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# The Politicization of Drone Warfare: The Importance of Narratives



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## List of Abbreviations

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Definition</b>
AWS	Autonomous Weapons Systems
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
GIS	Geographic Information System
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America

## Abstract

In the past twenty years, drone warfare appears to have critically altered the perception of armed conflict. Since the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror, drones, have played a major role in countering terrorism. This type of warfare has attracted much criticism due to the secrecy and lack of transparency surrounding it. The field of drone warfare has yet to be analyzed thoroughly. Constructivism seems to be the theory that explains the politicization of the term best, given that it discusses the importance of the different realities people experience. Content analysis was the chosen research method for this paper which included political speeches where the main goal was to convince the public of the legitimacy and precision of drone warfare. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the significance of narratives in the politicization of drone warfare.

**Keywords** Remote warfare, Drones, Narratives, Dehumanization, Clean warfare.

## 1. Introduction

The War on Terror narrative after the 9/11 attacks has introduced a relatively new concept of war, called “remote warfare” which is now more specific to “drone warfare”. This type of warfare is different from conventional warfare because of its physical and moral remoteness from the close-range violence on the ground (De Klerk, 2021). Biegon and Watts define it as a “strategy of countering threats at a distance, without the deployment of large military forces” which also “involves a combination of drone strikes and airstrikes from above, knitted together by the deployment of Special Forces, intelligence operatives, private contractors, and military training teams on the ground” (Biegon et al., 2017, p. 1). International Humanitarian Law (IHL) states that engaging in armed conflict should be an act of self-defense, meaning that it should have either been attacked or suspected of an imminent threat (Cullen, 2019). Even though drone warfare does not fall under this category, the United States of America (USA) has advocated that the War on Terror is an ongoing act of global self-defense against terrorism.

The distance between the operator and the weapons platform makes it much easier to release a bomb that will supposedly hurt only the target and limit collateral damage. More importantly, the narrative surrounding this type of warfare is about human security, broadly defined as people having “a freedom from want and a freedom from fear” meaning that people do not live solely because of their need for survival but are free to enjoy everyday life, something that was promoted to balance against the narrow state-centric focus of “security of territory from external aggression, or as protection of national interests” (White et al., 2019, p. 216). Nevertheless, it seems that the narrative is focusing on security concerns on the micro-level (on the everyday lives of citizens) which has now been merged with state security in order to justify the return to a focus on the macro-level by presenting uses of force as targeting people

that present a general threat to a state's citizens and their daily lives (White et al., 2019).

There has been a significant influence on the willingness of national leaders to employ military force as a tool of national security which drones have enabled. The dehumanization of warfare is supported by the technological progress the military has to offer. Drones allow the operator to be within a safe distance from the target or even in the comfort of their own sofa. Therefore, public opinion will most assuredly support not having their compatriots get killed in a foreign land. When it comes to the public's support, ever since Vietnam and the publication of the Pentagon Papers, the battle for gaining it has become as central to military success as a victory on the battlefield (Chaliand, 2014).

By legitimizing the use of force through claiming self-defense, governments are able to maintain their position without people protesting against unfair deployment outside the borders. Public opinion accepts the use of force as a way the government is fulfilling its duty. By having this kind of support from the public, state leaders would be able to choose more easily to participate in a war, given that what they seek in order to maintain their position is approval from the people who are voting. This narrative creates the idea that it will be much safer to conduct wars in the future and could possibly take the ethical factor out of the equation. However, to what end does the politicization of drone warfare being so fervently advocated? The characterization of something that is "safe" depends on very subjective points of view. Dehumanizing warfare is safe for which side, the one that has the technology to conduct war without endangering its soldiers' lives or the one that will suffer the consequences of not having the luxury of such technologic accomplishments?

