

Remote warfare in the ‘backyard’: the US government, counternarcotics, and remote warfare in Latin America

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Key Points

- Recent years have seen the introduction of practices that may be described as ‘remote warfare’ to the conflicts caused by the interplay of narcotics prohibition and organized crime in Latin America.
- Remote warfare is characterized by the indirect, sometimes clandestine deployment of military, intelligence and law enforcement capabilities by outside actors - in the case of Latin America, typically the U.S. - in order to further their aims against structures of organized crime.
- The main types of remote warfare practices that have been reported in Latin America consist in the use of private military companies, the provision of support (including military hardware, training, and the deployment of special operations forces alongside local actors), and intelligence support of different types.
- Remote warfare practices have, besides the human rights problems inherent in many of them, led to at least three distinct types of problems, namely (1) unpredictable effects regarding the original policy aims, (2) serious problems of legitimacy for the intervening actor due to the clandestine nature of its operations, and (3) the possible dependence on local actors, who may pursue aims that may be entirely different or from or even incompatible with those of the intervening actor.

INTRODUCTION

The term ‘remote warfare’ is being increasingly used in academic and policy circles to define a type of conflict that is ‘light footprint’, ‘low risk,’ as well as geographically distant from the government deploying violence.¹ In recent decades, most ‘Western’ military interventions have abandoned the deployment of large numbers of conventional forces. Today’s battles are increasingly fought through a combination of private military contractors (PMCs), military advisers and trainers providing “security assistance” on the ground to partners, as well as intelligence collaborations, often leading to kill/capture operations. Major military powers are often keen to present such military tactics as a low-cost and low-risk form of

international engagement. This is not only limited to Western powers. Russia and China are also revolutionising their arsenal and their warfare methods, pointing towards greater expeditionary/ technological engagement rather than a more conventional conduct of hostilities.²

This trend, as we analyse here, finds historical precedents in the Latin American region where the ‘war on drugs’ has often relied on practices currently associated with ‘remote warfare.’ As the report shows, many of these practices are now returning to the region due to the winding down of operations connected to the so-called ‘war on terror.’

* Research Associate and Coordinator of the Center for Latin American Studies, Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt

^a Associate Professor in International Relations, Swansea University

^b Associate Fellow at EGMONT - Royal Institute for International Relations

While stressing that, at times, governments in Latin America are deploying tactics of remote warfare themselves (e.g., Mexico and Colombia), this report focuses primarily on the U.S. government's deployment of 'remote warfare' in the region. It develops in two main parts. Part one provides an analysis of remote warfare, its development, and its key components. Part two assesses key practices of 'remote warfare' and how they have been deployed in Latin America. This section identifies three main practices: the use of PMCs, the transfer of military hardware and security assistance via training - often through the use of special operations forces³ - and intelligence cooperation, which - lately - has included the deployment of drones. The conclusion comes back to 'remote warfare' literature to explore some of the limitations of this approach and discuss possible consequences of remote warfare in Latin America.

REMOTE WARFARE: ORIGINS AND DEFINITIONS

Politicians and the military in several European states and the U.S. have come to regard remote warfare as a desirable alternative to conventional military deployments after the difficulties associated with fighting the post-9/11 wars on terror. Remote warfare is used by these countries to counter threats at a distance, without deploying large numbers of their own military personnel on the frontlines, which significantly decreases political costs. Thus, it is important to note that 'remote warfare' is a political term, often used in press releases or television addresses, alongside 'precision', 'surgical', and 'clean' to denote a shift in warfighting away from the costly wars of the early 2000s.⁴ Whether it is through the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs or drones), manned aircraft, and special forces - or through the provision of tactical support and training to local militaries - it is the light and distant elements that appeal to decision makers, while keeping the impact of war (destruction of infrastructure, civilian casualties and other more long-term damages) out of sight and out of mind of the voting public.⁵

The alleged advantages of remote warfare have led to the proliferation of remote warfare tactics and technologies to an increasing array of state actors. The U.S., U.K., and France have long been associated with the deployment of 'remote warfare' tactics, yet now more and more governments use the technologies and tactics associated with it. Drones are a most notable example: countries such as Germany, Italy and others, aside from owning their own drones, allow U.S. forces to operate their drones from their territory, as does Niger on the African continent. Countries like Israel, Nigeria, China and Russia have been using drone technology for a number of years now,⁶ which makes the advent of drone technology to Latin America all the more predictable.⁷

To be sure, 'remote warfare' literature sits alongside other contributions and debates that have highlighted the changing character of war. Starting with Mary Kaldor's delineation of 'new wars,'⁸ and coming from different theoretical and methodological perspectives, scholars have long identified the changing character of war. They have also highlighted dynamics and tactics that have permitted governments to deploy force without incurring the human, political, and financial costs traditionally associated with war. These approaches have included (but are not limited to): Risk-transfer militarism,⁹ virtual warfare,¹⁰ virtuous war,¹¹ proxy warfare,¹² liquid warfare¹³, surrogate warfare,¹⁴ vicarious warfare,¹⁵ and digital war¹⁶ all identify changes in the character, conduct, and every-day experience of war.

