Remote warfare – buzzword or buzzkill?

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Remote warfare – Buzzword or Buzzkill?

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ABSTRACT

The debates around remote warfare have grown significantly over the last decade, leading to the term acquiring a certain buzz in the media, think-tank, and policy discourse. The lack of any serious attempt to reflect and take stock of this body of scholarship informs the scope of this special issue, in general, and of this article in particular. This paper addresses this former gap and, in doing so, serves a threefold purpose. First, to provide a state-of-the-art review of this emerging debate. Second, to both categorise what properties make a buzzword and to make the case for why existing remote warfare scholarship should be approached in this way. Third, to introduce how the various contributions to this special issue extend the debate's conceptual, theoretical, and empirical parameters.

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Over the last decade, the language with which we have been studying political violence has sent the debate into "terminological and conceptual turmoil" (Rauta et al. 2019, 417). The late Colin Gray argued that academics and officials share a propensity to be "mesmerized by their own conceptual genius" (2007, 37). The (re)invention of concepts, he went on to explain, offered the "illusion of intellectual control" (Gray 2007, 37) that came, of course, at the significant cost of redundancy: the "discover[y] of a host of similar terms, each with its subtly distinctive meaning and probably its unique historical and cultural baggage" (Gray 2007, 37). This becomes clear when assessing the range of terms populating the semantic field of political violence: grey zone warfare (Hoffman 2016; Rauta and Monaghan 2021), hybrid warfare (Hoffman 2009; Lanoszka 2016; Renz 2016; Mälksoo 2018; Rauta 2020b), liquid warfare (Demmers and Gould 2018), post-heroic warfare (Luttwak 1995; Enemark 2013), proxy war(fare) (Rauta 2016, 2018, 2020a, 2021b; Groh 2019; Moghadam and Wyss 2020; Fox 2021), surrogate warfare (Krieg and Rickli 2018; Karagiannis 2021), and vicarious warfare (Waldman 2021). With so many labels, "war has burst out of its old boundaries" (Brooks 2017, 13) to such an extent that we are "conceptually under-equipped to grasp, let alone counter, violent political challenges" (Ucko and Marks 2018, 208; for why this is a problem for research progress and cumulation, see; Rauta 2021a, 2021c). So, naturally, a new concept enters the fray: remote warfare.

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The study of remote warfare has grown significantly over the last decade across several fields, including security studies, international relations, and law, yet there have been no clear attempts at making sense of where the debate is, let alone where it is going. In the process, the term has become a feature of British think-tank debates (Knowles and Watson 2018; Watson and Karlshøj-Pedersen 2019), entered the policy realm (The Labour Party 2019; HC Deb 16 December 2020), and has become used in media reporting on American drone operations (Robertson 2009). These usages have all contributed toward the term's overall "buzz." However, remote warfare has been subject to fairly limited conceptual scrutiny and evaluation (Watts and Biegon 2019; Watson and McKay 2021). As a consequence, its intellectual development and application have remained largely atheoretical. This failure to take stock fully of remote warfare scholarship, coupled with larger conceptual and theoretical inattention, represents a major gap in our knowledge of this subject.

More importantly, addressing this gap would seem even more imperative given that remote warfare has been described, rather speculatively, as "central to modern state-sponsored violence" (Adelman and Kieran 2020, 3) and "the most common form of military engagement used by states" (Watson and Alasdair 2021, 7). In their clearest form, these are over-statements yet to be subject to empirical scrutiny, and these should be read as an attempted rhetorical validation of an emerging research programme. Irrespective of how one might position the relevance of remote warfare on the spectrum of contemporary conflict, its 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). Without this clarity, remote warfare scholarship will not only be unable to cut through the turmoil which characterises the wider debates on contemporary political violence but, instead, will only deepen it.

This special issue is the first to provide a corrective to these gaps. It aims to advance the conceptual and theoretical study of remote warfare as an important step in supporting the continued and sustainable development of this nascent research agenda. The articles extend the empirical discussion manifold: (1) on this topic toward a more rigorous assessment of its history and relationship to new security problems and challenges such as assassination (Trenta 2021); (2) the dynamics and character of its use by actors other than the United States and Britain (Stoddard and Toltica 2021); (3) by extending remote warfare scholarship in new theoretical directions through the prism of ontological security (Riemann and Rossi 2021b); and (4) with a focus on the legitimacy of military capabilities (McDonald 2021). Other contributions develop the study of remote warfare's constitutive "remoteness," highlighting how clearer thinking on this subject can help us understand the empirical complexities of recent US military interventions (Watts and Biegon 2021). This special issue also makes space for a dissenting discussion on the limits of the notion in the form of a conceptual critique, in a way that invites considerations of the degree to which remote warfare is truly analytically and practically useful (Rauta 2021c). In line with the overall scope of this collective exchange, all contributions pay at least some attention to conceptual issues as a starting point for broader theoretical and empirical evaluations. Taken as a whole, this special issue aims to make a timely intervention to remote warfare scholarship by investigating a complex set of conceptual and theoretical puzzles that push the debate further beyond its traditional focus on issues of efficacy and ethics (Adelman and Kieran 2020, 4).

