

Remote Warfare: A Debate Worth the Buzz?

Written by Rubrick Biegón, Vladimir Rauta and Tom F. A. Watts

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RUBRICK BIEGÓN, VLADIMIR RAUTA AND TOM F. A. WATTS, DEC 15 2021

New strategic contexts tend to drive the development of new concepts. Amidst an intellectual background that falsely tried to re-invent warfare as fundamentally 'new' (Kaldor 1999), the use of airpower to conduct humanitarian interventions in the Balkans prompted debates on 'virtual' (Ignatieff 2001) and 'virtuous' (Der Derian 2001) war. The 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center shaped the Bush administration's failure to think conceptually about political violence as it collapsed counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency under the guise of fighting a 'war on terror'. The Obama administration's turn toward 'innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches to achieve [its] security objectives' after the counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq (DOD 2012, 3) coincided with debates on 'surrogate' (Krieg & Rickli 2018), and 'vicarious' (Waldman 2021) warfare, amongst other concepts. Around the same time, Russia's annexation of Crimea, its interventions under the threshold of open hostilities elsewhere, and Chinese activities in the South China Sea underpinned debates on 'hybrid' (Renz 2016) and 'grey/gray zone' (Hughes 2020; Rauta & Monaghan 2021) warfare. Interest in the indirect intervention of outside powers in the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars (amongst other recent conflicts) has similarly renewed scholarly and practitioner interest in the study of conflict delegation and 'proxy war' (Rauta 2018, 2021a; Karlén et al 2021).

Contributors to these debates have attempted to get to grips with what real-world events mean for our thinking on war, how it effects politics and society, and the policymaking process. One unintended and often overlooked consequence of these efforts, however, has been that the study of contemporary political violence has reached a place of 'terminological and conceptual turmoil' (Rauta et al. 2019, 417). We remain 'conceptually under-equipped to grasp, let alone counter, violent political challenges' (Ucko & Marks 2018, 208). As the list of concepts grows, a worrying sense of redundancy has developed, pushing the study of war into a series of analytical silos.

These concerns provided the intellectual starting point for our recently published co-edited special issue in the journal *Defence Studies*. This exchange was organised around examining what analytical contribution, if any, the study of 'remote warfare' can make to the debates on contemporary political violence. Drawing from aspects of this research, this short article has three goals. First, to provide the reader with a window into the current state of remote warfare scholarship by presenting some of the various meanings which have been given to the term. Second, to introduce the aims of, and contributions made by, our recently published special issue on remote warfare. And finally, to reflect on what our exchange means for remote warfare scholarship moving forward.

To summarise the argument developed both here and in our special issue itself (Biegón, Rauta & Watts 2021; Rauta, 2021b): as a 'buzzword', remote warfare has gotten people talking about a range of issues including on the role of technology in war, the use of different 'light-footprint' practices of military intervention, and the consequences of recent Western security and counterterrorism policy. As often happens with buzzwords, however, their over-use can be damaging. The stretching of the notion's study to include an ever-growing number of security actors, practices and cases raises questions about remote warfare's analytical coherence and value. To help put its study on surer footing, greater attention should be given to the conceptual foundations of remote warfare scholarship.

Remote Warfare – One Term, Many Meanings?

Remote warfare is not a new term. From as early as the nineteenth century it has been used to highlight the logistical challenges of fighting wars over large geographical distances (Watts & Biegón 2021, p.511). Over time however, the

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term has become widely used as a shorthand for describing the use of various technologies in war. Speaking during a 1977 debate on funding for the B-1 strategic bomber for example, Democratic Senator Edward William Proxmire drew a line between advances in airpower and remote warfare. As Proxmire put it: ‘...technology [has] provided us with a bridge to another period of warfare – *remote warfare* – warfare at distance, by proxy, the standoff weapon era’ (Congressional Record House 1977, 23537, emphasis added). During this period, the term remote warfare also developed a pejorative connotation which continues to underscore its use by some critics of Western security and counterterrorism policy. William Fitts Ryan, a Democratic Congressman and early critic of the Vietnam War, claimed in 1968 that it was ‘as if the Vietnam war ha[d] become a permanent and inevitable fixture in American life, like the interminable, *remote warfare* predicted in Orwell’s 1984’ (Congressional Record House 1968, 16675, emphasis added).

The term remote warfare continues to be used as a shorthand for studying various weapons technologies. The ethics, efficacy, and legality of drone strikes, as with the experiences of drone operators, have all been studied under the label remote warfare (Chapa 2021; Theussen 2021; Vilmer 2021). The depiction of drone technologies in various forms of popular culture have also been scrutinised, enlivening debates on the ‘cultural entanglements, imprints, and consequences of remote warfare’ (Adelman & Kieran 2020, p.10). Others have pushed to expand the meaning of remote warfare to include the study of different ‘remote’ weapons technologies such as cyber capabilities and autonomous weapons systems on the basis that these technologies share with drones the characteristic of ‘allowing operators to use ever more discriminating force while also receding further in time and space from the target of the military operation’ (Ohlin 2017, 2). This move has invited debate on what developments in artificial intelligence may mean for human decision-making over the use of force (Bode & Huelss 2021) and Western approaches to warfare (Rossiter 2021).

