# Remote Warfare in an Age of Distancing and 'Great Powers'

https://www.e-ir.info/2021/02/27/remote-warfare-in-an-age-of-distancing-and-great-powers/

ALASDAIR MCKAY, FEB 27 2021

**This is an excerpt from *Remote Warfare: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Get your free download from E-International Relations.**

In the introduction, it was stated that the main goals of this edited volume were to start filling the gaps in our understanding of remote warfare, challenge the dominant narratives surrounding its use and subject the practice to greater scrutiny. Through reading this book, readers will hopefully be left with a better comprehension of remote warfare than when they opened to the first page. Moreover, the three interconnected core themes of this book, revisited below, have challenged the conventional wisdom and exposed some of remote warfare's serious problems.

Firstly, though it can yield some short-term tactical successes, remote warfare is not a silver bullet solution to the deep-set political problems in conflict-affected states. In fact, it can damage peace and stability in states where it is used. Several chapters have shown how the use of remote warfare can exacerbate the drivers of conflict. This has been true whether it is remote warfare in Syria, as Sinan Hatahet's chapter demonstrated, Libya, discussed in the editors' conceptual introduction, or the Sahel, as explored by Delina Goxho.

Secondly, despite being presented at 'precise', 'surgical' and even 'humane', remote military engagements often do cause significant harm to civilians. Remote warfare does minimise the risks to a state's own soldiers, but in doing so, it shifts the burdens of warfare onto civilians. As Baraa Shiban and Camilla Molyneux's chapter on Yemen illustrated, the harm inflicted on civilians through remote warfare is not limited simply to deaths. It and can also have significant economic, educational, and mental health implications for impacted communities. Civilian harm in remote warfare is also closely linked to instability. As Daniel Mahanty argued in part of his chapter on security cooperation, civilian harm and human rights violations committed by partners can counteract peacebuilding initiatives. It can also erode the public's trust in the legitimacy of the partner state and increase the number of the disaffected who may turn to violence in response to state-sponsored abuse.

Finally, remote warfare has significant socio-political impacts on the states that practice it. The secrecy surrounding the use of remote warfare is potentially having a corrosive impact on democratic norms. As the chapter by Christopher Kinsey and Helene Olsen noted on private militaries, there is a danger that the lack of debate on their use could create a democratic deficit, where accountability, transparency, and even public consent are either ignored or quietly marginalised. According to Malte Riemann and Norma Rossi's chapter, outsourcing the burdens of warfare has had a deeper effect of reshaping modes of remembrance, duty, and sacrifice in states. This has subsequently made war appear less visible within democratic societies. Jolle Demmers and Lauren Gould warn that there is a danger that in the long term, with the removal of warfare from visibility and scrutiny, Western liberal democracies could become more violent.

As noted in the introduction there are limitations to what can be covered in any book and there are always areas left unexplored. Though the articles have been deep in their analyses, this volume has only scratched the surface of the scale and scope of remote warfare. As such, this concluding chapter examines some of the different thematic areas that could be explored in future research on remote warfare. But first the chapter discusses the important question of

whether remote warfare will remain the norm for states, particularly given the rise of 'great power competition' and the COVID-19 pandemic. These developments have yielded important questions regarding the future of remote warfare.

**Is Remote Warfare Here to Stay?**

Of late, there has been much talk from International Relations scholarship, think tanks, the defence community and politicians that that we once again live in a time of 'great power competition' (Dueck 2017; Kaufmann 2019; Elbridge and Mitchell 2020; Mahnken 2020). The crux of the idea is that there has been a shift away from global hegemony and towards a world where the US, China and Russia compete for strategic influence, trade and investment dominance, and world leader status in the development and regulation of new technologies (O'Rourke 2020). For states, this has meant that near-peer competition has become the main strategic priority, rather than counterterrorism. The 2018 National Defence Strategy, for example, outlines that: 'Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in US national security' (United States Department of Defence 2018, 1).

This grand narrative has been gathering momentum for a while. At the start of the 1990s, John Mearsheimer (1990, 5–6) opined, 'the bipolar structure that has characterised Europe since the end of World War II is replaced by a multipolar structure.' Since then, various writers have examined the military revival of Russia (Trenin 2016; Renz 2017), the economic and military rise of China (Kristof 1992; Overholt 1994; Buzan 2010) and the implications of all this for international security.