In this context, 'remotewarfare' initially stressed the advantages provided by new technologies (including, but not limited to drones/UAVs) and the distance they established between deploying government forces and their targets. When analysing U.S. remote interventions, for example, Ohlin focused on the perceived utility of military drones, cyber warfare, and future Autonomous Weapons Systems (AWS) and discussed the legal implications of using such technologies.¹⁷ Despite these being new variations on old themes, combining these three weapon technologies 'allows the attacking force to inflict military damage while the operators

of the weapon remain safely shielded from the theatre of operations.’¹⁸ Ohlin, who was also concerned with the issue of proportionality, provided a historical analysis in order to be able to tell where the future danger with remote warfare lies. Others highlighted the political, cultural, and psychological consequences of the deployment of superior technology on the deploying actors, their societies, and their targets.¹⁹ Remote warfare, however, has come to encompass more than the deployment of superior technology. Remote weapons systems, what Gusterson calls “remote control”,²⁰ are but one manifestation of this desire to distance oneself from the battlefield.

The meaning of remote warfare has expanded to encompass diverse activities above and below the threshold of war and enriching the understanding of ‘remoteness.’ Rogers described this new type of warfare as one where ‘the increasing use of special forces, private military and security companies and remote systems’ operate “at the expense of the engagement of large forces.”²¹ Thus, by considering not just the technology, but also the human dimension, he provided a definition of remote warfare more concerned with the intention of the interveners rather than the technological developments. Knowles and Watson as well chose to widen the spectrum of remote war tactics and strategy and to include not just new technology, but to consider remote war as an emerging methodology of carrying out war: ‘Rather than deploying large numbers of their own troops, countries use a variety of tactics to support local partners who do the bulk of frontline fighting. In this sense, the ‘remoteness’ comes from a country’s military being one step removed from the frontline fighting.’ They argue that ‘remote technologies play a role, but remote warfare encompasses a broader set of actions,’ such as for example the use of PMCs and the training and equipping foreign armies or foreign actors. For Knowles and Watson, unlike Ohlin, military technologies are merely an expression of what remote warfare truly entails: distance, limited size, and desire to remove oneself from the battlefield.²²

Demmers and Gould, through their ‘Intimacies of Remote Warfare’ project at the University

of Utrecht, have contributed to reinforcing the importance of how modern warfare has become ‘characterised by a shift away from “boots on the ground” deployments, towards light-footprint military interventions,’ which inevitably generate ‘a spatial and temporal reconfiguration.’ States, they argue, are increasingly interested in ‘democratic risk aversion, technological advancements and the networked character of modern warfare.’²³ Thus, it is not just a matter of risk aversion, but also a desire to proceed alongside other partner countries or in opposition to foes.²⁴ A wider stream of literature and policy work analyses different types of remote warfare - with a focus on partnered operations,²⁵ civilian casualties,²⁶ the role of security cooperation in the redefinition of US grand strategy,²⁷ and the impact, as well as morality, of emerging technologies. A 2021 Special issue in *Defence Studies* also aimed at establishing a clear ‘remote warfare’ research agenda. In this effort scholars assessed the history of remote warfare and its relationship with current security practices (such as assassination and targeted killing).²⁸ Others explored the use of remote warfare by states outside the Anglosphere²⁹ and questioned the legitimacy of remote military capabilities.³⁰ Finally, scholars expanded the methodological outlook of remote warfare scholarship by connecting it with debates on ontological security.³¹

As to its regional focus, remote warfare literature has so far focussed on the Middle East and North Africa as the primary ‘recipient’ regions of this type of remote intervention (notably Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Yemen and Libya), and has considered mainly state deployment, with a particular focus on states in the so-called West. There have been exceptions, such as analyses of the use of drones by terrorist groups,³² *Small Wars Journal* attention to the use of drones by Mexican drug trafficking organizations,³³ or reports published by organisations such as PAX focussed on the proliferation of armed drones by non-Western actors.³⁴ Stoddard and Toltica have also explored the use of remote warfare by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in their intervention in Yemen.³⁵

Scholars as well as legal and political commentators, however, have generally ignored the deployment of remote warfare in Latin America. They have mostly overlooked the historical precedents set in Latin American for current practices of remote warfare. Due to the scholarship's preoccupation with the Middle East and the Sahel, 'remote warfare' scholars have also overlooked the current deployment of remote warfare in the region. The 'wars on drugs' and counterinsurgency operations currently taking place in Latin America are being waged through remote warfare practices. This development poses specific problems, which need to be analysed against a backdrop of regional specificities but bearing in mind lessons from other remote warfare contexts, especially as one of the main remote actors in Latin America is the United States.

In this sense, this report builds on existing remote warfare scholarship to identify key tactics and practices that can be understood as 'remote warfare.' A recent edited volume identified five main activities: 'supporting local security forces' for example providing training, equipment or both; the use of special operations forces; the use of private military and security contractors; air strikes and air support, including the use of drones; and intelligence sharing with local partners.³⁶ Agreeing with this understanding, the current report condenses these activities into three main areas of analysis: the use of PMCs, the provision of support (including military hardware, training, and the deployment of special operations forces alongside local actors), and intelligence sharing, including the use of intelligence for kill/capture operations. The report explores these practices both in historical perspective - going back to the origins of the 'war on drugs' - and their current form. It highlights the benefits of deploying these tactics, as well as the consequences for the deploying government, the target country, and its population. While clearly providing advantages in certain circumstances, remote warfare comes with a whole set of challenges. Not 'seeing' such challenges, or choosing to overlook them, risks doing more harm than good, not just for affected civilians, but also for those actors that choose to intervene remotely.

