism as a theory regarding international relations deals with. The military support of a regime that promises future economic gains for the attacking or supporting country utilizing remote warfare seems like a utopian situation. The promise of minimal losses during war because of the use of remote warfare and the promise of future economic gains is an attractive proposition and could be the motivation behind some of the world’s remote warfare interventions. However, evidence suggests that drone and remote warfare has picked up during the Global War on Terror, rather than being specifically motivated by economic concerns in, for instance, ethnic conflicts or instability within weak democratic states. This paper does not negate the possibility that as Bonfatti (2017) argues, the frequency of attacks increases when there are economic incentives for the nation utilizing remote warfare to stabilize the region in question. One could view the use in conflict of remote drone technology in Afghanistan (a front of the Global War on Terror) as an indication of the purpose that remote warfare serves. In 2012, the usage of drones in bombing campaigns in Afghanistan was particularly heavy, double that of 2011, this period correlates directly with the United States decreasing the number of troops on the ground (Gusterson, 2016a). This indicates that militaries feel confident having fewer boots on the ground when they employ remote drone technology, thus minimizing the risk they face of casualties during conflict. When looking at recent conflicts, such as those in Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan, the United States of America did not deploy large numbers of ground troops like they did in, for example, the Gulf War. The wars in Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan were also not classified as formal wars, but the United States saw Muslim extremist militant operations in them that they wanted to destroy (Gusterson, 2016a). The strikes against Muslim extremists in Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan were not criticized nor supported by the United States’ European allies, who, in the past, “vigorously criticized the Bush administration for asserting the unilateral right to use force against terrorists in countries outside Afghanistan,” they have mostly looked the other way (Aslam, 2016). In International Relations the actions of great powers are assessed by their direct effects or consequences. Great Powers are responsible for the consequences of their actions if they intentionally caused them, this connects with the issue of drone warfare and remote warfare because these are intended actions and thus any mishap that takes place holds the entity responsible, accountable for the consequences (Hasian, 2016). There is still little certainty over the legal implications of the side-effects of military actions. One example of this is the great number of terrorists that fled the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan to seek refuge from drones in cities like Karachi, where they are now harming individuals in these new locations. Marouf Arif Hasian asks,

“who bears responsibility for the harm brought to civilians by these dislocated terrorists? Analysis from the perspective of the theoretical framework, constructed and applied here, suggests that even if the US may claim not to have directly intended such an outcome, it still shares some responsibility for the harm to innocent civilians” (2016).

This indicates that remote warfare does still hold those accountable, responsible for their actions, whether intended or not, which is important in an era where it is implemented regularly as a legitimate strategy of war.

In the last 15 years, there has been a significant rise in the usage of drones in conflicts worldwide, one indicator of the shift would be figures relating to the United States Air Force, who presently sees 50 percent of its pilots-in-training as drone pilots while the proportion of drone aircraft in the U.S. fleet rose from 5 percent in 2005 to 31 percent in 2012 (Gusterson, 2016a). One must consider what drove this significant rise, is it the lesser cost of drones in comparison to fighter jets, the lesser responsibility, and threat to loss of life that they carry, or a combination of both? This paper would argue that it is a combination of both. Further strengthening the position of drones in modern conflicts, the United States, specifically, vehemently defends their usage of drones because of their supposed efficacy as CIA director John Brennan states,

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“By targeting an individual terrorist or small numbers of terrorists with ordnance that can be adapted to avoid harming others in the immediate vicinity, it is hard to imagine a tool that can better minimize the risk to civilians than remotely piloted aircraft” (Gusterson, 2016b).

And Harold Koh stated that,

“Cutting-edge technologies are often deployed for military purposes; whether or not that is lawful depends on whether they are deployed consistently with the laws of war, *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. Because drone technology is highly precise, if properly controlled, it could be more lawful and more consistent with human rights and humanitarian law than the alternatives” (Gusterson, 2016b).

It is thus clear that drone technology is more effective at targeted killings than manually piloted aeroplanes are in avoiding civilian casualties and staying within the confines of human rights and humanitarian law. This shows that if employed correctly, remote warfare carries far less responsibility regarding the adherence to international human rights and humanitarian law and would thus hypothetically ensure the political survival for the individual in office in the country utilizing remote warfare. This notion is echoed by Knowles and Watson (May 2018) who state that the post 9/11 era has proved challenging for the laws governing the right to use force, *jus ad bellum*, and the laws governing the way force is applied, *jus in bello*. One example of the complicated nature of the laws surrounding the use of remote warfare is Article 16 of the International Law Commission’s Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts (ARSIWA) which states,

“A State which aids or assists another State in the commission of an internationally wrongful act (IWA) by the latter is internationally responsible for doing so if: a. that State does so with knowledge of the circumstances of the internationally wrongful act; and b. the act would be internationally wrongful if committed by that State” (“Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts,” 2008).

