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Remote Warfare and the Retooling of American Primacy

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the utility of remote warfare as a means of analysing the geopolitics of American primacy. Through the use of new technologies and surrogate forces to address security challenges with a minimal military footprint, remote warfare (re)imposes political distance between the United States and the sites of its military interventions. Its constitutive modalities of intervention range from drones and Special Operations Forces to Private Military Security Companies, security cooperation programmes and emerging technologies associated with Artificial Intelligence. As public support for large-scale overseas interventions has dwindled and strategic competition with China has intensified, remote warfare represents a means of 'retooling' US primacy, which is both a structural condition and a strategic orientation. As a strategic approach to the use of force, remote warfare enables the American state to project military power in a more flexible and sustainable manner. This has supported the maintenance of US primacy as Washington's strategic focus has shifted from counterterrorism towards a renewed emphasis on great power competition.

This paper argues for the utility of remote warfare as a means of analysing the geopolitics of American primacy. The 'remotification' of American political violence, as we coin it, has played out in two ways: through the use of new technologies and various surrogates to address transnational security challenges with a minimal military footprint; and through the (re)imposition of political distance between the US metropole and the subaltern sites of its military interventions. As public support for large-scale overseas interventions has dwindled and strategic competition with China has intensified, we argue that remote warfare has become integral to the retooling of American primacy. Although drones and, more recently, developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI) have received considerable attention, this process extends beyond the use of new weapons technologies. To distance conventional ground forces from the spaces and places of intervention, remote warfare makes use of multiple 'remote' modalities of intervention, including Special Operations Forces (SOF), security cooperation activities and Private Military Security Companies (PMSCs).[i]

There are two main strands of remote warfare scholarship. The largest body of literature interrogates the geographies, consequences and ethics of remote weapons technologies, principally drones (Adelman and Kieran 2018; Crawford 2015; Gregory, 2011a, 2011b; Gusterson 2016; Ohlin, 2017; Schulzke 2016; Shaw, 2013). A separate strand has expanded remote warfare's empirical referents to include multiple tools that distance conventional Western ground forces from frontline fighting (Demmers and Gould, 2020; Knowles and Watson, 2018a, 2018b; Knowles and Matisek, 2019; Watts and Biegon, 2019). This research has established remote warfare as one of several terms used to study contemporary political violence, adding to a complex conceptual field in this area (Demmers and Gould 2018; Krieg and Rickli 2019; Waldman, 2018). While some scholars suggest that existing understandings of remote warfare 'might be too closely associated with the scholarly niche of drone warfare'

to have wider utility (Krieg and Rickli 2019, 7), those advocating a more holistic understanding of the term appear to conflate its study with other conceptual frameworks (Knowles and Matisek 2019, 11). By applying the term to US foreign policy, we highlight the utility of remote warfare to analyses of contemporary international relations.

In acknowledging the conceptual ambiguities around contemporary warfare, we emphasise that our scholarly contribution is analytical. We do not intend to resolve the complex conceptual debates over the changing nature or character of political violence (Krieg and Rickli 2019) Synthesising insights from the two strands of literature noted above, we define remote warfare as a strategy of security management that blends multiple 'remote' modalities of military intervention to generate physical and political distance between an intervening agent and the sites(s) of its use of force.[ii] In our understanding, the phenomenon is imbued with an inherent geopolitical logic. Situated within the critical geopolitics tradition (Agnew 2005; Dalby 2008; Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992), and following Agnew et al. (2020, 8), we see geopolitics as an interdisciplinary 'frontier zone' shaped by scholarship in International Relations (IR) and Geography. As a strategic approach to the use of force, remote warfare is aimed at keeping the 'there *there'* and the 'here *here'*. It enables the American state to project military power in a more flexible and sustainable manner. This has supported the maintenance of US primacy as Washington's strategic focus has shifted from the security challenges posed by weak states to the strategic challenges posed by strong states. In recent years, the strategic reorientation toward great power competition with China (White House, 2017; DOD, 2018) has catalysed the development of more technologically mediated modalities of remote warfare.

The assortment of terms used to capture contemporary American interventionism – from everywhere war (Gregory 2011a) to liquid warfare (Demmers and Gould 2018) and vicarious

war (Waldman 2018) – speaks to the richness of the scholarly debate on this paper's overarching theme. Although terminological consensus has proved elusive, there is a strong sense among analysts that US military interventionism entered a different (if not necessarily 'new') epoch following the 2003 Iraq War. We acknowledge that the geopolitical logic intrinsic to remote warfare – the production of physical and political forms of distance between an intervening agent and the sites(s) of its use of force – is not entirely novel. Drones, for example, have antecedents in earlier 'distancing technologies' such as airpower (Satia 2014, 1; see also Blakeley 2018; Gregory 2011b, 189). Similarly, neither the US nor its Western allies such as the United Kingdom (Knowles and Watson, 2018a, 2018b) exercise a monopoly on remote warfare. The proliferation of increasingly sophisticated drone technologies to states and non-state actors (Callamard 2020, 4-5; Milan and Tabrizi, 2020), coupled with the competition amongst regional actors to provide military assistance to their preferred parties in the Libyan Civil War (Malsin, 2019) and beyond, alludes to wider trends in the 'remotification' of political violence. As the instruments of remote warfare proliferate, it is crucial to recognise that the strategic use of these tools will differ on a case-by-case basis, making the geopolitics of remote warfare inherently uneven. With this in mind, we explicitly examine the role of remote warfare in contemporary American foreign policy.