PMCS AND THE 'WAR ON DRUGS'

Scholars agree that the return to prominence of private military corporations (PMCs) can be traced back to the end of the Cold War.³⁷ At this juncture, several processes combined leading to the expansion and diffusion of PMCs. First, the disappearance of the Soviet threat led to a downsizing of most (Western) militaries, including that of the United States, contributing to a surplus of expertise now available to the private sector. Second, in the absence of the Soviet enemy, Western militaries came to confront a series of smaller, but more complex and fast-paced challenges. Debates at the end of the Cold War highlighted this shift from an allegedly clear Soviet threat to much more unpredictable risks.³⁸ Third, Western societies increasingly proved reluctant to intervene in foreign countries, especially if these interventions required the deployment of troops, and the ensuing risk of casualties.³⁹

In this context, the use of PMCs provides a series of real (and perceived) advantages to Western governments aiming to deploy force more remotely.⁴⁰ First, PMCs possess a series of specialist skills and capabilities (e.g. logistics, or the maintenance of new technologies) often downgraded or altogether lost in Western militaries.⁴¹ PMCs are also more nimble than conventional forces permitting a more rapidly deployment, with a quick surge capacity.⁴² Second, according to some scholars, PMCs permitted (and permit) Western governments to carry out tasks - generally reserved to militaries and to civilian agencies - at a lower cost. This claim, however, is heavily disputed in the literature.⁴³ Third, beyond their financial costs, PMCs certainly reduce political costs. PMCs permit governments to deploy forces and (at times) employ violence beyond the reach of public scrutiny and parliamentary or Congressional oversight. PMC employees are civilians bound by private contracts. This permits the deploying government to use PMCs regardless of constraints on the deployment of military force (such as troop caps).⁴⁴ The contracts regulating these deployments are also opaque, as are the procedures for awarding them which often lack genuine competition.⁴⁵ In the United States, contracts below \$50 million

do not require approval from Congress.⁴⁶ There is no obligation to disclose information regarding the content of the contracts and no institutional capacity (or interest) to follow-up on those contracts.⁴⁷ As Avant and de Neveres reported, 'even as DOD contract transactions increased by 328 percent between 2000 and 2009, the staff responsible for reviewing contractor purchasing... declined from seventy in 2002 to fourteen in 2009.'⁴⁸ Once a contract is signed, PMCs' missions can take years, with employees deployed to remote areas with little to no scrutiny from the deploying government.⁴⁹ Fourth, PMCs have permitted Western governments to engage in military missions without (excessive) concerns for casualties. Both in the deploying and in the target country, the death of PMCs' employees is treated far differently from the death of military personnel.⁵⁰ As Myles Frechette, former US ambassador to Colombia put it, it is 'very handy to have an outfit not part of the US Armed Forces. Obviously, if anybody gets killed or whatever, you can say it's not a member of the armed forces.'⁵¹

It should also be pointed out, that - at least in the US case - the success of PMCs has been influenced by their aggressive lobbying campaigns and by the revolving door between the US government, the Pentagon, and the so-called military-industrial complex. Some PMCs, for example, act as a 'veritable who's who of former military officers.' This makes both relations with government officials and the granting of contract easier, creating a sort of 'old boys' network.'⁵²

While much scholarship on remote warfare and PMCs focuses on the 'war on terror' and the extensive use of PMCs in Afghanistan and Iraq, Latin America and the 'war on drugs' represent the type of complex challenge PMCs were - theoretically - best placed to address. As Adam Isacson put it, 'the drug war in general, but Colombia in particular, was the testing ground for the use of military contractors.'⁵³ Three main PMCs have operated in the 'war on drugs.'

In 1999, **MPRI** (Military Professional Resources Inc.) received Pentagon contracts to work with the Colombian military. The initial consultancy contract (\$4.3 million), however, was not

renewed since the Colombian government was not impressed with the company's recommendations, which were reportedly high on jargon but low on practical advice and understanding of local conditions.⁵⁴ The company, however, restarted its work in Colombia under the Bush Administration, training the Colombian Army and national police to implement counter-guerrilla procedures.⁵⁵ During this contract, MPRI personnel engaged directly with the FARC and, again, the contract was not renewed in 2001, reportedly for low performance against the guerrillas.⁵⁶

The main PMC in the region is certainly **DynCorp**. The company has been under State Department contract since 1991.⁵⁷ It is now contracted for a range of services with more than 30 US government agencies and government contracts amount to 98% of its business.⁵⁸ In 1999, the Clinton Administration and Colombian President Andrés Pastrana agreed on Plan Colombia, which aimed at targeting so-called drug cartels and left-wing insurgents.⁵⁹ In the aftermath of the Plan, DynCorp became one of the main beneficiaries of US government expenditures.⁶⁰ As Hobson writes, 'Between 2005 and 2009 the USA spent more than \$1.9 billion on counter-narcotics contracts in Colombia, with the majority going to just five companies...Of these DynCorp was by far the largest, receiving some \$1.1 billion in contracts in the whole Latin American region.'⁶¹ To be sure, this clout is guaranteed by the strength of DynCorp's lobbying in Washington.