However, developments over the past decade have been seen to strengthen the validity of this narrative. In 2014, driven by numerous factors, Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine and 'annexed' Crimea which sent alarm bells ringing in the West and gave NATO a renewed purpose. Since then, Russia has expanded its presence in many parts of the world through arms sales, an undeclared, but seemingly significant, presence of mercenaries and special forces abroad, as well as capacity-building programmes for local forces (Watson and Karlshøj-Pedersen 2019). China's 'aggressive' trade activity (Lukin 2019), investment in defence technologies (Maizland 2020) and human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch 2019) have also raised concerns in the West. Since becoming China's paramount leader in 2012, President Xi Jinping has been accused of pursuing an ambitious, nationalistic agenda abroad, evidenced by Chinese claims to disputed territory in the South China Sea (Nouwens 2020), face-offs with India in the Galwan Valley (Wu and Myers 2020) and behaviour towards Taiwan (Ford and Gewirtz 2020).

There are also domestic drivers behind this rise of 'great power competition.' Though hostilities between powers pre-date the rise of 'strongman politics', this development is likely to be a significant factor. As Lawrence Freedman (2020) recently noted:

In the age of Trump, Xi, and Putin, it is hard to take seriously the idea that domestic affairs have only a trivial effect on the logic of great power practice. Moreover, domestic affairs not only help explain strategic choices, in terms of identifying interests and making provisions for warfare, but also what the powers have on offer. The way they govern themselves and arrange their social and economic affairs is part of the influence they exert.

Since coming to power in 2016, President Trump has made this 'great power competition' grand narrative the centrepiece of US defence and security thinking (Rachman 2019). The Obama administration were certainly concerned about Russia and China as parts of the 2015 National Security Strategy illustrated (White House 2015). But the 2017 National Security Strategy (White House 2017, 2) represented a formal announcement of this shift in global relations: 'After being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century […] great power competition returned.' In more recent comments, Defense Secretary Mark Esper outlined US strategic priorities:

For the United States, our long-term challenges, China, No. 1, and Russia, No. 2. And what we see happening out there is a China that continues to grow its military strength, its economic power, its commercial activity, and it's doing so, in many ways, illicitly — or it's using the international rules-based order against us to continue this growth, to acquire technology, and to do the things that really undermine our [and our allies'] sovereignty, that undermine the rule of law, that really question [Beijing's] commitment to human rights.

(quoted in Kristian 2020)

The US National Security Strategy also identifies other rising powers, such as Iran and North Korea as strategic concerns, and their attempts to 'destabilize regions, threaten Americans and our allies, and brutalize their own people' (DOD 2017, 15).

This rise of the 'great power competition' narrative has created new uncertainties for international security, not least for the use of remote warfare as a tactical tool for states. But there are reasons to be doubtful that it will mark the end for remote warfare or a return to large-scale interventions.

In the 'great power competition' era, states such as the US will rely heavily on partnerships. As Watts, Biegon and Mahanty noted in their chapters, security cooperation will likely remain an important tool in the American foreign policy. This will likely be true in the case of its allies too. Several countries are considering following a light-footprint strategy of 'persistent engagement', where a state 'maintains a presence in a country, with few troops, and work with regional and local partners to try and build influence and knowledge' (Watson 2020b).

Recent trends also show that states continue to have a strong strategic interest in confronting adversaries' armed forces off the open battlefield, operating in the grey zone and under the threshold of full, state-on-state conflict (Knowles and Watson 2018, 5–6). Remote approaches are essentially ways for states to avoid the economic and political risks of direct confrontation. The assassination of General Qasem Soleimani earlier this year by a US armed drone strike is an example of how remote warfare has been used to avoid direct confrontation, as are Iran's use of proxies in the Middle East. Both nations have sought to avoid directly fighting, but in doing so they have shifted the risk onto local civilians in the areas they are engaged.