The development and deployment of remote warfare in the post-Iraq period emerged out of a relatively 'fixed' strategy to preserve US pre-eminence. The contingencies associated with the Iraq conflict nevertheless precipitated changes in the longstanding commitment to primacy. As the focus of defence planning shifts from irregular warfare toward high-intensity conflict with peer-competitors, the coercive strategies and practices of the American state are reconfigured to facilitate heightened competition with China. Amidst these adjustments, a commitment to remote warfare has remained intact. By tracing this evolution in strategic thinking, our focus

on the agency of the US aims to make the contested, imprecise geographies of contemporary American political violence more concrete. Strategy connects power and geography. For Dalby (2009, 235), 'strategy and political power have unavoidable geographical dimensions, but ones that are not always well understood by either politicians or the publics who advocate the use of military force'. If geopolitics blends the political organisation of space with the geographical arrangement of coercive power (Dalby 2009, 234-5), our analysis seeks to draw-out the geopolitical logical animating US military interventionism in the post-Iraq period. Beyond the terminological debates on the geopolitics of contemporary American power, our motivation is to interrogate the function of remote warfare in American statecraft. What is remote warfare designed to do for the United States?

Our analysis proceeds in three stages. In light of the substantive divisions on how best to characterise US pre-eminence, we begin by outlining *primacy* as a foundational concept. From the latter stages of the George W. Bush presidency through the Obama and Trump administrations, we chart the changing geopolitical premises of American primacy: namely, the move away from the direct policing of territorial space in favour of more 'remote' modalities of intervention. Building on this observation, the second section unpacks the animating logic of remote warfare – the *physical* distancing of conventional US ground forces from frontline fighting against transnational security threats. We then relate this logic to the *political* distancing of US policymakers from the implications of interventionist violence. We discuss the increased appeal of remote modalities of intervention in the context of the shifting challenges to US primacy, from the policing of transnational security threats to the strategic competition with near-peer competitors. In the third section, we assess the novelty of the United States' post-Iraq approach to remote warfare to consider its possible recalibration during an era of renewed great power competition.

Primacy as a Strategic Orientation: From George W. Bush to Donald Trump

A variety of terms are used to conceptualise the United States' position in international relations. The larger discourse on American power interweaves overlapping ideas – from unipolarity to empire and hegemony – to connect US agency to the structural realties of global politics (Bacevich 2002; Barnett and Duvall 2005; Brooks and Wohlforth 2016; Mabee 2013). In this context, the concept of primacy maintains the focus on hierarchy while stressing the strategic deployment of coercive force. Although primacy is both a condition and a strategic orientation, our interest is mainly on the latter, insofar as the following analysis investigates the role of remote warfare in the retooling of the US's coercive capabilities following the Iraq War. This period follows shifts in the domestic politics of interventionism amidst general concerns over the strategic implications of American decline (Acharya 2018; Löfflmann 2015; Mabee 2013, 5-6; Quinn 2011).

As an expression of agency, primacy is realised through the multiple goals and processes of American foreign policy (Gowan 2006, 131-2). It is wrapped up in grand strategic efforts to push beyond international engagement in pursuit of wider interests, often through the deployment of military power (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016, 82; Posen 2014, 1-24). Because it has both structural and agential dimensions, primacy must be actively maintained via adjustments to foreign and security policy. From a political economy perspective, the maintenance of American primacy has been contingent on policing subversive social forces 'from below', including groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, which threaten the reproduction of 'open doors' and 'closed frontiers' (that is, capitalist markets governed and protected by the system of sovereign, territorial states) in strategically important regions

(Authors, in press; Blakeley 2018; Colas, 2008). Additionally, primacy's relational features mean it all but requires the leading actor to persistently protect its advantageous position vis-à-vis state rivals, even if its power-position grows more precarious (Acharya 2018, 2-3; Löfflmann 2015). As Agnew explains, '[p]rimacy depends in equal parts on successful competition and on subsequent recognition of that success by other states' (2003, 67).

A commitment to primacy can be traced across the foreign policies of all post-1945 presidencies. The pursuit of military pre-eminence remains the most consistent organising principle of the United States' wider foreign and security policy. Military power serves a variety of purposes and objectives, and can be 'leveraged' in a variety of settings beyond the immediate protection of US 'national security' (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 62-6; Mabee 2013, 121-50). For American politicians and planners, military pre-eminence is an important end in its own right, even as it is cultivated and used instrumentally for various purposes, including the economic and geopolitical interests associated with the aforementioned 'open doors/closed frontiers' imperative of US power-projection.

As originally conceived, the 'War on Terror' provided American elites with an opportunity to reconstitute primacy by overcoming a set of strategic problems created by the Soviet Union's collapse (Gowan 2006). To maintain full spectrum dominance over all conceivable military threats, the Bush administration prioritised the development of irregular warfare capabilities designed to fight the asymmetrical, transnational security challenge presented by al-Qaeda and associated networks (Ryan 2019). The 9/11 attacks promoted a fundamental 'remapping' of the geopolitical calculus of American policymakers, precipitating regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq as central fronts in a nebulous 'Global War on Terror' in which 'highly mobile forces [would] respond to contingencies anywhere on the planet in short order' (Dalby

2007, 591). This gave the US new purpose and new enemies, testing the dexterity of its military capabilities in unforeseen and complex ways. The Iraq War proved a turning-point both for the US military and the public (Berinsky 2009; Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler 2009). Dubbed the 'three trillion-dollar war' (Stiglitz and Bilmes 2008), polling data showed a growing scepticism of overseas commitments on the part of American voters in the decade following the 2003 invasion (Smeltz, Daalder and Kafura 2014). Shaped by these trends, Defence Secretary Robert Gates noted in 2011 that 'any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should "have his head examined"' (quoted in Shanker 2011).

By Bush's second term, the United States was already moving toward a more 'remote' approach to maintaining the territorial integrity of states threatened by transnational terrorist organisations. With the violence of distant, subaltern actors impinging on the politics of the US metropole, the financial, military and political costs of the Iraq War were becoming untenable. As the security situation in Iraq deteriorated, the Bush administration temporarily 'surged' the number of US ground forces and implemented a population-centric counterinsurgency model aimed at winning the 'hearts and minds' of the local population. Following the 2006 midterm elections, Donald Rumsfeld, steadfast champion of 'high tech' and 'light-footprint' forms of military intervention (Rumsfeld, 2002), was forced out as Defense Secretary. The US began to lean more heavily on partnered security forces, within and beyond Iraq (Biddle, Macdonald and Baker 2018, 113-8; Ryan 2019; Watts and Biegon 2017). Rumsfeld's replacement, Robert Gates, had a more pragmatic vision:

> The United States is unlikely to repeat another Iraq or Afghanistan—that is, forced regime change followed by nation building under fire—anytime soon. But that does not

mean it may not face similar challenges in a variety of locales. Where possible, US strategy is to employ indirect approaches—primarily through building the capacity of partner governments and their security forces—to prevent festering problems from turning into crises that require costly and controversial direct military intervention. In this kind of effort, the capabilities of the United States' allies and partners may be as important as its own, and building their capacity is arguably as important as, if not more so than, the fighting the United States does itself (Gates 2009, 29-30).