This illustrates that even allies of states that utilize remote warfare, who accidentally or deliberately commit a war crime, or an act labelled as an “internationally wrongful act,” will be liable to face responsibility for those actions. This indicates that there are still consequences for states that commit wrongful acts with remote warfare or drone technology, which might be a motivation for specifically the Obama administration’s lack of transparency surrounding the issue. The less “air-time” and international coverage the remote warfare program received, the less likely the administration was to experience international backlash and legal action against them. The United States has long believed their drone strikes to be permitted under international law and the United Nations Charter as actions of self-defense either with or without the consent of the country where the strikes take place (Hasian, 2016). This is because the country either supports the United States’ right to defend themselves or is unwilling or unable to act against an immediate threat to the security of the United States and its citizens.

The issue of responsibility has been widely discussed. However, some might disagree because of the relative safety that remote warfare either through the use of drones or support for foreign forces provides. Admiral Dennis Blair, former director of national intelligence for the United States described drone warfare, a form of remote warfare, as “politically advantageous.” Adding that drone warfare enables the president to look tough and show resolve without incurring American casualties, adding, “It plays well domestically, and it is unpopular only in other countries” (Gusterson, 2016a). This enabled countries like the United States to attack without utilizing a significant ground force, unseen and unanticipated, without presenting a, “a reciprocal vulnerability to those it killed” (Gusterson, 2016a). Admiral Dennis Blair would thus argue that remote warfare is a strategy to limit losses and the responsibility that those who implement it face. What then, do we make of the shift away from transparency? Could one argue that regimes like those of the United States and the United Kingdom were only feeding the public bits and pieces of information to “test the waters” and judge the response? If that is the case, one could argue that even the little information that the regime did release is evidence for the maintenance of political survival for those who are in office regarding the use of remote warfare.

Remote warfare, in the case that the support, both by monetary means and the supply of expertise, training, and weapons, is very similar to the usage of drones because both tactics can be used in a covert fashion, both tactics do

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not need a great number of boots on the ground in the state experiencing conflict and both are tactics employed to ensure political survival. This is because remote warfare, in both senses, allows the state using the tactics to minimize both responsibility and loss of life. The loss of a foreign soldier’s life or even the crash of a US drone has little impact on the news networks worldwide in comparison to the loss of a US Marine or Army soldier. The support of foreign militaries, unless controversial, like the United States’ support of the Israeli Defense Force or even the People’s Protection Units (YPG), usually come with few political or military consequences. Davies et al. (2018) found in their research that,

“With so many actors involved in drone warfare, we found that the president was shielded from a significant portion of the blame for civilian losses by the newspapers in our sample. These results suggest that this form of conflict was virtually risk-free for President Obama; he was very unlikely to be blamed for failure when responsibility shifted onto the intelligence agencies” (Davies et al., 2018).

The possibility of risk-free war, however, generates public expectations of drone strikes, which is that they are conducted in a way that minimizes the risk to civilians and soldiers alike (Davies et al., 2018).

Remote Drone Warfare, however, has side effects, since the inception of the US-led drone war in Pakistan and Afghanistan and specifically the increased usage of drone warfare in specifically the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Militants operating from within this region have taken notice that they are the primary targets of these drones,

“The American drone campaign in FATA started in 2004 and since then most of the strikes have centred on the tribal areas. Out of 391 total strikes, 387 have targeted locations in FATA with only six hitting the targets in the adjacent Khaibar Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan” (Aslam, 2016).

This has, unsurprisingly, motivated these militants to avoid the FATA altogether by moving to megacities like Karachi where drones cannot and will not target them (Aslam, 2016). It is thus no surprise that Osama bin Laden was found to be present in Abbottabad, a Pakistani city far away from the FATA (Aslam, 2016). The insurgence of militants to cities like Karachi has not come without consequence and has led to an increase in petty crime, kidnapping, extortion and other crimes in the cities in question (Aslam, 2016). Remote drone warfare thus has a few, arguably unseen consequences. The exodus of militants from the FATA is thus a side-effect of remote drone warfare and an opportunity for remote warfare through the support of foreign forces. Shalini Satkunanandan outlines another side-effect of remote drone warfare,

“The neatness of the moral calculus of drone strikes omits other incalculables, including the extent of anti-U.S. sentiments generated by the drone strikes (apparently a powerful recruitment tool for terrorist organizations) and the setting of worrisome precedents for future actions by state actors in disregard of sovereign borders and human life” (Satkunanandan, 2015).