In the case of Russia, it is also constrained economically and by manpower limitations. These realities led the RAND Corporation to conclude:

There is no indication that Russia is seeking a large-scale conflict with a near-peer or peer competitor, and indeed it appears Russian leaders understand the disadvantages Russia faces in the event of a prolonged conflict with an adversary like NATO. (Boston and Massicot 2018)

So far, Putin's approach to the West has largely taken the form of cyber operations, disinformation campaigns and targeted assassinations (see Thomas 2014; Connell and Vogler 2017; Mejias and Vokuev 2017; Stengel 2019; Splidsboel Hansen 2017). Reasonably competent at working 'on the cheap', Putin has also used limited remote military interventions as a broader foreign policy tool. This is likely to continue. As such, it is more probable to find US or UK troops in future confrontation with states like Russia, via its military contractors or special forces, in somewhere like Syria, rather than in a conventional war in Eastern Europe (Knowles and Watson 2018, 6). There is certainly a precedent for this. In February 2018, it was reported that US Special Forces clashed with Russian security contractors, working with Syrian forces, as part of a four-hour long firefight in eastern Syria (Gibbons-Neff 2018). The heavy Russian losses from this engagement, reportedly 200 troops (Ibid.), and the reputational damage may arguably make the Kremlin more hesitant about repeating this type of event. But this does not rule out skirmishes of a similar nature reoccurring.

In this sense, military engagement between 'great powers' and their allies is more likely to take the form of remote warfare or at least display elements of it. This presents a number of challenges to the transparency and accountability – and many of the dangers discussed throughout the book are likely to continue.

The recent COVID-19 outbreak, one of the largest global pandemics in living memory, has undoubtably increased tensions between China and the West. This volume was being finalised during the early stages of the outbreak. In just a few months, the spread of the virus has ground many countries across the world to a standstill and chronically impacted their economies and social routines. Estimates put the death toll so far at over one million (World Health Organisation 2020) and the cost to the global economy at between £4.7–£7.1 trillion (Asia Development Bank 2020). The origins of the virus in Wuhan, a city in central China, and the rapid global spread which followed has led some to

blame China for the impact of the virus. However, this growing Sino–Western rivalry still remains below the threshold of major war and is unlikely to change. Hostilities will likely take the form of sanctions, cyber conflicts and potentially proxy engagements.

In their response to COVID-19, some governments have taken a heavily securitised approach and, in some cases, exploited the situation to consolidate power (Roth 2020; Lamond 2020). This has seen state security agencies abuse their positions of authority and act outside the rule of law, often engaging in overly aggressive measures towards civilians (Brooks 2020). There is a danger that these actions could damage the relationship between the state and its people, help foster grievances, push alienated civilians towards to extremist groups and contribute to more violence in the long run (Watson 2020a).

There have been several warnings that non-state armed groups are attempting to exploit the disorder created by the pandemic in certain states. In Iraq, the Islamic State issued instructions to supporters regarding the virus and began to intensify its various attacks all over the Middle East and other regions (Abu Haneyeh 2020). In the Sahel, another area seen as a prominent battleground for jihadist groups, al-Qaeda affiliates and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara have also attempted to make gains from the outbreak and carried out attacks against military positions, UN peacekeepers and civilian populations (Berger 2020). An analysis by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, using the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project database, noted that violent attacks in Sub-Saharan Africa's conflict hotspots rose by 37 percent in the early months of 2020 when the virus was spreading in the region (Colombo and Harris 2020). Yet even before the pandemic, there were several warnings about the resurgence of Islamic State and growing presence of al-Qaeda, not only in Africa, but also the Middle East and South East Asia (Felbab-Brown 2019; Hassan 2019; Joffé 2018; Lefèvre 2018; Clarke 2019; Jones Harrington 2018). The bottom line is that non-state armed groups are likely to remain a threat for some time.

As such, it is highly probable that remote warfare will be the preferred method used to counter them because it is seen by them as low risk and relatively cheap. Many analysts certainly feel this to be the case with the UK. In an expert roundtable hosted by Oxford Research Group in early 2020, the participants indicated that the economic and political climate in the country would mean that the UK is likely to continue to take a remote approach to military engagements in the future. In recent years, the UK has seen its markets impacted by the uncertainty over Brexit, the economy crippled because of the COVID-19 responses, and the Government under pressure to reduce spending (Watson 2020b). In a general sense, the military, political and economic constraints that initially led to the dominance of remote warfare are still present and will likely be exacerbated (see Chalmers and Jessett 2020). Despite a changing global landscape, remote warfare is therefore likely to continue to define the approach of many states, making critical enquiry on the subject matter all the more important.