This extended introduction has three aims: to provide a state-of-the-art review of remote warfare scholarship; to assess the buzzword appeal of remote warfare; and to introduce the various contributions made by this special issue. It provides an overview of the current state of the debate, its direction of travel and, perhaps most importantly, the internal analytical tensions. It does so by building on existing reflections written from the perspective of those working on its legal (Ohlin 2017a), cultural (Adelman and Kieran 2020), and policy (Watson and Alasdair 2021) implications. Our introduction performs an important contextualising role, outlining the special issue's core themes and helping situate its contributions within this growing area of debate. For remote warfare scholars, it refreshes existing reflections on the overall state of the debate in line with the rapid expansion of the literature, which, amongst other contributions, has recently included two interdisciplinary edited collections (Adelman and Kieran 2020; Watson and Alasdair 2021).

For a wider audience, this paper also develops the notion of a buzzword as a heuristic for assessing the introduction of terms into the semantic field on contemporary political violence. The notion of a buzzword is widely used across the social sciences (Cornwall and Brock 2005; Cornwall 2007; Ravitch 2007; Bensaude Vincent 2014; Foulds 2014; Routley 2014; Mason 2019; Schnable et al. 2021). Despite being mentioned in recent scholarship on political violence (Almäng 2019, 192; Rauta 2020a, 115), its application in this area has yet to be justified or deliberated. From a review of the existing literature, we identify four properties common to all buzzwords: they are indicative of current fashions or *trends*; are inherently *vague*; are associated with *distinct actors* who stretch the words' meanings across various contexts; and are *normative*, having a role in setting or critiquing the policy agenda. Whilst "remote warfare" has yet to become widely used by policymakers or defence officials, it meets all of the criteria of a buzzword. To be clear: whilst the term buzzword has a pejorative connotation (Bensaude Vincent 2014, 238–39), our use of it should not be read as a denigration of either remote warfare as a subject of academic enquiry or the contributions made by existing contributors to the debate. Rather, we argue, it is through discussing and identifying remote warfare's "contingent, situational and relational meanings," to return to Cornwall and Brock's understanding of a buzzword (2005, 2), that its intellectual foundations can be strengthened. In short: labelling remote warfare as a buzzword is not to call for a cessation of its study but rather, consistent with the overall aims of this special issue, to encourage greater attention to the conceptual issues involved with this research enterprise moving forward.

This introduction is structured into three sections. The first section reviews the existing interdisciplinary debates on remote warfare and reflects on the major trends within the debate. We highlight the ongoing expansion of remote warfare's empirical referents to include the study of multiple security agents and practices. This trend has opened new research pathways, particularly when it comes to assessing the various policy failures associated with recent Western military interventions and their socio-political consequences. Yet, the addition of new referents has meant that the concept has travelled beyond its original focus on technology in war toward the distinct set of analytical and policy issues generated by delegation, creating a certain analytical tension of which participants to the debate should remain conscious. The second section examines remote warfare's buzzworthy-ness. We show that, whilst remote warfare meets all four criteria of a buzzword, policymakers have generally avoided using the term remote warfare and that

academically this has yielded some intellectual shortcomings. The third section outlines the specific contributions this special issue makes to the debates on remote warfare and maps the individual arguments onto our scope and in reference to the broader debate.

The study of remote warfare

Remote warfare is a subject of multidisciplinary debate. The breadth of the scholarship on the topic complicates any evaluation of this nascent research debate while incurring the risk of categorising discrete areas of study by imposing a sense of analytical neatness, which belies the inherent messiness of the research enterprise and downplays areas of shared enquiry and dialogue. Whilst remaining sensitive to these points, five broad areas of remote warfare scholarship can be identified: (1) the ethics, legality, and experiences of using various weapons technologies; (2) the cultural representations and consequences of remote warfare technologies; (3) issues of delegation and privatisation in war; (4) the transparency, efficacy, and human costs of recent Western counterterrorism and stabilisation operations; and (5) remote warfare's geopolitical logics and sociopolitical effects.

Whilst these contributions have progressed knowledge in multiple new directions, they have also created a major tension within the debate. As we discuss, some accounts have developed a *techno-centric* understanding of remote warfare, which focuses on the impact of various weapons technologies on the conduct, cultural impact, and legality of contemporary political violence. Others promote a more *outcome-oriented* understanding of remote warfare, which, whilst retaining some analytical focus on various weapons technologies, broadens the debate to study a wider set of security agents and security practices that share the effect of distancing an intervening agent's conventional ground forces from frontline fighting. This analytical move opens up the discrete set of academic and policy issues centred on delegation in war. This pulling apart risks not only fragmenting the accumulation of knowledge but also reinforces the trend toward conceptualising remote warfare in different ways. As we show below, each set of arguments also provides conceptual quandaries that require addressing.

The first set of studies emphasises the links between remote warfare scholarship and the study of technology in war. In the context of war, technology is used by humans to do things that the body cannot, whether this be to project force beyond the line of sight, react to the speed of machines, or strike adversaries with precision. With the notable exception of fully autonomous weapons systems, which would conceivably exercise their own algometric judgment (Bode and Huelss 2021), the use of most technologies in war can be understood as an extension of human agency. Whilst they may have some automated capabilities (Gusterson 2016, 33), the much-debated MQ-9 Reaper drone operated by the American, British, and French air forces are categorised as remotely piloted aircraft. Despite the immense physical distances at which these technologies enable force to be projected, their operators can exercise significant human judgment and control over the use of force (Chapa 2021).