Gates' statements around this time clarified US efforts to retool its coercive power in a more 'indirect' fashion. Evidence for this important change of tack extended to two policy documents formulated at toward the end of Bush's presidency: the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review and the National Defense Authorisation Act for Fiscal Year 2006.

The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)evidenced a clear commitment to full spectrum dominance by calling for military pre-eminence in both conventional and irregular warfare (DOD 2006a; Ryan 2019, 144-6). It promoted a 'whole-of-government' approach to building the capacity of partnering states to address internal security threats, particularly those associated with the al-Qaeda network, and the need to 'work with and through partners to operate clandestinely and to sustain a persistent but low-visibility presence' (DOD 2006a, 11). As such, the 2006 QDR demonstrated a renewed focus on the importance of both multilateralism in counterterrorism efforts and generating 'distance' between US ground forces and the combat operations associated with stability operations on the periphery.

To this end, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2006 authorised a new Pentagon-managed security cooperation programme known as the Section 1206 Global Train

and Equip authority (DOD 2006b), later expanded into the Section 333 Building Partner Capacity authority . Section 1206 funds were used to build the capacity of partnered states to better 'police' their own territories and, in the case of European partners, to provide troop contributions for stability operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Combatant commanders quickly came to value the Section 1206 authority as 'the single most important tool to shape the environment and counter terrorism outside Iraq and Afghanistan' (quoted in Ryan 2019, 155). Testament to this, $1.3 billion in programme funds were spent between October 2005 and September 2010 in over thirty countries across Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East (Ryan 2019, 154).

To prevail in the 'long war' against transnational terrorist organisations, the Pentagon also needed to accelerate its 'transformation' into a lighter, more expeditionary force. This would enable American forces to be 'surged' into various 'hot spots' in a way that mimicked the networked movements of its adversaries (Dalby 2009, 243). To this end, the 2006 QDR articulated a nimbler basing posture to reduce the military's Cold War-era 'footprint' while still providing for rapid power projection capabilities (DOD 2006, 18). Key to this vision was leveraging remote weapons technologies — precision guided munitions, unmanned aerial systems and stealth aircraft — to increase the accuracy and distance at which Western forces could strike their adversaries (Dalby 2008, 242; Dalby 2009, 235). Identifying 'many areas and technologies that promise to revolutionize the future force', in addition to building partner capacity through security cooperation programmes such as the Section 1206 authority, the 2006 QDR called for a sharp increase in the reconnaissance coverage provided by unmanned systems. This was to be accomplished, in part, by the accelerated acquisition of Predator and Global Hawk drones (DOD 2006a46). A squadron of drones would also be created to help SOF 'locate and target enemy capabilities in denied or contested areas' (DOD 2006a, 45). When

coupled with further funding and manpower increases(DOD 2006a, 43-5), these technologies would strengthen SOF 'capability and capacity to conduct low-visibility, persistent presence missions and a global unconventional warfare campaign' (DOD 2006a, 44; see also Ryan 2019, 156-61).

Governing in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the Obama administration sought a more restrained foreign policy, one that dovetailed with the changes implemented toward the end of Bush's tenure. Obama embraced the 'roadmap' laid out by the 2006 QDR, moving the US further in the direction of a 'transnational shadow war' (Niva 2013). Sensitive to concerns around American decline (Quinn 2011), insofar as there was an Obama Doctrine, it was defined as much by scepticism of the 'Washington playbook' on intervention as it was by the propensity for large-scale military intervention to protect its wide-ranging interests. 'Don't do stupid shit' became the unofficial slogan of the administration's foreign policy (Goldberg 2016). Although the administration 'surged' US ground forces in Afghanistan, this was a temporary and reluctant measure intended to salvage the deteriorating military situation in the country, rather than an endorsement of this form of intervention (Waldman 2018, 185). The 2011 intervention in Libya, which plunged the country into crisis and was described by Obama as amongst the 'worst' mistakes of his presidency (Tierney 2016), was followed by a reluctance to seek outright regime change in Syria (Rhodes 2018, 232-4). Obama received some criticism for 'leading by behind', both from his domestic opponents and from analysts who felt he had overcorrected in his attempt to streamline American primacy in the post-Iraq, post-financial crisis environment (Löfflmann 2015). For Obama, diplomacy, multilateralism and restraint could shore up US primacy, mitigating longer-term processes of decline.

These adjustments were only part of the Obama administration's geostrategic vision. It also sought a 'pivot' to Asia, later rebranded as a 'rebalance' (Acharya 2018; Posen 2014, 6, 95). The turn toward more 'remote' modalities policing of the periphery cannot be detached from perceptions of strategic competition with China (Dalby 2007, 594, 598; Dalby 2008, 422). The move to bolster the American military presence, basing architecture and strategic partnerships in East Asia has clear geopolitical logics and implications (Schreer, 2019; Scott, 2012). As early as the 2006 QDR, officials noted that 'China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time off set traditional U.S. military advantages absent U.S. counter strategies' (DOD 2006a, 29). Accelerating over time, geopolitical competition with an emerging (near-)peer rival has provided further impetus for the pursuit of more efficacious forms of military interventionism. By minimising the diplomatic, financial, military and political costs of intervention, a more 'remote' approach to counterterrorism would allow the US to focus on East Asia, which Obama viewed as integral to the country's long-term interests (Goldberg 2016). The increased use of drones and surrogates in Afghanistan and Pakistan dovetailed with this effort to 'contain' China, though the language of containment was, on the whole, eschewed by the Obama administration. In some respects, Trump's 'hard line' approach toward China – epitomised by his bellicose rhetoric and self-declared 'trade war' with Beijing – represented an intensification of pre-existing trends.