The first section of the paper focuses on the role of the theory of Constructivism in understanding the politicization of drone warfare. Constructivism tends to explain in a more fluid way new terminology, something that in the military sector is quite valuable. Explaining both sides of the argument of the use of drones in warfare seems to be easier with constructivist principles in mind. The second section suggests the importance of narratives and perception management especially in the field of international security. Governments using the word "safety" to appease public opinion when referring to warfare techniques is a rather common and old tactic. This section is followed by two subsections explaining the two narratives around drone warfare, namely the one supporting it and the one opposing it in order to present the arguments that both of them offer to the public. The last section before the conclusion discusses the issue of politicizing technology in an effort to justify decisions taken by politicians or government officials in general. The example of the expression of "boots on the ground" being used in order to convey negative emotions to the American public in order to support the use of drones in warfare instead of people marks a significant change in public opinion about technology. The conclusion makes a reference in the themes that were presented throughout the paper while also offering room for thought to the reader, especially considering that there are major conflicts taking place at the moment, in most of which drones have a central post.

## **2. The Role of Constructivism**

Alexander Wendt declared that “anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt, 1999, p. 42). Just like anarchy, the way states act is surrounded by subjectivity. Wendt’s whole theory is based on the fluid nature that characterises the field of international politics. Politicians and heads of states and governments hold their own views on how the world works or should work, while at the same time they are responsible for their state’s security. Nevertheless, security could be used as an excuse for other interests to be satisfied. Constructivism constitutes the ideal theory to explain the politicization of drone warfare, given that it is a relatively new term that needs to be presented in certain ways in order to pass specific messages. There are specific connotations in the way a concept is presented and the narratives surrounding it play a major role on how its evolution will take place.

Either supporting the use of drones in warfare or not, no one can deny that the vocabulary used in political speeches on the matter implies specific connotations that surpass reality. Moreover, the use of remote warfare poses many ethical dilemmas regarding how and when it is used, the convenience it portrays concerning fewer casualties, or the “no collateral damage” motto. Lastly, it appears necessary to understand why specific vocabulary is used, what messages the sender wishes to deliver to the receivers, as well as what is the significance of the public opinion regarding the politicization of the term “drone warfare”.

## **3. The Importance of Narratives**

Perception management plays a significant role when it comes to narratives. Speeches coming from politicians can create an utterly different image of an issue. In politics, in order to remain in power, it is not always the case to reveal details on specific matters, one of which is undoubtedly war. Drone warfare is also included in these issues as it constitutes a new perplexing way of waging war, especially in the field of proxy wars. Drones have attracted both support and worry from the academic community, given that its relation to international law seems to be a matter of perspective.

Looking into further detail, it is important to understand what drone warfare means to each related party. Starting with a military commander, this type of weapon symbolises precision lethality that can prove game-changing against an enemy, whereas for the enemy, it depicts a terrifying silent killer, necessitating constant caution to avoid detection and attack (Corn, 2019). Furthermore, for the field of law, national security, and social science it symbolises everything from the inherent illegitimacy of expansive notions of war and authority to kill, to the critical tool for rattling international terrorist organisations, to simply a tool of war, no different than any other weapon (Corn, 2019). More importantly though, for political leaders, it embodies flexibility and risk prevention in the strategy of leveraging national power to destroy or disrupt national and international threats.

Bearing in mind that politics dominate the national as well as the international arena, it becomes clear that the burden falls to politicians when it comes to creating a

narrative on such a thought-provoking subject. This type of warfare is asymmetrical, given the fact that it has been the result of extremely innovative and evolved technological progress. These weapons are not available to everyone depriving states of the right to self-defence. The governments of states which have acquired drones as a part of their military arsenal appear to be in favour of using them when they suspect a threat from another state. By contrast, the ones who do not have the capability to carry these weapons argue that it leaves them unprotected in attacks where it might also be impossible to track the source. The debate that emerges is challenging, considering that the two opposing sides are questioning whether the use of lethal drone attacks outside ‘hot’ or ‘active’ areas of combat operations abides by the rules of international law, or whether applying deadly force as a measure of first resort is a violation of international law (Corn, 2019).