Some have argued that remote warfare scholarship has been "*dominated* by the growing importance of armed drones, particularly in the US-led 'war on terror'" (Huelss 2019, 356, emphasis added). The ethics and the efficacy of drone strikes, as with the experiences of British and American drone operators, have all been studied under the label remote warfare (DeShaw Rae 2014; Schulzke 2016; Lee 2018; Chapa

2021). Ohlin (2017a) has pushed to expand the empirical referents of remote warfare scholarship to also include the study of cyber-warfare capabilities and Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS). Justifying this aggregation, Ohlin argues that these technologies share 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" (2017a, 2). This wider understanding of remote warfare informs assessments of its legality (Crawford 2017; Cullen 2017; Ohlin 2017b), as well as the challenges that artificial intelligence presents to retaining meaningful human control over the use of force (Bode and Huelss 2021).

In the context of this set of arguments, several conceptual problems arise speaking to the gaps underscoring the aims of this special issue. To begin with, it is unclear whether the basic "unit" of interest is (1) the drone, AWS, or cyber-warfare capability, (2) how human agents interact with and experience the use of these technologies, (3) the effects of these technologies on the conduct, laws, and costs of war, or (4) a combination of all of these factors. Indeed, the exact technologies which should be studied under the umbrella of remote warfare remain contested. Cyber-warfare, for example, has been singled out as "a distinct venue for conflict," which should be carved off from remote warfare scholarship (Biegon and Watts 2020, 19–20). How these "remote" weapons technologies map to wider historical trends is also somewhat ambiguous. Drones such as the MQ-9 Reaper may eliminate the risk of physical (but not necessarily psychological) harm to their operators. AWS, however, could transform the risk-calculus and conduct of war, in part by shielding commanders from the emotional burdens of armed conflict (Bode and Huelss 2021, 220–21). Yet, both technologies can be treated as the latest manifestation of a wider trend reaching back millennia: "the historiography of warfare is replete with assertions that new capabilities to kill or injure from a distance have remade combat, well before the advent of the computerized technologies that draw so much critical attention today" (Adelman and Kieran 2020, 4). As Ohlin similarly notes, the use of new technologies to impose an asymmetric risk of physical harm "has been the goal of weapon design ever since the abandonment of the club as an instrument of blunt-force killing" (2017b, 19). In this way, the debate would benefit from a further exploration of the "remoteness" of remote warfare – the property which is used to justify the aggregated study of multiple weapons technologies (Ohlin 2017a) – as well as the development of clear conceptual foundations to help progress the debates on these issues.

Sharing a focus on the technological aspects of remote warfare, a second area of research investigates the "cultural entanglements, imprints, and consequences of remote warfare" (Adelman and Kieran 2020, 10). Animating this scholarship is a frustration with the perceived gridlock that characterises the debates on the efficacy and ethics of killing at a distance (Adelman and Kieran 2020, 4–10). The ways in which drone technologies alter the experience of war has received attention in the debate (Williams 2015; Gusterson 2016; Lee 2018). A key notion emerging from this literature that overlaps with the debate on the cultural impact of remote warfare (Demmers and Gould 2021) is *intimacy*. This is a broad notion whose study is also a prominent feature of feminist approaches to geopolitics and security (Sjoberg 2015). In the context of remote warfare scholarship, intimacy is generally used as a shorthand to study the various "forms of proximity" (Adelman and Kieran 2020, 16), which, somewhat paradoxically, are created through intervention at a distance. The cultural strand of remote warfare scholarship broadens

the study of intimacy in remote warfare by probing the representations of drone pilots and "remote wars" in literature (Buchanan 2020; Jelfs 2020), television shows such as *Homeland* (Bjering and Graae 2020) and video games (Richardson 2020). Contributors to this section of the debate have also traced the genealogy of the contemporary use of drones to the writings of early aviation theorists such as Giulio Douhet (Zeitlin 2020) and to the culture of "technological determinism" that has shaped the American military for over a century (Walker 2018). Next to the above-mentioned requirement for historicising, therefore, sits a conceptual demand for a cultural account of the analytical assumptions generated by arguments that are over-reliant on technology.

Elsewhere in the debate, there has been a push to reconceptualise remote warfare as something greater than the use of new technologies. This literature reorients the debates focus away from direct combat operations through practices like air strikes toward indirect efforts to work through local security forces and commercial agents. Studies have examined the role of different security practices (military assistance and intelligence sharing) and agents (private military security contractors and special operation forces) in remote warfare (Watts and Biegon 2017; Krieg 2018; Kinsey and Olsen 2021; Richards 2021). These studies address similar questions: in what ways do particular security agents/practices qualify as remote warfare? What role have they played in recent British and American defence policy? And what are the risks and consequences of these practices for the oversight and transparency of military intervention? Intentionally or not, this literature reorients the thematic focus away from the study of technology in war toward the separate debates on delegation in war: an intervening agent's indirect attempts to "build partner capacity," and work "by, with and through" other agents – whether these be foreign security forces or security contractors.