Initially, Trump's idiosyncrasies raised the possibility of a radical break in the American pursuit of primacy. Substantively, however, the administration has remained committed to strategic competition with emerging powers and the policing of transnational security threats (authors, in press). The nationalism of the Trump phenomenon is unmistakable (Biegon 2019), but the ramifications of the (ostensible) rejection of 'globalism' are harder to discern. In some

respects, Trump's 'America First' vision, anchored to a transactional understanding of interests, narrowed the scope of US primacy. The Trump administration's National Security Strategy (NSS) pledged to 'reassert America's advantages on the world stage' by, in part, acknowledging the 'central role of power in international politics' (White House 2017, 55). The 'peace through strength' theme of the NSS was consistent with the foreign policies of previous Republican presidents (Herbert, McCrisken and Wroe 2019, 185-213). The document contained the usual platitudes about the importance of diplomacy, institutions and partnership. Above all, it evidenced a commitment to primacy. 'By ensuring our military power is second to none and fully integrated with our allies and all of our instruments of power', it read, Washington would 'deter and if necessary, defeat aggression against U.S. interests and increase the likelihood of managing competitions without violent conflict and preserving peace' (White House 2017, 26). Although, like Obama, Trump rejected open-ended, 'nation building' campaigns overseas, his administration institutionalised the 'remote' counterterrorism playbook he inherited from his predecessors, with a notable uptick in drone strikes and SOF raids in some theatres during the first year of his presidency (authors, in press). At the same time, Trump's chaotic presidency embodied a larger crisis in American foreign policy, heightening perceptions of decline (Biegon 2019; Cooley and Nexon 2020; Trubowitz and Harris 2019).

In sum, the post-9/11, post-Iraq period has been characterised by an unevenness in the geopolitical reasoning underpinning US primacy. Paradoxically, the Bush administration's experiment with regime change in Iraq created a conduit through which the political violence of subaltern forces could shape the politics of the American metropole – the violence of the insurgency brought the implications of the occupation 'home' to the American public and, by extension, American policymakers. From 2006 onward, successive administrations have

strived to reimpose distance – both politically and physically – between the United States and the places and spaces of its use of military force. At the same time, the currents of strategic competition with China grew more pronounced. In this context, American planners have 'shun[ed] direct control of territory and populations and its cumbersome order-building and order-maintaining responsibilities' in favour of a more remote approach to intervention (Demmers and Gould 2018, 367). The intersection of political crisis at home and military failure abroad damaged the ability of elites to build support for an internationalist foreign policy, undermining attempts to forge a coherent narrative to maintain primacy. To be sure, despite the lack of a fully-fledged grand strategy for the post-War on Terror period, US strategic thinking has adjusted to these emergent factors. In effect, however, the US confronted new constraints on its 'usable power', which Trubowitz and Harris define as the 'domestic political capacity to translate (material) power assets into international influence' (2019, 621). The persistence of transnational security threats in the global south precluded the possibility of wholesale retrenchment, as China's rise continued apace. The reproduction of US primacy would need to be sustained against both state competitors and non-state challengers.

What is Remote Warfare?

Remote warfare is a contested concept, one that is often studied on the assumption that 'you know it when you see it' (Watts and Biegon 2017, iii). The term remote warfare emerged from the dialogue on remote-controlled weapons technologies, of which drones have been the most prominently studied. As one scholar notes, research on remote warfare has been 'dominated' by concerns over the growing importance of armed drones, particularly in US counterterrorism operations (Huelss 2019, 356). Interdisciplinary debates on the ethics, geographies and history of drone warfare have been integral to remote warfare's development and terminological

currency (Adelman and Kieran 2018; Crawford 2015; Gregory 2011b, Gusterson 2016; Ohlin 2017; Schulzke 2016). In this area of scholarship, remoteness is generally understood to be generated through the asymmetrical physical distance imposed between an intervening agent and the sites of the use of force. From air-conditioned ground control stations in North America, these technologies enable United States Air Force operators to survey remote battlefields – their primary tactical function – and, if a target presents itself, conduct airstrikes with impunity (Gregory, 2011b). Drones reduce 'the importance that geographic distance and obstacles have in separating "there" from "here"' (Shaw 2013, 550, whilst allowing governments 'to hunt down affiliates "everywhere"'; (Gregory 2011a).

Over time, researchers have recognised that a narrow focus on drones diminishes the importance of other remote modalities of intervention (Adelman and Kieran 2018, 2). Building on this observation, a second strand of literature foregrounds the use of multiple 'remote' modalities of security management alongside, and at times in place of, remote-controlled drone technologies. The Oxford Research Group (ORG), a London-based think-tank advocating for more sustainable and accountable approaches to British security policy, helped foster this more holistic understanding of the 'remotification' of political violence. The ORG expanded the empirical referents of remote warfare to include, amongst other practices: (1) drones, whether used in a strike or an Intelligence Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capacity; (2) indirect efforts to build the military capacity of local or regional security forces through the provision of security cooperation and intelligence sharing; and (3) SOF, who can conduct 'kill-capture' raids against high level military targets and train, support and mentor partnered forces (Knowles and Watson 2018a, 2-3; Knowles and Matisek 2019, 10).