### *3.1 Supporting Drone Warfare*

Many politicians, when it comes to justifying the enormous amounts of public funds that are being distributed to the defence sector, use drone warfare in order to convince the public of its great benefits. The narrative they are trying to formulate is built immensely upon the remoteness of violence which has many other branches that help attract supporters. First and foremost, the loss of the physical asset, whereby the operator remains unaffected from the impact of any such attack, appears to be one of the main advantages of this type of warfare. It is evident that the ‘body-bag’ syndrome has not been erased from the memory of the American public, something that has cost many politicians’ careers, considering that sending US troops, for example, in proxy wars taking place on the other side of the world did not gain support when families received their relatives dead instead of being able to reunite with them. Therefore, remote warfare weapons, such as drones, ensuring that their operators are safely positioned close to their homes create a highly alluring narrative.

When it comes to drones, the supporters suggest that they indicate a shift in warfare with significant legal and policy implications, given that they accumulate data through 24-hour surveillance, ensuring the intelligence is valid in order to regulate precision attacks from a safe distance without endangering their lives. The narrative of ‘precision’ is also one with great power considering that politicians cannot have significant amounts of collateral damage attributed to their name, especially when fighting a war that is not immediately threatening to their borders. Distance, as well as precision, become ‘political’, thus they are used very often in order to describe this new tactic without attracting much criticism (Trenta, 2021). Furthermore, the ‘political distance’ of remoteness allows policymakers to deploy more and more force outside the limits of public and parliamentary scrutiny (Trenta, 2021). According to McKay, “recent practices of remote warfare are characterised by “opacity.” They tend to develop beyond the reach of public and parliamentary scrutiny” (McKay 2021b). It seems that this opacity truly benefits those supporting remote warfare, given that it offers room for more complex operations.

What is also noteworthy, is that there is speculation that future pilots might direct swarms of intelligent drones with a geographic information system (GIS) program,

thus appearing to be on the loop but not in the loop (Shaw, 2017). According to Shaw, “the end result would be a revolution in the roles of humans in air warfare” (Shaw, 2017). In the future, remote warfare weapons could remove almost completely the human factor from war in general, at least for those who can afford them. The soldiers will no longer be required to face the enemy up close, nor deal with the devastation created by an attack they caused. Thus, drone operators do not have to deal with the same psychological issues stemming from the act of killing, considering that their targets are positioned at a great distance from their own physical location.

Moreover, the three key obligations that apply to all parties involved in conflicts, namely that “they must distinguish between combatants and civilians, they must direct attacks only against combatants, and they must take precautions to minimize collateral civilian casualties”, also apply to remote warfare regardless of the distance between the two opposing sides (Rothenberg, 2014, p. 446). Therefore, when it comes to the legal obligations of those conducting remote warfare, there is not much difference from those of traditional warfare that is regulated by international law. In addition, there is the ‘basic rule’ of distinction, according to which “in order to ensure respect for and protection of the civilian population and civilian objects, the Parties to the conflict shall at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants and between civilian objects and military objectives and accordingly shall direct their operations only against military objectives” (Turns, 2014, p. 203). Intelligence gathering via drones or cyber operations is being done with extensive care in order to ensure their validity before engaging in lethal force actions.

An example of a successful remote warfare operation was the assassination of Baitullah Mehsud, a leading terrorist in Waziristan, Pakistan, by a Predator strike in August 2009 (Gregory, 2011). As technology progresses, it becomes evident that the precision required to reach success in this type of operation is constantly evolving and ameliorating. Across Iraq and Syria, US drones have been essential to over 19,600 coalition airstrikes against Islamic State between August 2014 and April 2017 (Airwars, 2017). While the Global War on Terror continues, drones play a crucial role in the narrative supporting it, bearing in mind the significance of remoteness to people who have lost their beloved ones not only on the ground of foreign lands but also those who have suffered losses outside their own home caused by terrorist attacks.