This trend began in the notion of remote-control warfare coined by Paul Rogers in 2013. The failure of the nation-building campaign in Iraq, he argued, accelerated a major trend within Western defence policy: the use of drones, private military security contractors and Special Forces to minimise – if not avoid – the deployment of "boots on the ground" in frontline fighting (Rogers 2013). This conceptualisation of remote warfare was extended by the Oxford Research Group's (ORG) Remote Control Project (renamed the Remote Warfare Programme in 2018), a now-defunct, London-based think-tank that advocated for more sustainable and accountable approaches to security (Moran 2015). Through its activities, which included publishing practitioner-oriented reports on the conduct of British counterterrorism and stabilisation operations (Knowles and Watson 2018; Watson and Megan 2019), the ORG helped develop a network of researchers to assess, among other topics, the failures and costs of recent Western military interventions in the Sahel (Goxho 2021) and Yemen (Shiban and Molyneux 2021). A resultant conceptual requirement for the future of the debate is, thus, to balance the inherently policy-practitioner origins of the notion with its ability to translate into a robust analytical concept useful for the academic debates. Equally important is the focus on distinguishing variations of delegated interventionism into a conceptual property of relevance to the definitions of remote warfare.

The more holistic conceptualisation of remote warfare pioneered by the ORG and others provides the empirical framework for a fifth area. The focus here is less on prescribing changes to how remote warfare should be approached in policy and more on examining its geopolitical logic(s) and sociopolitical consequences. Biegon and

Watts argue, for example, that remote warfare was central to the "retooling" of American primacy following the Iraq War (2020) and has also played an important role in maintaining security partnerships with states involved with counterterrorism operations in the Horn of Africa (Biegon and Watts 2021). Demmers and Gould (2021) have examined remote warfare's appeal to Western democracies, paying particular attention to the ways in which it has obscured democratic oversight over the use of force and concealed the human costs of political violence. Riemann and Rossi (2021a) have explored the "normative commitment" to distancing "privilege spaces" in the Global North from the realities of political violence, and the ways in which the growing use of military contractors have altered societal understandings of sacrifice and remembrance. As with the policy-oriented literature on remote warfare from which it has drawn inspiration, this segment provides a more holistic empirical framework for studying how Western states have projected force in recent years. Yet, since the trend in Western warfighting toward intervention from a distance and the study of its social-political effects are already prominent features of the semantic field on contemporary political violence, it raises questions about remote warfare's conceptual distinctiveness and boundaries of contrast, to use Rauta's explanation of how terms overlap in the wider semantic field (2021b).

Thematically, the five branches of remote warfare scholarship speak to a common set of questions. Is there anything new about the recent trend toward distancing conventional ground forces from frontline fighting? What explains this trend? How are the various forms of distance created through this process experienced by different audiences? Is intervention from a distance ethical and efficient? What are the effects of intervention from a distance on politics, society, law, and culture? Their principal point of divergence is the relative weight given to the study of technology vis-à-vis delegation in war. As we have shown, across five sets of arguments, remote warfare is deployed with multiple meanings, to address different empirical problems, and by bringing together policy, practitioner, journalistic, and academic perspectives. This presents an invitation to think more creatively about the concept by trying to make sense of its contradictions as well as to harness its analytical potential.

The notion of remote warfare: worth the buzz?

Having outlined the uses and abuses of the notion, one cannot but agree with the fact that remote warfare has acquired a certain "buzz." This raises a set of questions: is remote warfare a buzzword? What does this mean? And does this offer a productive pathway to articulate a conceptual and theoretical framework for remote warfare? As we argue in this section, the term "remote warfare" meets all four criteria of a buzzword which can be generated from how the notion is understood throughout the social science literature: it is indicative of current fashions or *trends*; it has an inherent *vagueness*; it has been associated with *distinct actors* who stretch the words' meanings across various contexts; and it is *normative*, having a role in critiquing or supporting the policy agenda. As a buzzword, "remote warfare" has value as a heuristic; it offers a useful shortcut for navigating the debates on contemporary political violence, providing a starting point for further study.

"Buzzwords" as heuristics

Buzzwords tend to capture and reflect the zeitgeist. They help define the "hot topics" of a given moment (Schnable et al. 2021, 26–27). Whilst this suggests that they can have a degree of presentism and ephemerality, they can also be convenient ways of providing "new and shiny concepts" (Mason 2019, 213). Because they are seen as denoting something that is in vogue, buzzwords can be uncharitably likened to fads. In this way, they are sometimes depicted as being detrimental to social science (Alvesson et al. 2017, 10, 20). Others point to how the notion of a buzzword has helped shed light on a variety of challenging subjects, ranging from development discourse (Cornwall 2007), feminist foreign policy (Mason 2019) and technoscience (Bensaude Vincent 2014). A sufficiently loud "buzz" can focus attention on novel trends, setting the stage for more detailed empirical, conceptual, and theoretical inquiry. Against this background, we argue in this sub-section that buzzwords often function as useful heuristics.