With such a large budget, DynCorp carried out a multiplicity of tasks in the region. These can be divided into three main categories: air missions, training, and intelligence. First, DynCorp personnel conducted aerial fumigation and observation. They piloted helicopters used for search and rescue mission and for armed support to the spraying missions. Second, DynCorp personnel has - reportedly - trained local forces, especially in Colombia. Finally, as Eventon and Bewley-Taylor wrote, 'there are some indications' that DynCorp was involved 'in intelligence gathering, interception of guerrilla communications and the provision of satellite images of guerrilla movements and base locations.'⁶²

DynCorp's activities have permitted the US government to deploy a large number of forces remotely. After Congress imposed caps on the number of US citizens in the region, DynCorp started to hire personnel from third countries, thus circumventing Congressional restrictions.⁶³ In a corporate game of Russian dolls, DynCorp has also been able to subcontract some of its activities to other PMCs. **Eagle Aviation Services and Technology (EAST)**, the company that delivered weapons to the Contras in Nicaragua in the 1980s at the time of the Boland Amendments (hence in violation of US law), is a subcontractor of DynCorp which operated in the region.⁶⁴

DynCorp's activities, however, have also exposed many of the risks of relying on PMCs. It has been reported that the activities of DynCorp personnel have gone well beyond those stipulated in their contracts. DynCorp employees have often participated in direct combat and in the hunt for guerrillas. Employees themselves have admitted to being involved in high-risk operations.⁶⁵ Furthermore, a complex network of collaborations seems to accompany the company's fumigation missions. DynCorp operates under the State Department Narcotics Affairs Section and its Air Wing. Oversight, however, is lax. Concerns regarding the shooting down of fumigation planes have increased the violence accompanying these missions. 'In areas targeted for aerial fumigation,' Villar and Cottle write, 'paramilitaries working with the Colombian Army arrive in helicopter gunships to "clear the ground" so that the planes, often piloted by Americans, are not shot at by militant campesinos.'⁶⁶The role of DynCorp, then, amount not only to the outsourcing of violence, but to the outsourcing of disregard for human rights and rights to health concerns for the affected communities.⁶⁷

Finally, **Airscan** specialises in aerial surveillance. This, reportedly, includes the deployment of UAVs. The company is part of the network surrounding spraying missions detailed above. It locates coca plantation and provide information to DynCorp for its fumigation missions. The company has also managed the protection of *Occidental Petroleum* pipelines in Colombia,

and it has been involved in operations against the FARC. In December 1998, it was involved in the bombing by the Colombian air force of the community of Santo Domingo which killed 17 civilians and no FARC rebels.⁶⁸

Overall, through the deployment of PMCs the US government has been able to conduct military and military-like operations in a more remote and deniable manner. As Villar and Cottle write, highlighting dynamics typical of 'remote warfare,'

'The use of PMCs enables Special Operations Forces under the coordination and command structure of SOUTHCOM to work alongside private contractors for covert operations. Most importantly, PMCs decentralize covert operations by decreasing the US government's official level of involvement as privatized armies or "special operations teams."⁶⁹

PMCs have also permitted much of the US funding for the 'war on drugs' to remain within US corporations.

As the brief overview above has detailed, however, the "advantages" presented by PMCs, however, often come at a cost. Abuses have often been rampant, but the private and contractual nature of these deployments has made it harder to hold the companies and the deploying governments accountable. Training and support deployments have often escalated to engaging in direct combat. In several regions, PMCs have cooperated with corrupt governments and violent paramilitary groups to perform their assigned tasks.⁷⁰ Through PMCs, the US government has been able to distance itself from the abuses conducted by the companies, presenting them as third and 'remote' parties. This, however, might be truer in the Washington bubble and among US public opinion than it is in the target countries, where PMCs are understood as instruments of the US government and little distinction is made between private businesses and US governments. Finally, PMCs have permitted the US government to ignore the casualties incurred. As Riemann and Rossi writes in their discussion of PMCs as a key component

of remote warfare, the use of PMCs permits governments to 'outsource' death. This is particularly consequential since it breaks the bonds between war and the society engaging in it. It weakens the sense of sacrifice and national identity, as well as state sovereignty.⁷¹

PROVISION OF EQUIPMENT, TRAINING, AND THE USE OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

If the deployment of PMCs has been a relatively recent development, the US government has a long history of involvement in Latin America. Starting in the early Cold War, the US government focused on reshaping the structure and conduct of police and military forces in the region. The aim was to make local governments and their security institutions more responsive to US interests. Reforms also aimed at diverting their attention away from external threats and towards (potential) sources of internal subversion that threatened the security and interests of the United States and of its regional allies.⁷² Over time, different (real or perceived) sources of subversion and different military and national security doctrines have permitted the United States to justify its involvement. What remained constant was the US government's violent engagement in the region. This often took the form of practices currently associated with 'remote warfare.'

The US presence in the region, in fact, often relied on remote forms of violence that would permit activities in the region without raising the financial and political costs of involvement. The provision of support for local security forces (police and military) through training and equipment, as well as the deployment of intelligence officials and special forces for both training purposes and, at times, to work alongside these local forces fit this pattern.⁷³

In Latin America, most of the provision of equipment has happened through the sale of hardware and technology. While this sale characterised the 'war on drugs' from the start, it radically increased in the Reagan years when

US spending on international counter-narcotics efforts more than tripled.⁷⁴ In the H. W. Bush years, *National Security Directive 18* and the Andean Initiative provided Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia with over \$260 million in military, intelligence, and law enforcement assistance. This represented only a first instalment for a program that would amount to \$2.2 billion over 5 years.⁷⁵ In the 1990s, the militarization of the 'war on drugs' became even more explicit⁷⁶ and the transfer of hardware and technology expanded, with lucrative deals for US corporations.