### *3.2 Opposing Drone Warfare*

According to Peter W. Singer, remote warfare weapons create the idea of riskless warfare, which as a result, “appearing to lower the human costs of war, may seduce us into more wars” (Lifton, 2013, pg. 15). This constitutes the most important argument the critics of remote warfare possess, given that narratives have the power to change how people feel about a situation which in any other case they would strongly oppose instead of supporting. The lure of riskless warfare is a dangerous narrative as well as a truly unrealistic one. War always has casualties no matter the side. Even though drones limit the numbers of casualties on the side that operates them, they do not have the power to ensure a no casualty scenario on the opposite camp.

Despite arguments that drones are more precise in targeting, there is still evidence that



armed drones may make the use of lethal force easier, especially outside of an armed conflict, and at the same time encourage their use in a way that questions international legal standards, resulting in an increase in the number of individuals affected by drone strikes (Dorsey and Bonacquisti, 2017). Bearing in mind the chaos created by a drone strike in a region, the damage does not solely include the number of deaths that occurred, but also the issues that will emerge regarding the financial losses, the infrastructure destruction, as well as the physical and mental health of the population. Furthermore, some critics argue that drone attacks violate the sovereignty of the territorial state where the strikes occur, an issue that has yet to be resolved by the international community in order to be included in the regulations of international law (Ohlin, 2019).

In addition, the socio-psychological arguments of remote warfare's critics include the fragile psychological state of drone operators after a strike, as well as the public's detachment from the reality of lethal violence. Gusterson argues that "because drone operators can develop an intimate understanding of the daily routines and social interactions of their targets, the violence they experience is in some ways more psychologically proximate than that of other soldiers, who are physically closer to the enemy but may get only a brief glimpse of, or never see at all, the people they kill" (Gusterson, 2016, p. 72). This point of view targets the arguments supporting drone warfare on the principle of soldiers not being exposed to the act of killing, while at the same time exposing the mental issues that could stem from the close surveillance of targets that drone operators end up killing. The Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) with which soldiers on the ground return to their homes is not limited to them but is also a very common mental issue among drone operators. Moreover, regarding the public, the socio-psychological detachment from the realities of political violence is labelled by Brunck as "psychological remoteness" (Brunck, 2020, p. 516). This type of remoteness is caused because people have a difficult time dealing with critical events and use this as a defence mechanism, something the Covid-19 pandemic has brought to light recently.

Another point of the opposing remote warfare side is the targeted killings technique which, according to Gabriella Blum and Philip Heymann, "of all the coercive counterterrorism techniques employed by the United States, targeted killings have so far attracted the least public criticism" (Blum and Heymann, 2010). The use of drones for the targeted killing of suspected terrorists has caused a major debate among scholars of international law, especially since the killing of Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harethi, a suspected al-Qaeda operative, in November 2002 (Cullen, 2019). Even though the Global War on Terror has united several Western states in a common fight against terrorism, it remains debatable whether lethal force outside of the context of an armed conflict is legal under international law. Jane Mayer of the New Yorker claims that "the embrace of the Predator Program has occurred with remarkably little public discussion, given that it represents a radically new and unbounded use of state-sanctioned lethal force" (Mayer, 2009). The lack of criticism, the secrecy around remote warfare operations, their depiction as 'precise' and 'surgical', as well as the asymmetrical distribution of death and suffering they impose, impedes democratic political deliberation on contemporary warfare (Demmers and Gould, 2021). Scholars

argue that it is these qualities of remote warfare that will push Western liberal democracies closer to war.

The issue with the images the media and politicians are trying to create around drone warfare is that nobody has the chance to find out the truth about these operations. The public is presented with information that only benefits the politicians in charge and the media is following their lead, given that whoever tries to uncover the truth ends up losing everything, including their lives in some cases. It is argued that after every drone strike alleging to kill a handful of militants, an anonymous US government official offers comments to the press, calmly reassuring reporters that only the poorly portrayed enemies die in America's drone wars and the press wilfully echoes it (Benjamin, 2012).