Since the end of the Cold War, there have been multiple waves of conceptual innovation aimed at capturing the global trend toward more indirect forms of military intervention conducted from a distance, without the deployment of large numbers of the intervening agent's conventional ground forces. During the 1990s, the humanitarian interventions conducted principally from the air in the Balkans prompted debates on post-heroic warfare (Luttwak 1995), virtual war (Ignatieff 2001) and virtuous war (Der Derian 2001). The Obama administration's turn toward what it labelled "innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches to achieve [US] security objectives" (Department of Defense 2012, 3) in the aftermath of the nation-building campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq prompted the arrival, (re-)discovery, or invention of some of the terms outlined at the start of this article.

Our review of the debate pointed to remote warfare being caught between its understanding as "an approach used by states to counter threats at a distance' (Watson and Alasdair 2021, 7) and a form of "technologized warfare" (Adelman and Kieran 2020, 11). These differences are consistent with buzzwords more generally, as their (relative) ambiguity is constitutive of their ability to generate "buzz" and travel widely across the discursive terrain. Buzzwords are intrinsically capacious (Schnable et al. 2021, 27–28). They cannot have singular meanings. This has elicited comparisons between buzzwords and Gallie's "essentially contested concepts" (Gallie 1955; Cornwall 2007, 472). Buzzwords are different, however, because contestations over meaning are "drowned out" by the noise, even as the "buzz" creates the appearance of consensus (however thin or superficial). In the case of buzzwords, there tends to be agreement on the importance of the term, if not its precise meaning.

Writing about buzzwords in the context of development policy, Cornwall and Brock argue that they often act as "fuzz-words," particularly when they are used for reasons of political expedience (2005, 10). In an influential report for the United Nations, Cornwall and Brock wrote that it was an "almost inherent property of buzzwords that they facilitate a multiplicity of contingent, situational and relational meanings" (2005, 160). The "fuzz" of the buzzword speaks to the inability of the term in question to produce concrete or actionable consensus; as buzzwords are negotiated politically and institutionally, differences in perspective reveal contestation over meaning, impacting how the buzzword is

translated into the policy process (Cornwall and Brock 2005, 2). At the same time, the buzz/fuzz-word obscures these complications, in part because of the multiple ways in which the term finds resonance.

Different (groups of) actors can utilise buzzwords in different ways (Cornwall and Brock 2005; Schnable et al. 2021). The abstractness of such terms allows their meaning to be modified as they travel across different audiences (Foulds 2014). Contingency and real-world events can drive such changes. The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, and its subsequent interventions elsewhere in Europe and the Middle East below the threshold of open hostilities, generated debate on proxy wars (Rauta 2016) and hybrid warfare (Hoffman 2009; Lanoszka 2016; Renz 2016; Mälksoo 2018; Rauta 2020b). In the case of hybrid warfare scholarship, this took its study in a new direction and away from its focus a decade earlier on irregular and terrorist threats in the Middle East (Hoffman 2009). Semantic adoption can also have an evolutionary character. For instance, "the use of buzzwords within published academic studies could hypothetically occur either after or before practitioners popularise the terms." Thus, buzzwords tend to start as (abstract) concepts rather than "objective" phenomena (Schnable et al. 2021, 29).

As noted by Cornwall (2007, 478), it is a peculiar feature of buzzwords that, "just as they appear to rise 'above' ideology, they are densely populated with ideological projects and positions." This normative function has both negative and positive features – negative in the sense that buzzwords, like jargon, can "mystify" the public, providing a false sense of reality (Ravitch 2007); positive because they frame solutions to problems and can focus the policy agenda by facilitating greater policy consensus (Cornwall and Brock 2005; Bensaude Vincent 2014; Mason 2019). In the case of development policy, buzzwords are understood to have legitimised the general direction of certain policy agendas, even as they have co-opted opposition and deradicalised challenges to the status quo (Routley 2014; Schnable et al. 2021). In some instances, the heuristic function of buzzwords means they become a "slogan" or "advertisement" for the agendas they help consolidate (Bensaude Vincent 2014).

Remote warfare as a buzzword

Remote warfare is presented by its supporters as *fashionable*. According to those who deploy the concept, it reflects clear *trends* in current practices of military intervention. "Across the globe," write Watson and McKay, "there is a discernible trend of states engaging militarily from a distance" (2021, 10). It is a trend seemingly comprised of other trends – risk aversion, technological advances, networking (Demmers and Gould 2021, 37–39) – which have coalesced today. The nature of these trends, of course, is open to debate, remaining largely unsupported by the established research clusters of military intervention and conflict research, whose rigorous conceptual categories and robust trend assessments methodology outpace and outmatch such statements. However, there is a general consensus that intervention from a distance – whether achieved through the use of weapons technologies or a wider set of security agents and practices – can reduce the various costs associated with military intervention. This has proved appealing to states in recent decades, and the trend has grown more pronounced in the wake of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. This trendiness would seem to follow from

a concurrent fascination with drones and drone warfare. Indeed, the "remote" appellation stems, in part, from the study of "remote control" technologies that is an integral part of the interdisciplinary debates on drone warfare.