At this stage, the US government also started to identify regional armies as its main partners in the war on drugs. In Colombia, up until the early 1990s, the army had refused to become involved in counternarcotics missions. The main partner for the US had been the national police. This changed in the mid-1990s when the army became the main beneficiary of US support and hardware, while Washington (at best) turned a blind eye to the extensive connections between the Army and paramilitary groups such as Carlos Castaño's AUC (Self-Defence Forces of Colombia), so rebranded in 1997.⁷⁷

Under the Clinton Administration, the initial (more holistic) approach of Plan Colombia was also abandoned to emphasize 'punitive' drug policies as well as heavy military and police aid for drug interdiction and aerial eradication.⁷⁸ 70% of the total aid package went to military operations.⁷⁹ Similarly, the Merida Initiative (sometime referred to as Plan Mexico) has centred on the purchase of military hardware from US corporations and the provision of training for police and armed forces.⁸⁰ These sales have not declined in recent years, with a reported \$9 billion spent by countries in Latin America on purchases of arms and equipment from the United States between 2000 and 2016.⁸¹

If sales represented the bulk of the provision of equipment, the US government has also transferred technology to local partners for the conduct of specific operations. This hardware was at times left with the regional

government after the operations, and at other times withdrawn. For example, through collaboration (at times coerced) with US anti-narcotics operations, the government of Mexico acquired between the 1960s and late 1970s, 39 Bell helicopters and 22 small aircrafts, making it the largest fleet in Latin America at the time.⁸² In the 1980s, on the contrary, the Reagan Administration deployed six Black Hawk helicopters to Bolivia as part of Operation Blast Furnace. After four months, the helicopters and the 160 US troops accompanying them were withdrawn.⁸³

In the case of Latin America, the provision of materiel and equipment has often happened as part of broad (and public) legislative counter-drug initiatives and with the support of the receiving government. Starting in the 1990s, several of these programs received additional scrutiny as concerns regarding the human rights records of many of the regional actors receiving military aid gathered strength. In 1996, for example, the Leahy Law (from the name of the Senator who sponsored the legislation, Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont) established human rights standards for counter-narcotics (military) aid. It prohibited the transfer of materiel to units accused of committing grave human rights violations. Similar measures included End of Use Monitoring agreement with receiving parties (e.g. the Colombian Army) which only limited the provision of weapons for deployment in certain areas or solely for counter-narcotics purposes. As several commentators have argued, however, the US government has been able to find loopholes in such legislation or to provide interpretations so broad to make restrictions meaningless.⁸⁴ The US government maintained close ties to the Colombian military throughout the 1990s, while it conducted horrific abuses amounting to the worst record in Latin America at the time. In other cases, sales of weapons and other material were from the start excluded from these restrictions, such as sales through the Foreign Military Sales program. Some others simply flew under the radar.⁸⁵

The provision of equipment has gone hand in hand with the provision of training. The United States government has historically trained

scores of military, police, and intelligence officers from Central and Latin America. This training has taken place in the region or at institutions within the United States, including the controversial School of the Americas, later renamed Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. Historically, for example, Mexico has been the largest feeder of trainees to the School.⁸⁶ The emphasis on training has not subsided. As a recent report highlights, training is currently a fundamental component of the US presence in the region and plays a prominent role in (re)shaping the policies of regional governments. The region ‘receives a fifth of all training supplied by the United States to foreign officials.’⁸⁷ In Colombia, another country with historically high levels of US involvement, US ‘marines and Special Forces - trained more than half of the 6,300 Colombian military and police personnel who got U.S. training in 2001. The rest attended U.S. military institutions, including 151’ officials who attended the School of the Americas.⁸⁸ In line with remote warfare scholarship, the forces trained by the United States act as proxies in the war on drugs and, in the case of Colombia, also operate in other theatres of conflict.⁸⁹

Of particular interest in this context is the deployment of small teams of special operations forces, often in conjunction with teams from the DEA or intelligence agencies, to work alongside regional forces in the conduct of operations. These teams have often blurred the distinction between training and direct military engagement, as well as between law enforcement and war.

In the 1980s, Special Forces played a leading role in training local forces in counterinsurgency.⁹⁰ In Peru and Bolivia, the US Army deployed military and military intelligence personnel as part of Tactical Assistance Teams. They assisted local forces with intelligence collection and were active on the ground.⁹¹ The 1987 *Operation Snowcap* deployed US Army Special Forces and DEA personnel ‘to provide paramilitary training, law enforcement planning, intelligence and advisory support for counterdrug raids on cocaine processing labs and airstrips in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador.’⁹² While US Special Forces

remained at base, DEA teams were free to join the operations. The program was later shut down when it became clear that DEA agents were involved in full-blown military operations, particularly in the confrontation with the Sendero Luminoso group in Peru, something for which they were ill-equipped.⁹³

The deployment of small DEA training teams, however, remained a staple of US engagement. In 2004, the Bush Administration started deploying foreign-deployed Advisory and Support Team (FAST) in Afghanistan. Here the DEA worked with Special Operations Command to hunt ‘Afghan drug lords linked to the Taliban.’⁹⁴ As Eventon reported, when FAST programme head Richard Dobrich was asked whether the programme represented war or law enforcement, he answered ‘succinctly and enthusiastically: ‘Both!!!’” The same teams were later deployed in Latin America.⁹⁵ Once again, this example highlights the role of the ‘war on drugs’ in establishing precedents for the ‘war in terror,’ as well as the more recent return - in updated form - of the same practices to the region.