A great example is the case of Baitullah Mehsud, the leader of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and alleged mastermind of the assassination of Pakistan's former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who was killed in a drone attack in the village of Zanghara in South Waziristan on August 7, 2009 (Benjamin, 2012). According to the report, he had been at the home of his father-in-law receiving intravenous treatment for diabetes when a missile fired from a Predator drone landed on the building resulting in his death. There was no mention in the media of his wife, father-in-law, and eight others who were victims of the attack as well. In addition, there was no mention that this strike succeeded after fifteen previously unsuccessful strikes against Mehsud, which resulted in the death of between 204 and 321 victims, from low-level Taliban to elderly tribal leaders to children (Benjamin, 2012). However, the information shared with the American public was that justice had been done and that the target was rightly eliminated.

#### **4. Politicizing Technology**

Bearing in mind that political leaders reassure the public of the limited risks and collateral damage ensued by contrast to the traditional 'boots on the ground' tactics, it is rather perplexing to question such a cleverly constructed narrative. However, remote warfare remains a type of conducting war, which apart from being illegal under international law, is also a highly destructive action on every level of life. By using drones to conduct warfare, there is no need to unite a country behind a conflict, no need to justify shared sacrifice, no need for continuous debates in Congress or Parliament. The public does not feel as opposed to remote warfare tactics as to older more violent and dangerous ones.

Mandel wonders, "if indeed remote technologies help to overcome democracies' casualty-sensitivity, and if 'bloodless war' becomes a reality, will these democracies then not become less 'cautious' in commencing the 'poor game' of war?" (Mandel, 2004). When the choice to engage in a war without having suffered an immediate attack becomes easier and perhaps less costly in the public's point of view, the question of who would stop a government that has the support it needs to conduct remote warfare is born. The border between taking a part in a war due to imminent threat and due to power accumulation is very thin in the mind of every state leader even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza at the time of writing

pose two excellent examples for both cases. The narrative of using remote warfare weapons to avoid havoc and disaster is one that falsely creates the image of a war with no casualties making it appear more ethical. However, that is never the case with any type of war.

In addition, drones are characterized as a type of “bureaucratic killing machines” (Hasian, 2016, pg. 78). They are built and defended by motivated human actors who use rhetorical techniques that compile politics and technology, military planning, and cultural assumptions about honour and sacrifice. This might result in convincing the public of the nobility as well as the necessity of the cause, rather than the reality of human suffering. In general, technology in warfare is being used to defend the ‘humanity’ of killing and create the image of efficiency so that politicians do not feel culpable of the military’s actions. Drones are the perfect tool to allow a politician supporting them to distance themselves from the violence erupting from a conflict, especially when it is an out-of-range one, while at the same time perpetuating the effects of war. It is highly important to question all the narratives surrounding a new concept that is introduced to the public, especially when the field it correlates with is the one of warfare. There is always a new perspective to examine in order to ensure the most objective attitude towards something as perplexing as war.

Finally, two great current examples are the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. In Ukraine, killer drones are used by the Ukrainian army to fight against a significantly larger army in an effort to defend the country’s borders, something that is considered to be “reshaping the balance between humans and technology in war” (Economist, 2024). The world supports the right of the Ukrainian leadership to use this type of technology to regain its freedom and stability, especially because Ukraine appears to be the ‘underdog’ in this context. At the same time, Israel is using “aerial and artillery bombardment to pummel Hamas from a safe distance” while also minimizing the risk to their soldiers “by putting drones on the front lines” (Economist, 2023). This takes a completely different turn in narrative given that Israel is being criticized by the international community for the way its military is using drones due to the high numbers of Palestinian civilians being killed on the ground in a disproportionate response to the Hamas attacks. Therefore, perspectives indeed change according to the context and the use of drones in warfare is not an exception to that.