"Remote warfare" is a *vague* term. References to its imprecision have become routine. This is wholly consistent with buzzwords more generally; their elusiveness being constitutive of their ability to generate buzz, allowing them to "travel" across the discursive terrain. The "remoteness" of remote warfare has been open to multiple interpretations. It is understood to come from the physical separation of an intervening state's conventional ground forces from frontline fighting (Watson and Alasdair 2021, 7), but also the distancing of Western publics from the daily experiences and sacrifices of war (Adelman and Kieran 2020, 8; Brunck 2020; Demmers and Gould 2021; Riemann and Rossi 2021a). At the same time, however, other contributions have unpacked the various "intimacies" – or proximities – that are simultaneously produced through these actions. These include various forms of civilian harm (Shiban and Molyneux 2021; Watson and Alasdair 2021, 14–16) and the psychological stress experienced by some Western drone operators (Williams 2015; Lee 2018). Speaking to what Riemann and Rossi (2021a, 82) label its "radical duality," remote warfare has, thus, simultaneously invited debate on how the realities of political violence are pulled closer for some audiences whilst being pushed further away from others. The study of these dialectical processes (Jelfs 2020) speaks to the abstractness of its existing meaning.

The ambiguity around "remote warfare" is due in part to its association with *different actors*. As alluded to in our earlier review, part of the popularity of the term appears to stem from its ability to resonate differently with researchers, observers, and critics across disciplinary or institutional contexts. Given the increasing scope of the security agents and practices studied under its umbrella, remote warfare's ability to generate both buzz and multiple meanings is intuitive. Furthermore, problems of precision and meaning are not contained to recent remote warfare scholarship. The concepts of hybrid warfare and grey zone war have also been challenged and/or questioned over their ambiguity (Rauta 2016, 2020b; Ucko and Marks 2018; Almäng 2019). Even before they become buzzwords, the meaning of newly coined terms can be opaque, muddying the contexts that determine the boundaries of war itself (Almäng 2019). The contributors to this special issue offer different and, in some respects, competing definitions of remote warfare. This is in keeping with the capaciousness of buzzwords, as we understand them, and shows the value of buzzwords-as-heuristics for generating vibrant research agendas.

In the case of remote warfare, the term took root outside of the academy. The objective was not to use jargon to obfuscate the phenomenon but to find the right language to draw attention to it. In 2014, the ORG, a London-based charity and think-tank advocating for more sustainable and accountable approaches to security, created the Remote Control Project, which would be recast as the Remote Warfare programme in 2018. Again, this illustrates the salience of the "remote" adjective, which, through its association with "remote control" devices, evoked the perceived centrality of drone technologies to recent Western security practices. The ORG helped consolidate a wider network of NGOs and civil society organisations working on the oversight of remote warfare, with particular focus on human rights, governance, and transparency issues. This helped bring the concept and terminology to new audiences – particularly in Great Britain, but also elsewhere.

As a buzzword, remote warfare has a *normative* dimension. It has often been approached as a set of real-world practices which, implicitly or explicitly, need changing. Adelman and Kieran (2020, 11) emphasise the importance of challenging remote warfare's depiction by state actors and promoting a "continual reconsideration of scholarly assumptions about it." The ORG scrutinised several policy challenges created by remote warfare (Watson and Alasdair 2021, 14–21), recommending changes to the doctrine, training and planning approach used within the British military (Knowles and Watson 2018). Riemann and Rossi (2021a, 79) point to the "ethical imperative" at the centre of the real-world practices of remote warfare, and others call to "'make strange' the evolving normalisation of remote warfare as the lesser evil – as precise, efficient wars of necessity" (Demmers and Gould 2021, 43). Remote warfare is also understood to undermine elements of international law, even if complexities mean that its effects are not as one-sidedly negative as is sometimes suggested by activists (Crawford 2017; Cullen 2017; Ohlin 2017b). These understandings of remote warfare as normatively undesirable conceivably influences the thinking behind whether the label is considered appropriate in policymaking and defence circles.

As Bensaude Vincent notes, "the term 'buzzword' itself has a pejorative connotation" (2014, 238–39). The same might be said about remote warfare. Some history is instructive here. William Fitts Ryan, a Democratic Congressman from New York, was a public critic of the Vietnam War and the first member of Congress to vote against additional funding for the conflict (Knight 1972). In a 1968 debate on defence appropriations, Ryan claimed that it was "as if the Vietnam war has 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). Striking a similar tone, a 1973 issue of the socialist magazine *Science for the People* singled out remote warfare as a key tool of "American Imperialists" and "a war of human machines against the human body" (New England Action Research 1973, 39, 42). In the Vietnam context, remote warfare was seen as a techno-political challenge to be overcome, in part by raising popular awareness of its hidden costs and threats to democratic governance. This normative undercurrent continues to inform much of the multidisciplinary debate on remote warfare, resulting in a call to "mak[e] visible … [the] moral and political challenges that this new way of war has given rise to" (Demmers and Gould 2021, 43).

Although remote warfare meets the criteria of a buzzword, it is therefore understandable that politicians and officials have used the term only sparingly. It has not (as of yet) been utilised explicitly to set policy agendas so much as critique existing practices. In its 2019 General Election manifesto, the (opposition) Labour Party pledged "to assess the security challenges facing Britain, including new forms of hybrid, cyber and remote warfare" as part of a Strategic Defence and Security Review (The Labour Party 2019). The term remote warfare is not defined in this context and is mentioned only once. In December 2020, Alyn Edward Smith, Member of Parliament for Stirling and the Scottish National Party's shadow spokesperson for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, presented a Private Members Bill on "Arms (Exports and Remote Warfare)." Amongst its other aims, this bill was intended to "prohibit the use of lethal autonomous weapons" (HC Deb 16 December 2020). It also aimed to create more "effective mechanisms for democratic oversight or transparency" on both arms exports and drone

operations, whilst also "updat[ing] UK policy on drones, particularly on the rules of engagement, adherence to international law, and … post-strike assessments to learn lessons on how the technology is evolving."

