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## Remote Control – a New Way of War

Remote warfare, which puts a premium on UAV's, special forces and private contractors, is being hailed as an ideal alternative to traditional practices. That's not good, argues Paul Rogers. Whatever war-weary publics may want, this vision of hard power is no panacea for the future.

By Paul Rogers for ISN

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One of the most significant trends in international affairs is the move towards security by remote control. While this is commonly seen as focusing on the use of unmanned platforms, it goes well beyond these systems to encompass a wider change in strategy and posture. It has its origins in the problems that arose at the outset of the 'War on Terror' and while it has the potential to shape future conflicts, there are aspects that suggest that it is dangerous to see it as a panacea.

### Political origins

When President George W. Bush formed his first administration in 2001, two of the key appointments were Donald Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense and Paul Wolfowitz as his Deputy. Both were convinced of the need for the United States to re-assert its international leadership. This did not necessarily mean that they were committed to major increases in the size of US armed forces, with Donald Rumsfeld, in particular, believing strongly in the need to shape military forces that could protect and advance Washington's interests without the need for large overseas deployments.

This approach, commonly known as "war lite", advocated more emphasis on airborne stand-off weapons, Special Forces and expeditionary naval forces. It was based on the view that such was the United States' military superiority that it was highly unlikely that there would be a need for the deployment of troops on the scale of the 1991 war against Iraq.

However, in the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush Administration reacted forcibly to the threat posed by terrorism and forcibly removed the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, coupled with the dispersal of the al-Qaeda movement. This was achieved rapidly in a manner that followed Rumsfeld's policy, with intensive use of air power and Special Forces combined with the re-arming of the Northern Alliance of warlords.

In the January 2002 [State of the Union Address](#), President Bush extended the 'war on terror' to three states that he identified as an "axis of evil". While Iran and North Korea were identified as states that supported terrorism and that intended to develop weapons of mass destruction, Iraq was the lead candidate for regime termination and a coalition was formed to engage in that process early in 2003. Once again, the emphasis was on the use of air power, highly mobile ground forces and area-impact

munitions, and while there were some tens of thousands of ground troops involved, the numbers were far lower than in 1991.

## **Unexpected consequences**

But after President Bush delivered his “[mission accomplished](#)” speech in May 2003, the evolution of the ‘war on terror’ proved to be very different to what had been anticipated. In Iraq a bitter insurgency developed that combined with inter-communal conflict to produce a wholly unexpected level of violence. Coalition [casualties](#) between 2003 and 2011 numbered 4804 killed - the great majority of them from the United States - together with well over 20,000 seriously injured. Moreover, Afghanistan was also in the grip of armed insurgency as the Taliban and other armed opposition groups sought to regain control. This ultimately led to the deployment of 130,000 foreign troops being deployed to counter this insurgency. While most of the foreign forces will be withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, the [total cost](#) of the wars in the two countries - with additional attacks ordered against al-Qaeda in Somalia and Yemen - will be somewhere in the order of \$4 trillion.

In the United States and many Western countries, the wars became markedly unpopular, and one of the effects of the outcomes in Afghanistan and Iraq was for a change in outlook in terms of using military forces to maintain international security. Back in 1993, President Clinton’s first Director of Central Intelligence, James Woolsey, had characterized the changing threats faced by the United States in the early post-Cold War world as being an environment in which the United States had slain the dragon of the Soviet Union but now faced a jungle full of snakes. In a real sense the al-Qaeda movement was a major “snake” as were the Taliban and the Saddam Hussein regimes, but “taming the jungle” through boots on the ground had now clearly failed.

## **Remote warfare**

In parallel with these problems there had emerged some major developments in military technology, the most significant being the production of armed drones. These had been developed out of the experience gained with remotely operated reconnaissance vehicles that had been available for several decades. The main producers of these systems had been the United States and Israel, but many other countries had an interest in acquiring them, both for civil and military purposes. The specific issue of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) that could be armed with precision-guided missiles such as the Hellfire was still new until a decade ago. However, the development of Predator and Reaper UAVs - not to mention their Israeli equivalents - was to have a profound impact.