Importantly, special operations forces have also been able to deploy beyond public scrutiny and to circumvent constraints on the deployment of US forces. For example, the Department of Defense Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) program sends small teams of Special Forces to work with the forces in other countries. The program was established through Section 2011 of Title 10 of the US Code. On paper, a deployment can occur only if its primary aim is to improve the performance of the US Special Forces themselves, as well as their awareness of local terrain and customs.⁹⁶ A series of investigative reports from Dana Priest in the late 1990s, however, showcased how this requirement was often ignored and how - through JCET - the US government could circumvent limitations on collaboration with units involved in human rights abuses.⁹⁷ Furthermore, the training provided was also able to circumvent constraints imposed in the 1990s to limit US support to counter-narcotic activities. As a senior US officer in Colombia explained, the US ‘can call anything counter-drugs. If you are going to train to take out a

target, it doesn’t make much difference if you call it a drug lab or a guerrilla camp. There’s not much difference between counter-drug and counterinsurgency.’ Moreover, former members of these forces admitted that they made a clear effort to use counter-narcotics as a cover to conduct counterinsurgency training.⁹⁸

Many of these distinctions collapsed in the aftermath of 9/11. Special operations forces took on an even broader role both in the ‘war on terror’ and in the continuation of an expanded ‘war on drugs’ in the region. Special operations forces training missions in the region tripled between 2007 and 2014. This has coincided with a reduction in civilian missions. According to WOLA, this has turned special operations forces into a system of parallel diplomacy.⁹⁹ as well as, potentially, a less accountable tool of remote violence.

As the remote warfare scholarship expects, the provision of training and equipment and the deployment of special operations forces have provided a series of advantages to the US government. Through both public and (more) covert sales of weapons and equipment, the US government has been able to strengthen its local partners in the region as well as to impose changes to military and intelligence institutions. These sales have also, often, benefited corporate America with much of the funds seemingly earmarked for countries in the region remaining in the US, diverted to weapons manufacturers and other corporations.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the US provision of training has permitted the US to pursue its strategic interests while only rarely deploying their own forces to the region.

As Watson and McKay write, however, remote warfare comes at a cost. First, there is a cost to civilians in the targeted communities.¹⁰¹ As Jamieson and McAvoy write, governments rely on remote instruments (e.g. PMCs and special operations forces) to engage in ‘othering.’ These tools permit to establish distance between the deploying governments and the crimes committed on their behalf.¹⁰² While the US government has often turned a blind eye to these abuses, US training has often

been accompanied by egregious human rights violations. A report of the Fellowship for Reconciliation, for example, found a positive correlation between the units and officers that received U.S. assistance and training and human rights violations. As Eventon reported, citing the study, “many of the officers who oversaw the largest number of killings, ‘received significantly more U.S. training, on average, than other officers.’” According to FOR director, John Lindsay-Poland, on average “when there were increases in U.S. military aid, in those areas there was an increase in killings. And more importantly, when U.S. aid decreased... the killings did too.” The correlation is certainly not limited to Colombia. Second, practices of remote warfare ‘risk exacerbating rather than resolving the drivers of conflict.’ The length of the ‘war on drugs’ and the violence that has accompanied it are testament to this dynamic. The US emphasis on military solutions and on the transfer of military hardware and technology has contributed to the radicalization of the war on drugs. In the target countries, it has also led to (often) uncontrollable violence often perpetrated by paramilitary groups that have enjoyed US support and/or collusion. Domestically, the influx of weapons has led to the militarization of local police forces, blurring distinctions between law enforcement and warfare both in terms of equipment and in terms of activities.¹⁰³ Finally, like PMCs, the use of training and of special operations forces ‘falls through the gaps in mechanisms designed to use force abroad.’¹⁰⁴ As detailed above, the deployment of special operations forces and other small training teams has permitted to avoid public scrutiny and circumvent political and legal constraints.

INTELLIGENCE, DRONES, AND TARGETED KILLINGS

In Phil Klay’s latest novel, *Missionaries*, centred around the ‘war on drugs’ in Colombia, Juan Pablo, a Colombian Army captain meets Mason, a US Special Forces adviser. As they chat, Juan Pablo tells the reader of his frustration with the level of US government support. ‘What

we want,’ Juan Pablo reflects, ‘is not simply a new front in a war, but access to that thing the Americans, and only the Americans can provide. The same thing that killed Raul Reyes, and which the Americans have been using to hunt people in Iraq and Afghanistan...And it is something we deserve access to. After all, it started here, in Colombia, thirty years ago.’ The novel briefly discusses the use of US intelligence agencies and cooperation during the hunt for Pablo Escobar and the role of Search Bloc. As Juan Pablo concludes: ‘Of course, we can run the system in a limited sense, on our own. In fact, we teach the system to other military allies around Latin America. But access to US assets turns it into a monster.’¹⁰⁵

US intelligence agencies, their resources, and their practices have certainly been at the centre of the ‘war on drugs’ from the start and, at times, the system really has turned into a monster, with the US government and politicians looking the other way. Like other forms of U.S. engagement in the region, cooperation in the realm of intelligence collection and analysis has not been limited to the war on drugs. Over time, it has involved - with varying intensity - multiple US agencies (e.g. CIA, DEA, FBI) and it has targeted different enemies.