For the ORG, the term remote warfare 'describes approaches to combat that do not require the deployment of large numbers of your own ground troops' (Knowles and Watson, 2018a, 2). Despite some qualifications (see Knowles and Watson 2018a, 2-3), this definition lacks definitional precision and failureto capture the geopolitical logics animating why remote warfare may be used. Nevertheless, in the emerging policy debates on remote warfare, the ORG helped illuminate the ways in which Western policymakers could use various modalities of remote intervention to generate political distance in their security management practices. Echoing a distinction central to Patrick Porter's (2015) research on the importance of distance in international security, ORG researches noted that 'the "remote" in "remote warfare" speaks more to strategic than physical distance' (Knowles and Watson 2018a, 3). Although remote technology can increase the physical distance between an intervening agent and the site of the use of force, it does not, echoing Porter, 'necessarily shrink strategic space, the ability to project power across the earth affordably against resistance' (2015, 8). Strategic space is a contested arena in which the agency of the intervening state clashes with the resistance of the actor targeted for the use of force. It is measured not only in terms of costs in blood, treasure, and diplomatic fallout, but 'the political will to incur those costs' (Porter 2015, 8-9). By increasing the physical distance between American ground forces and the spaces and places of their intervention, remote warfare can compress strategic distance by reducing the costs involved with overseas intervention. Often cloaked in secrecy, these 'light-footprint' operations help insulate defence planners from some of the domestic risks of intervention, including with respect to oversight and public debate (Knowles and Watson 2018a, 20-3; 2018b). This contributes to a 'paradox', as argued by Demmers and Gould (2020) – with military intervention becoming more remote and 'sanitised', ostensibly, 'it becomes uncared for, and even ceases to be defined as war'.

Synthesising the two existing pockets of remote warfare literature, we offer a novel definition of remote warfare, as a strategy of security management combining multiple 'remote' modalities of military intervention to generate physical and political forms of distance between an intervening agent and the sites(s) of the use of force. When taken together, the word 'remote' make a significant contribution to the analytical terrain, which is greater than allusions to remote-controlled drones and other constitutive tools. The noun 'warfare' is qualified by the adjective 'remote' precisely to imply that, for its architects, the violence of war-fighting (and its socio-political impact) is to be geographically and politically 'distanced' from the state that said planners are nominally responsible for defending (See also Krieg & Rickli, 2019). This spatial dimension is crucial in strategic terms, even if it is only implied in official discourse. Remote warfare is about maintaining and, where possible, extending practices of coercive statecraft, providing new pathways for US military interventionism. The tools of remote warfare are embedded in a strategic logic that rests on geopolitical premises — that coercive violence can be 'distanced' so as to minimise the negative implications of continued interventionism, both to facilitate coercive statecraft and sustain the United States' dominant power-position in international politics.

Our focus on the strategic drivers of remote warfare positions our understanding of the phenomenon within the wider debate, offering a critical view that distinguishes our analysis from existing accounts of the geopolitics of American power. In the critical tradition initiated by Ó Tuathail and Agnew, geopolitics is 'the study of the spatialization of international politics by core powers and hegemonic states' (1992, 192). As emphasised by Dalby, at the core of critical geopolitics is the 'necessity to engage with the spatial framing of politics and the geographical tropes used in security, defence and foreign policy thinking' (2008, 415). This subsequently engenders a close consideration of strategy, which is, among other things, an

attempt to order geographies of power for the benefit of the dominant actor (see for example, Agnew 2005; Dalby 2007; 2009). As we can now examine, recent scholarship on the geopolitics of American power has tended to gloss over the intentionality of the US *qua* national actor, often obscuring the planning that has gone into the use of remote modalities of intervention.

The scholarship on the phenomenon of remote warfare encompasses a variety of competing and adjacent terms, with particular emphasis on networks (Niva 2013), light-footprints (Goldsmith and Waxman 2016), shadows (Waldman 2018, 182, 199), grey zones (Gregory 2011a, 241-2), hybrids (Hoffman 2009) and assemblages (Demmers and Gould 2018; Moore and Walker 2016). Demmers and Gould, for instance, have identified a trend toward 'flexible, open-ended, "pop-up" military interventions, supported by remote technology and reliant on local partnerships and private contractors, through which (coalitions of) parties aim to promote and protect interest'. What they term 'liquid warfare' is 'temporally open-ended and event-ful, as well as spatially dispersed and mobile' (Demmers and Gould 2018, 366). The remoteness that constitutes this newfound fluidity is possible because of advancements in satellites, cyber, robotics and information technology more broadly. The fluidity of the approach speaks to its flexibility for those seeking new ways of intervening in foreign conflicts, whether for purposes of counterterrorism or geopolitical manoeuvring, at a time when Western publics are less willing to countenance this type of interventionist policy. The notion of liquidity, as with the emphasis on networks, can obscure the centrality of American agency to this story. The technologies that facilitate remote warfare were developed to realise a geostrategic vision of international politics in which Washington continues to police the periphery while preserving its power resources vis-à-vis strategic competitors like China.

In their examination of 'liquid warfare', Demmers and Gould draw on the work of Zygmunt Bauman, whose seminal *Liquid Modernity*, published in 2000, identified patterns of 'lightness' in the wars in the Persian Gulf and the Balkans in the 1990s. The 'post-Panoptical' patterns sketched by Bauman, in which power was associated with 'escape, slippage, elision and avoidance', evoke recent practices of remote warfare as well as the tendency to detach the phenomena from specific, geopolitically-situated agents. 'Blows delivered by stealthy fighter planes and "smart" self-guided and target-seeking missiles—delivered by surprise, coming from nowhere and immediately vanishing from sight', he wrote (2000, 12), 'replaced the territorial advances of the infantry troops and the effort to dispossess the enemy of its territory—to take over the land owned, controlled and administered by the enemy'.

The notion that organised political violence was effectively coming from 'nowhere' echoed the (problematic) argument of philosopher Jean Baudrillard that 'the Gulf War did not take place' (1995). In the context of the US military's overwhelming air power, Baudrillard pointed to the relative indirectness of the experience for individual US personnel. This meant that the events of 1990-1991 were more a simulacrum of war than the 'real thing'. Similarly, poststructuralist IR theorist James Der Derian wrote about the virtual-reality-infused notion of 'infowar' in his work *Virtuous War*. In infowar, 'networks of remote sensing and iconic representation enable the targeting, demonization, and, if necessary, killing of the enemy', facilitated by 'violent (GPS-guided missiles and bombs) as well as non-lethal (pulse weapons and psychological operations) applications of technology' (Der Derian 2009 [2001], 255). Clearly, there is overlap between remote warfare and earlier forms of post-Cold War military intervention. In their focus on the diffuse and ambiguous (networks, shadows, grey zones), however, these accounts tended to downplay the agential forces behind the geographic distribution of kinetic violence and the geopolitical organisation of coercive power. Although the US has never had a monopoly on

remote warfare, the practices most closely associated with remote interventionism emerged from a unique and steadfast commitment to primacy on behalf of the American state, which, as discussed above, manifested across the Bush, Obama and Trump presidencies.