Whilst retaining some focus on the use of technology in war, another branch of the debate has pushed to reconceptualise remote warfare as a wider set of practices used in lieu of an intervening agent’s conventional ground forces. This understanding of remote warfare reorients focus away from the study of technology in war toward the challenges created by working with (and through) local security forces and commercial agents. The genesis of this wider understanding of remote warfare can be traced to Paul Rogers’ (2013) writings on ‘security by remote control’, and was developed by the Oxford Research Group’s Remote-Control Project, altered the Remote Warfare Programme.

Bringing together authors from a range of disciplinary and professional backgrounds, in February 2021, researchers at the Remote Warfare Programme published a fifteen-chapter edited volume on remote warfare with E-IR. According to these authors, remote warfare is ‘an approach used by states to counter threats at a distance’ that can include, but is not restricted to, the use of remote weapons technologies (Watson & McKay 2021, 7). This wider understanding of remote warfare as also including the use of military assistance programmes, special operation forces, private military security contractors, and intelligence sharing has invited debate on a range of different analytical issues. Amongst others, these have included the various human costs of recent Western counterterrorism operations (Shiban & Molyneux 2021), their socio-political effects on Western states (Demmers & Gould 2021; Riemann & Rossi, 2021), and the geopolitical drivers of intervention from a distance (Biegón & Watts 2020).

In these and other ways, remote warfare is a single term with many meanings. The recent expansion of its study to include a growing number of technologies, practices, and actors has provided a framework for more creative thinking about some of the legal, political, and cultural implications of war in the twenty first century. Worryingly however, uses of the term remote warfare have far outpaced existing efforts to take stock of where the debate is, how it got there, and where it’s headed (Watts & Biegón 2019; Watson & McKay 2021). Existing scholarship has largely focused on expanding the cases and security practices studied under its umbrella instead of specifying what remote warfare is and how it differs from other concepts in the debates on contemporary political violence. As Rauta (2021b) explores in his contribution to our special issue, this inattention to conceptual issues poses at least two immediate problems.

First, as with International Relations scholarship more broadly (Berenskoetter 2017), conceptual evaluation has major implications for the debates on contemporary political violence (Rauta et al 2019; Rauta 2021a, 2021b). The introduction of new concepts can be an important tool for creative thinking about war. It can help underline

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inadequacies in the existing lexicon and provide a window into areas of the debate that have been overlooked or marginalised (Ucko & Marks 2018). That said, the identification and addressment of conceptual problems is integral to the sustainable development of any research agenda (Rauta 2021a). Ultimately remote warfare's study must be built on strong conceptual foundations because it is 'through language that one selects not just a name for the observed phenomenon, but where it starts and ends, as well as how one understands and explains it' (Rauta 2018, 451).

Second and relatedly, more work is needed to substantiate the claim that remote warfare is a 'distinct form of military engagement' (McKay 2021a, iv). Some literature appears to suggest that remote warfare is something used by almost every state, everywhere, throughout history (Watson & McKay 2021, 7-13). The problem here is that the analytical contributions made by studying already well-researched practices and cases of military intervention as remote warfare remain unclear. Similarly, the rationale for using remote warfare over other concepts that could also be used to study these phenomena is fuzzy. These ambiguities are important because, as explored in our special issue, they call into question both remote warfare's usefulness as a distinct category of warfare (McDonald 2021), and its overall contribution to the study of contemporary political violence (Rauta 2021b).

Remote Warfare as a Buzzword

'A commitment to open dialogue and analytical reciprocity', it has been argued, 'remains essential if remote warfare scholarship is to continue to grow' (Watts & Biegion 2019). Our special issue was assembled and co-edited in this spirit. While Biegion and Watts (2020) find utility in the concept of 'remote warfare', Rauta (2021) remains more sceptical. The lack of consensus on the notion's conceptual and terminological value doesn't foreclose the possibility of vibrant, enlightening debate. What we do agree on is that remote warfare scholarship 'should own its past and present errors' (Rauta 2021b, 4). The concept should be subject to the same scrutiny as others used to study war in the twenty first century.

As the starting point for this exchange, we set out to examine the 'buzz' that remote warfare has gained in certain academic, think-tank and practitioner circles over the past decade (Biegion, Rauta & Watts 2021). This invited reflection not just on the current state of remote warfare scholarship, but the complex and negotiated processes through which terms are introduced into the debates on contemporary political violence. In our assessment, remote warfare meets all four properties common to 'buzzwords': it is indicative of current fashions or *trends*; it has an inherent *vagueness*; it has been associated with distinct actors who *stretch* its meanings across various contexts; and it is *normative*, having a role in critiquing the policy agenda. Although the idea of a 'buzzword' is often used in a pejorative sense, our move to reapproach remote warfare in this way means neither denigrating remote warfare as a serious subject of academic enquiry nor dismissing the contributions made by existing remote warfare scholarship. Consistent with the overall aims of our special issue, it was intended to encourage greater attention to the conceptual issues involved with this research enterprise.