## 5. Conclusion

Remote warfare has a central place in how most conflicts take place today. The most common battlefields of remote warfare are the ones related to terrorist groups, given that the Global War on Terror has been the main context for the introduction of such tactics to the public. Even though the concept of remote warfare is not new, the technological advancements that have allowed it to become somewhat of a norm are certainly the most up to date. A great example is the evolution of the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, more commonly called the drone, which was also used during the 20th century, though the models then cannot compare with today’s Predator or Reaper. Moreover, the Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS), as well as cyber warfare operations have significantly evolved, while also their theatre of operations has

expanded.

Although remote warfare weapons started as surveillance tools, as technology progressed, they also took part in other activities, such as targeted killings and strikes. This tactic attracted much criticism from public opinion, given that despite advocating for minimum collateral damage and civilian casualties, the true numbers that emerged from NGO-produced reports were significantly bigger than what was presented in the official reports. What is noteworthy, is that even though drones, for instance, had been in use since the Bush administration and evolved substantially during the Obama terms, the Obama administration became more transparent about the drone strike program after the President's re-election in 2012 (Crawford, 2013, pg. xv). Until the re-election, government officials would not even engage in questions concerning the issue nor admit the existence of such programmes. The secrecy and denial that surrounded remote warfare tactics played a crucial role in the emergence of people opposing it, claiming that without true transparency, the US government along with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) were free to act regardless of legality in any case they deemed necessary.

Another important factor that remains one of the most debated issues concerning remote warfare is accountability. Apart from drone warfare, the use of fully autonomous weapons also creates an accountability gap as there is no clarity on who would be legally responsible for a robot's actions, namely the commander, programmer, manufacturer, or robot itself (Galliot, Macintosh and Ohlin, 2021, pg. 2). Furthermore, it is clear that without accountability, the parties involved would have less motivation to ensure robots would not endanger civilians and victims would be left unsatisfied that someone was punished for the harm they experienced (ibid.). This plays a great role in the narratives presented to the public.

Throughout this paper the narratives both in support and in opposition to remote warfare are presented in order to make it more understandable how perception management works when a new concept is introduced. Speeches made by President Obama, as well as by John O. Brennan, constitute great examples of how narratives work. Both of them attempted to convince the public of the cleanness and precision remote warfare weapons offer on the battlefield. Their persistence in how distance favours those who operate drones, or cyber warfare tools aims at creating the idea that it is a safer choice in conducting war. Bearing in mind that these speeches took place many years after the establishment of the US drone programme and that before them, it was mostly denial that surrounded statements regarding this issue, it becomes evident that the information released to the public by NGOs concerning the true numbers of civilian casualties that resulted from targeted strikes was the driving force behind the attempt to transparency.

An interesting point of view from the other side of events, namely those constantly persecuted by drones in their everyday lives, a southern tribal sheikh from Yemen, Mullah Zabara, confessed to Jeremy Scahill that "the US sees al Qaeda as terrorism, and we consider the drones as terrorism. The drones are flying day and night, frightening women and children, disturbing sleeping people. This is terrorism" (Cohn, 2015, pg. 17). This constitutes a narrative that western media rarely or never present to the public. The power of representation and perception management lies within

governments and the media, something that has been thoroughly analysed throughout this paper. This is the reason the theory of Constructivism was chosen to explain the concept of remote warfare. Circumnavigating its ambiguous nature, it was important to present all the aspects leading up to the perceptions cultivated around the world.

To conclude, the aim of this paper was to offer a wholesome view of this relatively new method of warfare to make more understandable the aspects of how war has been conducted for many years now despite not being as communicated to the public, as well as how it will perhaps be the central way of war in the future. While the epicentre is the case of the USA, remote warfare tactics are spread around the world, thus making it imperative for the academic and international community to examine all the factors pertaining to the concept. Given the fact that at the time of writing the war in Ukraine burst followed by the conflict in Gaza, it is highly important to take a closer look at the current events and how they are illustrated by the media, as well as what kinds of tactics are used within the war fronts.

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