Two tentative conclusions can be drawn from the term's use in recent British policy discussions. First, there appears to be a lag – if not contestation – of the recent reconceptualisation of remote warfare as "an approach used by states to counter threats at a distance" (Watson and Alasdair 2021, 7). Where the term has been used in a policy setting, its meaning centres on weapons technologies like drones and AWS. The bill introduced by MP Smith, noted above, deals mainly with British arms exports, and its title, "Exports *and* Remote Warfare" [HC Deb 16 December 2020, emphasis added], implies the sale of military equipment is considered separate from remote warfare. Second and perhaps more importantly for our purposes, the term's use by policymakers suggests the underlying pejorative connotations traceable to the Vietnam War have persisted, albeit in a form reconfigured to the particular contingencies of twenty-first century British politics. On the rare occasion that "remote warfare" has been used in policy debates, then, it continues to be approached as something that needs to be scrutinised, regulated and ultimately "made better."

Special issue structure and contributions

The term's recent trendiness points to the importance of the phenomena that its use is meant to capture. Despite the various contestations that have played out, remote warfare is a substantive topic, which has the potential to make a series of important and timely contributions to the debate on contemporary political violence. The contributions to this special issue explore an array of conceptual, theoretical, and empirical puzzles. They do not come to a consensus on how remote warfare should be conceptualised. Instead, they propose a variety of pathways for moving the debate forward, with the overarching aim of bringing greater clarity to its meaning for academics, researchers, and practitioners.

In their contribution, Stoddard and Toltica examine Saudi Arabia's and the United Arab Emirates' recent intervention in Yemen as a case of remote warfare. In doing so, they take an important first step toward addressing the gap within the outcome-oriented literature on remote warfare for the detailed, empirical study of non-Western approaches to remote warfare. As Stoddard and Toltica trace, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have also combined the use of airpower, special operation forces, private military security contractors, and local partners to intervene from a distance, if in a different operational and strategic context. Drawing from practice theory, Stoddard and Toltica develop a novel conceptualisation of remote warfare as a set of practices, which, whilst varying in its exact tactical configuration, produces the strategic effect of advancing a state's political interests without the deployment of large numbers of its conventional ground forces. According to the authors, this practice-based understanding of remote warfare helps "de-essentialise" the concept by moving beyond binary questions of classification. It provides a framework for the more nuanced conceptualisation of remote warfare as a continuum of different configurations of tactical practices. Such a move, they argue, provides a stronger foundation for comparative studies of the use of remote warfare by different actors, and helps to better position remote warfare within the larger debate on the changing character of political violence.

In the following paper, Trenta proposes a timely conceptual distinction between the remoteness and the covertness of remote warfare. Through a review of recent remote warfare scholarship, Trenta highlights the problematic conflation of "two distinct dimensions that characterise deployments of force and, more broadly, governments' engagement in conflict and political violence" (2021). Existing understandings of the remoteness of remote warfare, he argues, "has come to conflate the means or methods governments use in the deployment of violence and the ways in which they deploy these methods." To disentangle these notions, Trenta proposes that remoteness be approached through the *means* of military power used by an intervening agent to advance its strategic interests, being understood as the degree of physical distance separating the armed combatants involved in conflict. Trenta argues covertness, in contrast, should be approached through how military force is deployed, more specifically whether it is used in an opaque or overt manner. This distinction makes a timely contribution to remote warfare scholarship by providing the conceptual clarity needed to move toward a more sophisticated understanding of the complex interplay of remoteness and covertness in political violence. Trenta takes an important step in this direction through a detailed empirical study of the US government's use of assassination as a foreign policy tool since the beginning of the Cold War. In this way, Trenta also makes a second set of important contributions to remote warfare scholarship: not only does his paper help extend the historical focus beyond post-9/11 counterterrorism and stabilisation operations toward the Cold War but also develops the study of assassination as a remote warfare practice.

Riemann and Rossi make a much-needed corrective to the debate on the use of Security Force Assistance (and similar practices, including security cooperation) as a form of remote warfare. They theorise its growing prominence in British foreign and defence policy through an ontological security perspective to explore the role of self-identity as a driver of intervention from a distance. In this way, Riemann and Rossi begin to reorient remote warfare scholarship away from a narrow focus on "security-as-survival" toward "security-of-being." The United Kingdom's growing use of SFA, they argue, can be mapped to its "autobiographical narrative" – a "story" which actors create about themselves in order to understand and navigate the world – which they call a "global engagement identity." At its core, this "global engagement identity" centres on the United Kingdom's self-perception as a globally active island nation with a great power mindset. In an era of increasing uncertainty, the growing prominence of SFA is seen to serve three purposes: "first, it reinforces/reinstates routinized relationships with significant others; second, it re-establishes a sense of temporal continuity in the UK's activities; and third, it tames the existential anxiety generated by the current uncertain and unpredictable international security environment" (Riemann and Rossi 2021a, 2021b). In this way, Riemann and Rossi (2021b) conceptualise 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."