The United States, for instance, has found armed UAVs to be particularly useful in targeting al-Qaeda and other insurgents in North West Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia. They are deployed both by the military and the CIA and have found favor because of their precision and the absence of risk to operatives. American UAV strikes in Pakistan peaked at 118 in 2010, since when there has been a greater focus on Yemen. As of mid-October 2012, there had been 37 armed strikes in Yemen and 40 in Pakistan. The United Kingdom has deployed Reaper UAVs, and Israel has made much use of reconnaissance and armed drones against paramilitary opponents in southern Lebanon and Gaza.

The use of armed UAVs has increasingly been supported by other elements of remote warfare, neither of them new but each being enhanced. One is the much more widespread use of Special Forces that often conduct operations with a minimum of publicity. The other element involves a much greater use of private military and security companies (PMSCs), with the United States currently employing 20,000 private personnel in Afghanistan. In keeping with Special Forces, PMSCs tend to act with a minimum of publicity. A further development is the growth in numbers of defense intelligence agents, with the Pentagon recently announcing plans for a [near-doubling](#) of agents operating overseas.

Put together, the combination of armed UAVs, Special Forces and PMSCs amounts to a relatively low-profile form of warfare that is often regarded as a cheaper and less accountable means of maintaining security. At the same time the use of UAVs, in particular, is controversial for several reasons. One is the questionable legality of what may amount to targeted assassinations and a second is the quality of intelligence available to determine the actual targets. For example, there have been many instances of civilians being killed, especially when village compounds have been hit in Pakistan. Third is the ease with which UAVs can be operated without risking the lives of pilots, making their early use in a conflict particularly attractive. Finally, in Pakistan the civilian casualties and the perceived infringement of sovereignty have resulted in bitter public opposition to their use and a distinct increase in anti-American attitudes.

Nevertheless, the trend towards remote warfare continues, and other countries are moving rapidly to develop appropriate systems. Sukhoi in Russia has recently announced that it is moving its aerospace development emphasis away from aircraft towards unmanned vehicles, a move directly advocated by President Putin. Chinese arms manufacturers have also moved rapidly to develop a range of UAVs, both for their own armed forces and because they see considerable export potential. Perhaps most significant of all has been a 30-year development program undertaken by Iran, which started at the time of the Iran-Iraq War in the early 1980s and was prompted by the urgent need to be able to conduct reconnaissance of Iraqi troop movements. Since then it has developed into a major program aided a year ago by the capture of an advanced stealthy US reconnaissance UAV operated by the CIA.

Iran is also illustrative of how UAVs can be easily passed on to sub-state paramilitary groups. In October 2012, Hezbollah operatives in Lebanon, possibly with Iranian assistance, launched a UAV in the south of the country. After flying the UAV down the eastern Mediterranean, it was re-directed into [southern Israel](#) where it was eventually intercepted by the Israeli Air Force. This was the deepest penetration of Israeli air space by a UAV launched by Hezbollah and has caused concern within the Israeli Defence Forces as a disturbing indicator of potential future trends.

### **A welcome paradigm?**

In the short term, there is a common view in the United States, Britain and France that remote control warfare is a significant and welcome development after a decade of considerable difficulty associated with the 'war on terror'. A longer view suggests otherwise as more states recognize the advantages of such an approach and move to adopt elements of it. There are currently no arms control processes underway for handling the new weapons systems, virtually nothing in the way of controlling Special Forces and little interest in aggressively monitoring or regulating the use of private military and security companies. For now, the process is one of expansion, but the recent Israeli experience should serve as a warning that remote warfare may turn out to have elements of particular interest to sub-state and paramilitary movements, enhancing asymmetric warfare capabilities in unexpected and potentially dangerous directions.

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