The six other contributions to our special issue picked up on this call in a variety of different ways. No consensus was reached on how remote warfare should be conceptualised. Some proposed re-approaching remote warfare as a family resemblance of legitimacy problems associated with military capabilities (McDonald 2021). For others, remote warfare was studied as a set of practices 'that share a common core – a desire to achieve military outcomes without large ground deployments – but that vary in implementation between cases, especially in terms of the policy/strategic objectives, the tactics involved, and the benefits accrued' (Stoddard & Toltica 2021, p.448). Attention was also given to the study of remote warfare's constitutive 'remoteness', both as a means of working toward a clearer sense of remote warfare's conceptual utility (Watts & Biegion 2021), and to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the interplay between remoteness and covertness in remote warfare practices (Trenta 2021). Drawing from ontological security theory, Riemann and Rossi (2021b) examined the role of self-identity as a driver of remote warfare. In doing so, they made the case for understanding remote warfare as an 'attempt to recreate order and hierarchy to keep threats at a distance, establish routines and stability, and (re)establish a coherent autobiographical narrative' (Riemann and Rossi 2021b). Consistent with the overall aims of this special issue, space was created for a detailed conceptual critique of remote warfare (Rauta 2021b). This move to open up remote warfare scholarship to a more dissenting viewpoint makes a series of particularly timely interventions. It highlights the need for those working in this

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area to pay greater attention to defining remote warfare and its constitutive features, explaining what analytical value the notion has, and addressing doubts about its conceptual 'competitiveness' in the wider study of contemporary political violence.

Conclusion: From Buzzword to Research Agenda?

What are the implications of our analysis for researchers interested in making their own contributions to remote warfare scholarship? A more complete discussion of a new research agenda must be left to future research. Nevertheless, the arguments developed in our special issue highlight the need for a greater focus on the conceptual foundations of remote warfare scholarship.

As a starting point for discussion, the recent calls to study 'non-Western approaches' to remote warfare by 'exploring the use of remote approaches to fighting by the likes of Russia, Iran, China or the Gulf States' (McKay 2021b, 241) would benefit from some qualification. As Stoddard and Toltica (2021) highlight in our special issue, studying the uses and strategic logics of 'remote warfare' by states other than Britain and the United States – the principal empirical focus of most existing literature – can promote clearer thinking on remote warfare as a set of practices. Chinese, Iranian, and Russian practices of intervention at a distance are already widely studied under other conceptual umbrellas however, including hybrid, gray-zone and surrogate warfare (Renz 2016; Krieg & Rickli 2019; Hughes 2020). Rather than prioritising the further empirical expansion of remote warfare scholarship as an *end* in itself; approaching such studies as a *means* for developing a clearer sense of the notion's analytical utility and differentiation could help address scepticism of its contributions to the study of contemporary political violence (Rauta 2021b).

Relatedly, the call for 'watchful eyes on technology' (McKay 2021, 241-243) through the further study of autonomous weapons systems would also benefit from some reformulation. Continuing technological advances in these and related fields should not be excluded from remote warfare scholarship, particularly given the term's wide-spread use to discuss different weapons technologies. At the same time however, the temptation to endlessly expand the practices studied under its umbrella without equal consideration to the properties and features that bind and tie them all together should be avoided. Those working in these areas would do well to heed Rauta's (2021b) call to not only provide a more 'robust description of its constituent properties and how these are configured to give meaning', but to develop a clearer sense of 'what the concept is not'.

What specific analytical contributions does studying contemporary political violence under the umbrella remote warfare make? What properties can reasonably be understood to connect advanced weapons technologies such as autonomous weapons systems on the one hand and military assistance to partners directly engaged with fighting on the other? At what point (or time) is 'remote' warfare no longer 'remote'? To what degree can political decisionmakers shape and influence the 'remoteness' of remote warfare? How can the study of remote warfare as a set of legitimacy problems (McDonald 2021), a means of identity creation (Reimann & Rossi 2021), and as a set of practices (Stoddard & Toltica 2021) be further developed? Remote warfare scholarship would benefit from further research in these areas.

These calls to bring greater analytical coherence to remote warfare scholarship should not be misread as an attempt at 'disciplining' or 'gate keeping' this rapidly growing area of study. The research enterprise often develops in messy and unstructured ways. Despite its definitional and conceptual ambiguities, remote warfare scholarship has invited creative thinking on many different issues connected to conflict, and from a range of academic, practitioner, and think-tank perspectives. The 'intellectual and professional pluralism of remote warfare scholarship represents one of its greatest strengths' (Watts & Biegon 2019). Making space for more critical perspectives gives tangible meaning to such claims. By harnessing the plurality of voices contributing to the debate, we can better wrestle with the complexities of political violence in the twenty-first century.

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