Similar to Trenta's contribution, Watts and Biegon investigate the "remoteness" that constitutes remote warfare. This examination is a step toward identifying the analytical specificity of remote warfare within wider debates on contemporary political violence. According to the authors, it also holds analytical relevance for understanding wider empirical developments including the complexities of recent US military interventions.

As is clear from discussion of the American public's relative detachment from the realities of war (see, for example, Adelman and Kieran 2020, 9), there is growing scholarly interest in the topic. When it comes to remoteness itself, however, there is a persistent and troubling lack of clarity. Remoteness, Watts and Biegon argue, exists on a continuum, and its study should be separated from the debates on physical distance, even if the two notions are somewhat connected. Defining remoteness in relation to the public's socio-psychological detachment from the realities of political violence, as mediated through knowledge and spectatorship of the use of military force, the authors build on recent analyses of the cultural and sociopolitical effects of remote warfare. The dynamics of remoteness are illustrated and "unpacked" by way of an often-overlooked case of remote warfare: US intervention in Libya during and after the "Arab Spring." The Libya case shows that, while the physical distancing of US forces from frontline fighting contributed toward the public's remoteness, a thorough accounting of remote warfare requires us to consider the public's role and positioning with respect to the conflict.

Next, McDonald explores the military capabilities that are used as part of remote warfare through the prism of political legitimacy. In doing so, he questions the importance of remote warfare scholarship to wider debates on the transformation of military power. Following a theme also discussed by Stoddard and Toltica (2021), McDonald proposes conceptualising remote warfare as a family resemblance of legitimacy problems created through the use of military capabilities. The concept of remote warfare, he argues, is "difficult to successfully differentiate and distinguish from like concepts." It "covers a variety of diverging phenomena, which are problematized for diverging reasons, and its novelty is unclear" (2021). For McDonald, remote warfare cannot, therefore, be approached as a particular category of war. Its reconceptualisation as a family resemblance of legitimacy problems provides a clearer boundary of contrast by way of its "focus upon the consequences of integrating military capabilities at a systems level in order to generate military effects" (2021). It also helps better explain remote warfare's newness – a subject of limited existing debate (Watts and Biegon 2019; Zeitlin 2020; Watson and Alasdair 2021, 10–14) – in terms of the greater direction that policymakers can exercise over the use of military capabilities overseas. Building on this framework, McDonald continues to explore the core legitimacy problems involved with remote warfare, examining the role of state agency, government agency and responsibility. His analysis concludes with a discussion of the legitimacy of the infrastructure and basing arrangements needed to intervene at a distance.

Finally, Rauta's paper offers a dissenting view that questions the extent to which "remote warfare" should be advanced as a conceptual alternative. Rauta's article presents a conceptual critique that locates "remote warfare" and its conceptual problems in the broader semantic field of political violence. As one of the latest arrivals in the ever-expanding vocabulary of the study of political violence, "remote warfare" has contributed to a democratisation of the debate around war and warfare by appealing to the practitioner, policy, think tank, and academic worlds in some shape or form, thereby permitting an intellectual exchange relatively unconstrained by each worlds' modus operandi. Nevertheless, for "remote warfare" to make significant strides, its proponents need to engage with the notion's intellectual infrastructure, and in this way, engage in the wider debate on how we think about political violence. Rauta's article argues that "remote warfare" should not be an exception, especially as – so far – the record stacks against the notion. First, Rauta unpacks the lack of analytical

value: what intellectual leverage does it hold over existing terms making similar claims? Second, he presents an analysis of the many paradoxes with which "remote warfare" arrives, all requiring examination before casting the notion as relevant to the discourse on contemporary war and warfare.

Conclusion: is remote warfare worth the buzz or just a buzzkill?

Debates on contemporary political violence are complicated and contentious. The semantic field has become populated with a growing list of terms, newly coined or repurposed, which tend to reflect comparable concerns and speak to similar processes and phenomena. Of course, the introduction of new concepts is an important tool for creative thinking about political violence in the twenty-first century. Conceptual innovation can help underline inadequacies in the existing lexicon and provide a window into areas of the debate that have been overlooked or marginalised (Ucko and Marks 2018). Yet, the proliferation of concepts may also foster disorder and a general sense of scholarly unease. For those operating in this field, the dizzying array of overlapping and competing labels can create a troubling sense of redundancy; the excitement of exploring elements of the perceived zeitgeist can be undermined by a sense of confusion and narcissism of small differences.

Such "buzzkill" may be understandable, but it is not inevitable. Although we acknowledge the challenges that accompany the further development of a relatively new concept, the fact of the matter is that "remote warfare" has already firmly established itself in the study of political violence, having taken root across a range of disciplinary and professional contexts. As we discussed, it has grown more prominent in recent years, becoming a "buzzword" used not only by academics but by policymakers and practitioners. Thinking about remote warfare as a buzzword means approaching the latter heuristically. This move does not mean discrediting existing contributions, which can stimulate cutting-edge scholarship on a range of interrelated topics and issues. At a minimum, it offers an entrance into messy debates that extend well beyond any single conceptual framing – a topic which is explored further in the remainder of this special issue

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