Even preceding the widespread use of drones, there was the strong sense that the spatiality of warfare was in flux. The geographer Derek Gregory (2011a) coined the phrase 'everywhere war' to capture the essence of this new stealth and shadowesque form of conflict. From the 'Amexica' border to the nebulous 'Af-Pak' theatre, Gregory blends a variety of security phenomena, from terrorism and narco-trafficking to the Arab Spring uprisings. At the same time, Gregory remarks that 'there is a considerable history behind today's remote operations in the borderlands', noting that remotely piloted aircraft have been used in warfare going back many decades (2011b, 189). Although the fusion of intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and strike capabilities within a weapons platform marks a change in 'late-modern' warfighting, giving rise to new visibilities in the counter-insurgent battlespace, drone warfare has continuities with older forms of air war when it comes to the purported 'efficiency' of such attacks (Gregory 2011b, 193, 205). As with others (Blakeley 2018; Saita, 2014), Gregory traces this back to previous historical epochs, such as British aerial counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan in the 1920s (2011b, 189). It is the 'American way of war' that constitutes his principal empirical focus (2011a), and Gregory work's does re-centre the United States in this 'everywhere' milieu. Nevertheless, in our analytical purview, the point of remote warfare is precisely that it is not 'everywhere' it is '*some*where'—the violence is intended to be distanced from various actors and audiences in the metropole, making it more politically palatable.

The geographical aspects of remote warfare remain somewhat ambiguous. Things like drones and SOF still require a territorial 'footprint' of some kind. Moreover, the United States can

never fully distance itself from the effects of its military statecraft, evidenced by the violent 'blowback' that follows its interventions as well as the paradoxical forms of intimacy that accompany practices like targeted killings (Demmers and Gould 2020; Gregory 2011b; Lee 2018; Moran 2016). However, as discussed above, this tension reflects the wider discourse on the 'new new' wars, in which warfare is 'liquid' and 'everywhere' (Gregory 2011a), seems to come from 'nowhere' (Bauman 2000, 12), and is experienced 'vicariously' (Waldman 2018), but only by the dominant party. By relating this form of military intervention to US primacy, the dynamics of contemporary remote warfare become clearer and more concrete. The (geo)politics of the phenomenon become open to scrutiny. Remote warfare is designed to facilitate military interventionism by distancing the United States from the application of coercive force by keeping the 'there *there'* and the 'here *here'*. It is not 'everywhere' but 'somewhere'. The ideal amount of distance is determined by American politicians and planners, with an eye toward US pre-eminence and the preservation of its useable power (Trubowitz and Harris, 2019). In this effort, policymakers can draw on a variety of tools, which we can now interrogate in greater detail.

The Geopolitics of Remote Warfare: From Counterterrorism to Great Power Competition

Remote warfare's history is complex and subject to multiple interpretations (Knowles and Watson 2018a, 2; Watts and Biegon, 2019). To an extent, contemporary trends resonate with historical experiences. For example, recent US drone operations (in Pakistan and elsewhere) are similar to interwar Britain's aerial 'policing' operations in Iraq, where the fledging RAF was deployed to maintain order without the costly and politically-contentious deployment of larger numbers of ground forces (Blakeley 2018; Saita, 2014). Similarly, multiple remote

modalities of military intervention – from drones to SOF and PMSCs – were integral to the 'large-footprint' campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. As Dalby reminds us however, 'historical analogies with contemporary developments are always tempting, but need to be addressed cautiously if appropriate lessons are to be drawn for present discussions' (2009, 235). Insofar as we are able to assess the 'newness' of contemporary remote warfare, we need to contextualise its place in the retooling of American primacy. This means foregrounding the geopolitical logic imbued in the practices of remote warfare while acknowledging the discrete histories of its constituent instruments.

In our view, 'remote warfare' has analytical utility in part because it distinguishes (re-)emergent dynamics in the post-Iraq War period from earlier periods of American primacy. Our definitional focus on the production of geographical and political distance helps periodise contemporary trends. It captures recent and ongoing changes to the practices of war-fighting prevalent among (though not exclusive to) Western states. At its widest, it acknowledges the technological legacy of the 'virtuous' post-Cold War interventions (Der Derian 2009) while differentiating 'light-footprint' counterterrorism operations from the preceding nation-building campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. The nation-building approach was costly, an issue of growing import given heightening concerns over China's rise as a strategic competitor. It also lacked flexibility, and seemed incapable of addressing the challenges posed by irregular groups like al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In contrast, a remote approach afforded some adaptability to the contingencies thrown up by these irregular forces. Moreover, remote warfare captures the various technological advancements that, in the case of drones, have heightened the asymmetric features of Western interventionism (Ohlin 2017; Schulzke 2016). When compared to earlier episodes of intervention, and in light of the challenges to American primacy, there is something genuinely distinct about the recent 'remotification' of US military

power. This is true despite the fact that the history of war undoubtedly includes many examples of states strategically attempting to distance themselves from the realities of political violence, whether physically/geographically or politically.