**Some Future Directions of Research**

A common narrative of this book is that while remote warfare may be 'remote' from Western perspectives, it is part of the everyday reality for some communities in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and elsewhere. It has significant impacts on civilian populations and much of this remains underreported. But as the chapter by Shiban and Molyneux on Yemen highlighted, conceptualisations of civilian harm in remote warfare need to move beyond civilian deaths and injuries to broader understandings of its effect on societies.

These realities make it important to find and amplify the voices of the communities in states where remote warfare operations are conducted. Work by investigative journalists, academics and NGOs has been invaluable in bringing these currently marginalised voices into clearer focus (see Watling and Shabibi 2018; Pargeter 2017). But this remains a very limited and restricted research exercise. There are good reasons for this. Field research in the terrains of remote warfare is both costly and dangerous (see Bliesemann de Guevara and Kurowska 2020). Nonetheless, greater inclusion of local populations' perspectives on how they perceive the use remote warfare in their communities would undoubtably improve understandings of the phenomenon and give a voice to those who have largely been ignored in discussions.

Getting local voices heard does not necessarily have to be done by field work. The internet holds huge potential to

offer a platform to marginalised voices. A future online edited volume on remote warfare could be based around commissioning chapters from individuals and groups in theatres where operations have taken place.

This book has been largely concerned with critiquing Western states' use of remote warfare, particularly the engagement of the US and UK. Though some chapters did certainly explore the non-Western dynamics to remote warfare, there is nonetheless a greater weighting towards Western approaches. Western states rely heavily on remote warfare and so it makes sense for researchers in Western democracies to focus their attentions on the activities of their own governments and militaries because there is a greater chance of stimulating change. Moreover, the general lack of debate on remote warfare in the West makes it essential for researchers to lead the way in raising awareness of these issues.

Nevertheless, expanding the scope of the case studies to explore non-Western approaches to remote warfare could be a fruitful avenue for scholars to explore. There is, of course, no shortage of literature exploring the use of remote approaches to fighting by the likes of Russia, Iran, China or the Gulf States (Mumford 2013; Berti and Guzansky 2015; Renz 2016; Chivvas 2017; Fridman 2018; Kuzio and D'Anieri 2018, 25–61; Fabian 2019; Krieg 2018; Krieg and Rickli 2019). There are also several accounts on the use of remote tactics by developing states, particularly those in Africa (Abbink 2003; Tubiana and Walmsley 2008; Craig 2012; Tamm 2014; Isaacs-Martin 2015; 2018; Krieg and Rickli 2018; Tapscott2019; International Crisis Group 2020). Nonetheless, a comparison between democratic and less democratic states' experiences of remote warfare would be a worthwhile pursuit. It may help researchers to understand the differences and similarities between how states use remote approaches. A particularly interesting question to address on this topic could be whether there is a relationship between regime type and remote warfare and, if so, what the drivers behind this are.[1] As remote warfare is likely to be a tool used by states for some time, a greater focus on how approaches to remote warfare differ across the globe may become even essential in the future.

The technological tools used in remote warfare today, such as drones, will still be present in the short-term and will be an important area of future research. Scholars and researchers will continue to raise awareness on how the use of such technology impacts civilians on the ground and its broader ramifications, particularly its contribution to greater radicalisation and subsequent instability (see Saeed et al. 2019). But as the chapters noted there are concerns that technological advances in defence are outpacing legal and moral frameworks both domestically and internationally.

The increasing flow of global data, which is driven by new information technologies, is one example of this. As Julian Richards noted in his chapter on intelligence sharing, there is a risk that highly complex and integrated intelligence systems, sharing ever more industrial-scale amounts of data, could enable abuses of intelligence by states. In his chapter Richards notes that there are public fears in Western democracies about a creep towards a global 'surveillance society' and that intelligence sharing with authoritarian regime could contribute to greater human rights abuses.