Remote drone warfare thus sets “worrisome precedents” for future warfare and actions regarding the disregard of sovereign borders, human life and airspace, all in the name of national defense. There is thus a motivation for states to not be transparent regarding issues of remote warfare either through foreign military aid or the use of drones because of the worrying implications these actions have. Drone strikes have proved to be a remarkably effective tool for terrorist-recruitment because of the, if limited, collateral damage they inflict and the shift away from conventional warfare that they indicate. While the Obama administration signaled its intention to minimize collateral damage, the damage has been done (Satkunanandan, 2015).

Remote warfare has succeeded in diminishing the risks of exposing specifically British troops to another series of grueling conflicts by maintaining a light footprint in the countries where these conflicts take place (Knowles and Watson, June 2018). Knowles and Watson (June 2018), found that with the appropriate support to capable partners remote warfare can accomplish its goals of destroying and degrading terrorist targets. While it poses several practical challenges to overcome, like working in a highly risk-averse environment and working with local forces who may have different or lacking capabilities, interests and approaches to that of your own military. While remote warfare does pose certain challenges, it has largely been successful in maintaining the political survival of those in power,

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specifically in Britain,

“There have been no high-profile anti-war protests on the streets of London, and – bar the embarrassing defeat in Parliament of a government motion to begin airstrikes in Syria in 2013 – the UK has been able to lend support to its allies relatively unhindered” (Knowles and Watson, June 2018).

This indicates that remote warfare as a tactic employed to ensure political survival is successful in its purpose. However, the movement away from transparency can be blamed for the success of the tactic even in the United Kingdom. There is evidence that suggests that in the United Kingdom, just like in the United States the government in power ensures its political survival by dodging responsibility for any failures in the tactic of remote warfare, placing the responsibility on its intelligence forces instead (Knowles and Watson, May 2018). Knowles and Watson state that “the government justified this lack of transparency by allowing the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) to provide oversight. As its members are security cleared, they are able to view sensitive information which the rest of Parliament cannot, including the intelligence and legal advice that informed the strike against Khan” (Knowles and Watson, May 2018).

This indicates that at least the British government has set up one entity of control to audit their actions relating to the use of remote warfare, albeit instead of being transparent with the citizens they govern. However, the governments in question, dodge responsibility by transferring responsibility to their security services or intelligence agencies, who “know more,” indicating that the government was not aware of all the information before authorizing the strike or attack when this is not entirely true. The United Kingdom does not only utilize remote warfare in the sense of supporting foreign forces, but they also utilize drones to carry out strikes on terrorists whom they claim threaten the national sense of security (Knowles and Watson, May 2018). There is also a lack of government transparency relating to the usage of drones, as outlined by Knowles and Watson when they state, “beyond the example of the Reyaad Khan strike, the government has also maintained high levels of secrecy over UK drone operations in many of its counterterrorism operations” (Knowles and Watson, May 2018). This shows that the lack of transparency surrounding the usage of remote warfare is not only a U.S. issue but a transatlantic one.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to illustrate the shift away from conventional warfare that the global system has experienced during the last 18 years, post 9/11. Global governments like those of the United Kingdom and the United States have defended their use of remote warfare vehemently and have defended it based on the fact that we are presently fighting a different enemy that calls for different tactics. The global war on terror has called for different tactics because terrorist groups are stateless entities and are highly mobile. The usage of drone warfare has unfortunately led to anti-US sentiment in the countries that it is employed in, and sometimes justifiably so because of the collateral damage incurred, or wrong individuals targeted. The usage of drone technology has also served as a terrorist recruitment tool for terrorist groups who feed off the community’s dissatisfaction with and hate of the western intervention in their country. This paper argues that remote warfare has been used as a political and military tool to ensure the political survival of those in office since its regular usage by western regimes post 9/11. Evidence suggests that the methods used to ensure political survival aside from the shift towards drone warfare and the support of foreign militaries are a shift away from transparency. While it is impossible to keep these tactics secret, details about the missions and the targets thereof have rarely been made public. The lack of transparency regarding the use of remote drone technology by the United States has angered even those who consider themselves part of the program of remote warfare, like Harold Koh. There are many possible reasons for the secrecy surrounding the use of remote warfare, one reason being the unconventionality of it. Yet the motivation for the use of remote warfare is clear, it is not politically and socially viable to put large numbers of boots on the ground in a foreign conflict, evidence of this is President George W. Bush’s low approval rating at the end of his presidency (Sjoberg and Via, 2010). Remote warfare is not without responsibility, however, but it does limit the amount of responsibility and losses that a country can face. The low risk that it poses to both the soldiers and civilians is one of the main reasons it is now the most popular tactic of war, even when considering the likelihood of terrorist attacks rising with the usage of drone technology.

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