By providing a (comparatively) covert means for ISR and targeted strikes, drones have eased the recent transition away from large-scale ground wars (Shaw 2013). From Washington's perspective, unmanned aircraft are attractive because, despite the acute psychological intimacies experienced by drone pilots (Gregory, 2011b; Lee 2018), the use of drones does not generate the kind of political opposition that comes with more conventional interventions (Mayer 2015, 767-8). On the whole, the American public has been relatively unopposed to the use of drones (Kaag and Kreps 2014, 60-6). Meanwhile, China's burgeoning drone industry has heightened concerns over the impact of unmanned technologies on future interstate conflict (Horowitz, Kreps and Fuhrmann 2016, 11, 39). China's export of drones to the Middle East has drawn particular attention (Milan and Tabrizi 2020, 734-5). Coupled with the accelerating horizontal and vertical proliferation of drone technologies, advances in remote-controlled weapons systems have generated talk of a 'second drone age' characterised by (further) transformative changes in the legality, ethics and exercise of the use of force (Callamard 2020). Due to their limited payload and survivability, the existing generation of drones, namely the MQ-1 Predator and the MQ-9 Reaper, are gradually 'becoming less relevant as the United States slowly rebalances its military posture towards the Asia–Pacific region and renews its focus on high-intensity warfare' (Mayer 2015, 769). By incorporating greater stealth and deep-strike capabilities in the next generation of armed drones however (Mayer 2015, 773-4; Haas and Fischer, 2017), the United States further refines its remote warfare 'toolbox', creating new pathways in the pursuit of primacy amidst the shifting technological terrain.

Consistent with the 2006 QDR's vision of Special Operations Forces fighting 'a global unconventional warfare campaign' (DOD 2006, 44), American SOF were active in a record 147 states by 2015—up from 60 in 2009 (quoted in Byman and Merritt 2018, 83). Pioneered during the counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, and generally utilised outside of media and legislative scrutiny (Niva 2013; Moran 2016),[iii] 'kill-capture' raids have been rolled out across the subaltern areas of US counterterrorism efforts, often in conjunction with drone strikes. The changing 'cartographies' of political violence against high-value targets has been traced to the adoption of networked organisational practices on the part of the secretive Joint Special Operations Command (Niva 2013). SOF also train, advise and assist local forces who conduct the bulk of the frontline fighting against transnational terrorist groups, while occasionally accompanying these forces into battle (Byman and Merritt 2018, 85; Biddle, Macdonald and Baker 2018, 104). Their lighter military footprint 'makes it easier for the United States to have influence and operate in places that would otherwise bristle at or outright reject any overt American military presence', reducing the political costs of such activities for both the US and the host-government (Byman and Merritt 2018, 88). As Washington's strategic focus has shifted away from counterterrorism toward great power competition with state competitors, however, funding for SOF, which increased precipitously in the post-9/11 era, has begun to level off raising new uncertainties about this instrument of US remote warfare (Trask, Clark and Brandin 2020).

Within the remote warfare literature, there is the acknowledgement that, for interventions to be effective, 'there must be allies on the ground with the power to seize, clear and hold terrain' (Knowles and Matisek 2019, 10). With this in mind, in addition to SOF, security cooperation has become a vital tool in supporting the host-country forces that do the bulk of frontline fighting (Knowles and Matisek 2019; Watts and Biegon 2017). The 'patchwork' of activities

that comprise 'security cooperation' share a unifying focus on 'reduc[ing] the need for US troops to do the fighting by improving the ally's ability to do this themselves' (Biddle, Macdonald and Baker 2018, 91-2). Used in conjunction with security force assistance programmes, security cooperation initiatives provide a conduit for the US military to train and equip overseas partners – and to otherwise 'build their capacity', in the bureaucratic language of these activities. To this end, 'Washington employs (security cooperation) to not only build relationships with foreign security forces, but also to distance its forces from the kinetic violence of the battlefield, ostensibly while retaining a degree of influence over resource allocation and outcomes' (Watts and Biegon 2017, 3). The delegation inherent in such activities creates a complex set of principal-agent problems that limit the effectiveness of this 'remote' modality of intervention (Biddle, Macdonald and Baker 2018). Although they distance the US from the spaces of its intervention, security cooperation programmes can contribute to the misalignment of interests between the US and its partners, creating agency losses and leading to the misappropriation of aid.

Issues of externalisation, delegation and agency loss can also be observed in the use of private military and security companies (PMSCs), another instrument of military intervention that reduces Washington's reliance on conventional forces. The use of private contractors echoes the historical role of mercenaries, but the presence of PMSCs in contemporary remote warfare can be traced to the immediate post-Cold War period (Krieg 2018). As illustrated in the work of Deborah Avant (2005), the privatisation of security forces in the 1980s, 90s and early 2000s had consequences for the control and regulation of state violence at a time when a host of new, non-states actors had entered the international security arena, from NGOs to transnational corporations. In keeping with the evolving geopolitical understanding of American power, PMSCs act as 'force multipliers that enhance the state's ability to fight wars remotely',

enabling them 'to achieve military objectives overseas with enhanced discretion, plausible deniability and consequently lower political costs' (Krieg 2018, iv). A range of military activities have been contracted out to commercial agents in support of counterterrorism operations in Africa, including core logistical support functions, base protection, equipment maintenance and even manned aerial surveillance operations (Moore and Walker 2016). PMSCs have been thoroughly integrated into American drone operations, including in Afghanistan and Iraq, where they have been used to compensate for operator shortages in reconnaissance missions (Schmidt, 2016). According to reports, PMSCs are used to arm drone aircraft and to defend drone bases outside of conventional warzones (Risen and Mazzetti, 2009). Alongside or in place of SOF, PMSCs have also been utilised to build the capacity of foreign security forces (Waldman 2018, 190).

In the near- to medium-term, these remote modalities of military intervention – drones, SOF, security cooperation, PMSCs – will remain instrumental in the 'policing' of transnational terrorist organisations, which continue to challenge American primacy 'from below'. However, the patterns and tools of remote warfare will almost certainly be impacted by the ongoing the reprioritisation of US defence planning. According to the Summary of the 2018 National Defence Strategy (the replacement for the QDR), '[i]nter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security' (DOD 2018, 1). This shift will generate new trajectories for US remote warfare, which, in their complexity, are beyond the scope of this article to interrogate in full. Nevertheless, Washington's commitment to military pre-eminence will remain a pillar of its broader efforts to maintain and, where possible, strengthen its primacy. This will almost certainly fuel considerable investments in, and development of, autonomous weapons systems. Indeed, analysts have already identified an

emergent 'arms race' in the area of weaponised Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Haner and Garcia 2019).