On the same general theme, Jennifer Gibson's chapter highlighted the dangers of data-driven approaches to targeted killing through armed drone strikes, and the challenges this activity poses to international law. As Gibson argued, in places like Yemen life and death decisions are being made based on loose collections of data assembled by algorithms with limited intelligence on the ground. This raises difficult questions about whether technology helps or hinders the processes that lead to pilots launching deadly drone strikes.

Joseph Chapa, whose research involved interviews with armed drone pilots, came to a more optimistic conclusion about how the distance in remote warfare, enabled by technology, impacts pilots' judgement. In his chapter Chapa argued that drone technology actually enables pilots to exercise human judgement when making life and death decisions. Nevertheless, Chapa did also point to the potential dangers presented by emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) to this process.

Indeed, perhaps the greatest anxiety surrounding future developments in military technology concerns the dawn of autonomous weapons systems (AWS) and AI (see Scharre 2014, 2019; Sharkey 2017; Schwarz 2018). This is an emerging global phenomenon, with global military spending on AWS and AI projected to reach $16 and $18 billon

respectively by 2025 (Sander and Meldon 2014). A growing number of states and non-governmental organisations are appealing to the international community for regulation of or even bans on AWS (Cummings 2017, 2). Certainly, there are valid ethical concerns about AWS. As Ingvild Bode and Hendrik Huelss' chapter highlighted, these technologies could challenge the existing norms governing the use of force due to the effect they may have on human judgement. This could have huge impacts on civilians in warfare. According to their chapter, 'the legal definition of who is a civilian and who is a combatant is not written in a way that could be easily programmed into AI, and machines lack the situational awareness and ability to infer things necessary to make this decision.'

However, some are more optimistic about AI, particularly concerning its relationship with civilian harm. Though researchers across various disciplines are cautious about the growth of this technology, they believe that, if used under the right conditions, such systems have potentially more 'positive' uses (for a good overview of the key debates see ICRC 2019). In terms of its impact on warfare and civilian harm, Larry Lewis, director of the Centre for Autonomy and Artificial Intelligence, has argued that the proper use of machine learning algorithms can help minimise civilian casualties during armed conflict:

While the history of warfare is replete with examples of technology being used to kill and maim more people more efficiently, technology can also reduce those tragic costs of war. For example, precision-guided and small-sized munitions can limit so-called collateral damage, the killing and maiming of civilians and other non-combatants.

(Lewis 2018)

Going forward, more open debate, dialogue and the circulation of accurate information will be crucial. This will mean that there is a shared understanding of risks and ways to better promote safety for the military applications of technology. The lack of discussion and progress among UN member states on this subject shows (see Haner and Garcia 2019) that the international community has a lot of catching up to do on this issue.

**Looking Forward: The Value of Intellectual Pluralism**

As the introduction noted, last year an event was co-organised by Oxford Research Group and the University of Kent which brought together stakeholders from various academic disciplines, the NGO community, civil society, and the military to discuss remote warfare. The event showed how important engagement across professional sectors can be as both a learning experience and in moving conversation forward (Watts and Biegon 2019). The conference saw those in the military and NGO sectors, communities that might not normally share platforms, exchange their experiences of remote warfare. This book has captured some of that diversity by shedding light on the key debates permeating the use of remote warfare.

As this volume has shown, remote warfare affects many sectors of societies both at home and abroad. It is not simply a military matter, but rather a highly social one. Inclusive, open and diverse dialogue and debate between stakeholders involved in remote warfare, then, is vital if scholarship is to continue to grow. If researchers fail to reach beyond professional silos and work collaboratively, it risks creating a stale discursive environment where research clusters fall into circular discussions in their own echo chambers. The chapters in the book have shown that the use of remote warfare has several significant problems and there can only be progress towards resolving them through discussions between communities. This book, then, represents part of the beginning of this process, not its end.

**Notes**

[1] For some initial data collection on this, see a presentation by Yvonni Efstathiou on regime type and the use of non-state armed groups: https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/event-podcast-the-oversight-and-accountability-of-remote-warfare

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## About the author:

**Alasdair McKay** is Senior Editor at Oxford Research Group. He holds undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from the universities of Manchester and Aberystwyth. He has edited several books for E-International Relations, including *Nations under God: The Geopolitics of Faith in the Twenty-First Century* (2015) and *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* (2014).