In the early Cold War, the US deployed the military and the CIA to contribute to the restructuring of police and military forces for the fight against (alleged) communists and internal subversion. Starting in the early days of the war on drugs, US technology and intelligence assistance often made possible the conduct of operations. In 1975, for example, two years after Nixon’s declaration of war, US surveillance planes and satellites were permitted to identify cannabis fields in Mexico.¹⁰⁶ These were then eradicated by Mexican forces with the collaboration of DEA agents in Operation Condor.¹⁰⁷ Intelligence reform and the transfer of technology also played a prominent role in the US approach to the region under Reagan and Bush. Under Bush, National Security Directive 18 and, later, the Andean strategy included support for intelligence collection and analysis.

Perhaps, as Juan Pablo hinted in the novel, the most famous case of intelligence cooperation in the 1980s and 1990s was the hunt for Pablo Escobar. With US support, Colombian President Barco established the Search Bloc, a special operations police unit with the task of finding the drug lord. The unit became one of the main channels of collaboration with the United States. The CIA, the DEA, the US Army's Special Forces' unit - the so-called 'Centra Spike' - were all involved and, at times, at loggerheads with each other.¹⁰⁸ But the hunt for Escobar relied especially on the 'muscle' of US technology. In 1992, then President Gaviria permitted US surveillance flights to enter Colombian air space at any time, without specific authorization.¹⁰⁹ As Crandall writes:

'In a precursor of the postmodern military and intelligence drone, the CIA dispatched a Schweizer SGM 2-37, a fixed-wing surveillance glider that could hover stealthily over a target for hours... At one point, seventeen American spy planes were in Medellín airspace at one time, so many that the Air Force had to put a Boeing E-3 Sentry in the air just to monitor them.'¹¹⁰

In the aftermath of 9/11, intelligence cooperation became even more prominent as restrictions established in the 1990s were abandoned. The US expanded its intelligence cooperation, especially with Colombia, and to a lesser degree with Mexico after the start of intensified conflict there. This included training, the transfer of technology, and the creation of intelligence 'fusion' centres bringing together US and local forces and modelled on those developed by the US with its local allies in the war on terror.¹¹¹ Intelligence sharing also came to rely on US technological advancements. In recent years, the US government has helped with the acquisition of drones/Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and/or has deployed them in countries in the region. This has generally happened with the support of the local government.

In Colombia, the US government deployed Scan Eagle drones for counter-narcotics and

counter-terrorism purposes.¹¹² As to Mexico, US unmanned aerial vehicles were deployed on the US-Mexico border already in the 1990s. In the aftermath of 9/11, the Department of Homeland Security increased its use of drones along the border, including the *Predator B*.¹¹³ The use of (unarmed) drones expanded under the Obama Administration as the situation in Mexico markedly deteriorated. In 2009, the US flew an unarmed Predator drone over Mexican territory after the killing of US Immigration agent Jamie Zapata. According to Dana Priest, an agreement was reached between the two countries for the flight of drones: 'U.S. pilots sitting in the States would control the planes remotely, but a Mexican military or federal police commander would be able to direct the pilot within the boundaries of a Mexico-designated grid.'¹¹⁴ In 2011, investigative reporters from the *New York Times* revealed that the US government had also started regularly flying high-altitude unarmed drones, including the *Global Hawk* over Mexico. Drones were used to collect intelligence then transferred to Mexican law enforcement agencies.¹¹⁵ At the time, two intelligence fusion centres were created: one run by the CIA in Mexico City, and another run by the DEA in Monterrey. US authorities provided Mexico with extensive intelligence technology. This included: 'electronic signals technology, ground sensors, voice-recognition gear, cellphone-tracking devices, data analysis tools, computer hacking kits and airborne cameras that could read license plates from three miles away.'¹¹⁶ In cooperation with Mexican authorities, the US used 'real-time intelligence against kingpins on a Mexican-U.S. priority list - including cell phone geolocation, wiretaps, electronic intercepts and tracking of digital records - to help Mexican authorities target them.'¹¹⁷ This allegedly contributed to the capture of several kingpins. The winding down of the 'war on terror' has also further increased the availability of intelligence and military technology in the region. The Department of Homeland Security established a programme to repurpose military equipment previously deployed in those two countries. These have included towers, aerostats, helicopters, drones,¹¹⁸ and the NSA RT-RG mass surveillance system previously used in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹¹⁹