In recent decades, advances in computing power, data collection and the sophistication of narrow forms of AI have increased the range and complexity of the military tasks which can been delegated to machines (Krieg and Rickli 2019, 101--8). This underpinned the development of increasingly 'autonomous' weapon systems (AWS), which are understood to threaten the military foundations of American primacy. The Pentagon's Third Offset Strategy, announced by then Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel in 2014, was designed to leverage advances in AI technology to counter military modernisation efforts by China and Russia (Wyatt 2020, 4). The 2018 National Defence Strategy similarly stressed the 'military application of autonomy, artificial intelligence, and machine learning, including rapid application of commercial breakthroughs, to gain competitive military advantages' (DOD 2018, 7). Consistent with this focus, successive administrations have heavily invested in the development of AWS systems across the spectrum of the air, sea and land domains (Haner and Garica 2019, 332-3). As defined in the Pentagon's Directive 3000.09, AWS are weapons that 'once activated, can select and engage targets without further intervention by a human operator' (quoted in Bode and Huelss 2018, 399).

Despite previously implying support for legally binding prohibitions on AWS usage (Bode and Huelss 2018, 399), China has consolidated robotics and weaponised AI research as one of its strategic priorities (Kania 2020). China's defence planners view AI as central to an ongoing 'Revolution in Military Affairs'. If properly leveraged, they believe, AI could disrupt the conventional military superiority at the heart of US primacy (Wyatt 2020). By 2030, the country aims to be the world leader in AI (Wyatt 2020, 10-11). Whilst these technologies have

wider commercial applications, its 'Next Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan' specifies some of their intended military applications (Haner and Garica 2019, 333). If realised, China's pursuit of AI leadership could have major strategic implications (Kania 2020; Wyatt 2020). Coupled with China's prioritisation of anti-access/area denial capabilities intended to 'squeeze' American forces out of the First Island Chain (Schreer 2019, 507-9), a Chinese advantage in AWS could break perceptions of US military pre-eminence, central not only to American military partnerships in East Asia but American primacy writ large (Wyatt 2020, 15-16).

To be clear: fully autonomous weapons systems are not yet in operation, and may in fact never be developed. That said, despite the image of futuristic 'Terminator-esque hunter-killers', systems with autonomous features are already shaping expectations around human-machine interactions, altering wider norms governing the use of force (Bode and Huelss 2018; Huelss 2019). As noted above, their research and development are strategic priorities for both China and the US, and, as other countries invest in this area (including, most prominently, Russia, South Korea and the United Kingdom [Haner and Garica, 2019]), technologies associated with AI/AWS may become increasingly important to remote warfare in an age of renewed great power competition. AWS could conceivably provide planners with additional tools to pursue military action without the need for 'boots on the ground', in turn generating more technologically mediated forms of remote warfare with different expressions of (geo)political distance.[iv]

Conclusion

In the context of interdisciplinary debates on US strategy, the geographies of American military power and the changing dynamics of Western interventionism, this article made the case for the analytical utility of remote warfare. We offered a novel definition of remote warfare to examine its role and function within contemporary American foreign policy. For the purposes of our analysis, remote warfare is a strategy of security management that blends multiple 'remote' modalities of military intervention to generate physical and political distance between an intervening agent and the sites(s) of its use of force. Encompassing an array of technological and policy instruments, then, from drones and AI to SOF, PMSCs and security cooperation programmes, remote warfare reflects a strategic effort by the United States to retool the coercive capabilities at the core of its international primacy.

While some of the tools of remote warfare have relatively extensive histories (security cooperation and PMSCs, for instance), others are comparatively more novel (namely, drones and AI, though the former emerged out of earlier forms of conventional airpower). The 'remoteness' of remote warfare provides planners with enhanced flexibility by distancing a state's own forces from frontline fighting. This has enabled the United States to move away from large-scale boots-on-the-ground operations, as associated with conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The strategy here suggests that the application of coercive force can be hidden from domestic audiences, who are increasingly sceptical of the US's global 'policing' role. Remote warfare is not necessarily about (re)building a consensus in favour of military interventionism. Rather, it is (at least in part) about collapsing strategic distance and extending practices of coercive statecraft. To this end, it provides a conduit for US military interventionism, which, in the post-Iraq war environment, has been increasingly closed off to traditional kinds of large-footprint campaigns.

The dynamics associated with remote warfare extend well beyond the foreign and security policies of the United States. The 'remotification' of political violence, as we have coined it, has a much larger scope, and is deserving of additional scholarly attention. However, although the dynamics of remote warfare can be analysed from a variety of angles, when applied to the geopolitics of American foreign and security policy, remote warfare is best understood as a means of retooling the coercive power at the core of US primacy. Additionally, this primacy will be an important factor for research on remote warfare moving forward—not only because of the legacy of US interventions in peripheral or subaltern areas of the global south, but also because the US remains committed to military pre-eminence in an era of renewed great power competition (DOD 2018; White House 2017). Heightened geostrategic competition with China will ensure Washington's status as a dominant 'trendsetter' moving forward, though future research will need to account for a range of actors, assuming the global remotification of political violence and military intervention intensifies.

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[i] On occasion, cyberwarfare has been discussed as one component or expression of remote warfare (see for example Ohlin 2017). As demonstrated by David Sanger (2018), the realm of cyber security is characterised by high levels of uncertainty and confusion, with cyber-attacks constituting a *sui generis* weapon. In our understanding, the cyber domain represents a distinct venue for conflict. We thank the anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to our attention.

iii There are two notable exceptions to the secrecy that has cloaked SOF operations: the 2011 raid that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan; and the 2019 raid that resulted in the death of ISIS chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Syria.

iv AWS could conceivably heighten the deniability of the use of military force (Haner and Garica 2019, 332).Likewise, by eliminating the risk of both physical and psychological harm to Western military personnel, AWS could further erode public oversight and accountability . As Ohlin notes (2017, 35-6), when situated within the larger arch of weapons development, AWS threaten to provide the 'ultimate degree of remoteness' from the physical risks of organised violence: human agents would not only be physically distanced from frontline fighting, but removed entirely.