While drones in the region have so far been unarmed, starting in the Cold War, the US involvement in the region has often been connected with the conduct of targeted killing and kill/capture operations against insurgency and drugs-related high-value targets. In 1959, a US Special Survey team arrived in Latin America. The team recommended the setting up of a military intelligence network, improved training, and the establishment of specialised counter-insurgency brigades. In 1962, targeted killing featured as a key component of Brigadier General William P. Yarborough's recommendations on Colombia. In his view, the United States needed to take a leading role in creating clandestine teams able to conduct - along other operations - terrorist activities against known communist supporters. This force should have been combined with 'hunter/killer' teams to collect intelligence and kill leading figures.¹²⁰ In Yarborough's report, the Colombians were advised to begin "paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents."¹²¹ While initially devised as a targeted killing strategy, this soon became an instrument to target not only communist suspects and guerrilla members, but also those who sympathised with the guerrilla or just the population living in areas of guerrilla activities. Stressing the influence of Latin America on US foreign policy, it should be noted that the same approach was adopted in Vietnam, through the Phoenix Project. Here, the targets were not members of the Viet Cong themselves, but individuals considered part of the Viet Cong infrastructure, that is the civilian network that (allegedly) supported the guerrilla.¹²² In both Latin America and Vietnam, what had been envisioned as a targeted effort became a wanton killing programmes with abuses and countless innocents caught in the crossfire.¹²³

In the 1980s, targeted killing featured prominently in US involvement in the region through both death squads and the support for insurgents, such as the Contras in Nicaragua. (In)famously, the CIA produced a training manual for the contras that recommended the killing of specific individuals on the basis of their political/social position and their role in supporting the Sandinista government. At the same time, the Reagan administration was

also crucial in establishing legal precedents that permitted the elimination of terrorists¹²⁴ and - by equating drugs to a threat to national security - drug lords.¹²⁵

In the 1990s, the 'kingpin strategy' redeployed the same approach that had failed against the Viet Cong Infrastructure (the civilian support network supporting the Viet Cong insurgency). Like in Vietnam, the assumption was that by cutting off the head, the body would crumble too. The strategy, adopted by the Bush Administration, gave American forces the permission to kill foreigners involved in drug trafficking. Law enforcement targets quickly transitioned to military ones. The strategy also expanded the resources and the authority available to the DEA. Its head, Robert Bonner was, after all, behind the strategy itself.¹²⁶ To be sure, alongside these more overt strategies, intelligence, intelligence training, and (covert) intelligence sharing represented a point of contact between the US government and paramilitaries forces in the region. The National Security Archive, for example, has traced the connections between US government agencies and Los Pepes who played a prominent role in the hunt for Escobar and in the killing of his enablers and supporters as well as innocent bystanders.¹²⁷ Similarly, in 1990, a US team of military advisers travelled to Colombia with the aim of improving Colombian intelligence and military intelligence capabilities. As Robin Kirk reported, initially thought as a tool to be deployed in the 'war on drugs' the new intelligence system was targeted against alleged 'subversives.' The new navy intelligence system, called Network 7, 'based in Barrancabermeja began to recruit professional killers and paramilitaries as "hunter-killer" squads that collected information used to murder Colombians, among them peasant leaders, human rights defenders, and people who made the mistake of getting in their way.'¹²⁸ Through the 'war on terror,' under Bush and even more so under Obama, targeted killings became a key component of US foreign policy. The blurring of the 'war on drugs' with the 'war on terror' contributed to an increase in intelligence cooperation and a 'return' of technologies and practices of targeted killing to the region.

In Colombia, for example, under the Bush Administration, intelligence support and targeted killings started to be directed against the FARC, especially after the kidnapping of US citizens. The Administration authorised the US Special Forces Command and methods that had been at the forefront of the fight against al-Qaeda.¹²⁹ However, as Dana Priest reported, while US and Colombian forces were able to locate FARC leaders, killing or capturing them proved much harder. It was in this context and due to these difficulties that the Colombians, with US support, developed a new 'bombs on forehead' strategy. Despite some legal qualms in Washington, the Office of Legal Counsel under Bush concluded that targeting guerrilla leaders was no different than targeting terrorist, plus, precedents had been set already under Reagan. The US provided Colombian forces with GPS guidance kits that transformed gravity bombs into accurate smart bombs. The control of this technology initially remained with the United States. The Colombians needed to ask permission for the deployment of the bombs and, if they misused it, the CIA could withdraw GPS support. In 2010 Colombia was given full control of the GPS bombs. According to Priest, the campaign of smart bombing reportedly decimated the FARC leadership and caused extensive desertions.¹³⁰

Intelligence cooperation has been at the forefront of US involvement in the region. The collection, analysis, and transfer of information to local forces has permitted the US government to distance itself from the conduct of these forces, in a similar pattern as in other remote warfare tactics. (Covert) intelligence support has also been - traditionally - less controversial than military training and transfer of equipment, as it does not involve the direct use of force. However, considering the surveillance practices sometimes used in the recent past by intelligence agencies of countries involved in the US drug war, one might conclude that the results of intelligence cooperation are not necessarily normatively more acceptable than other remote warfare practices.¹³¹ By establishing militarized surveillance

techniques, and by enhancing the capabilities of often highly problematic and politicized security agencies, it might do much damage, albeit this damage will be hard to attribute.

BACKLASH: REMOTE DRUG TRAFFICKING AS A RESPONSE TO REMOTE WARFARE?

One of the most interesting features of current drug trafficking organizations, for example in Colombia, is that many of their current standard operating procedures seem to mimic the state behaviour observed in remote warfare practices. This is not in itself a novelty - the history of non-state violent actors in Latin America - and presumably elsewhere - is replete with examples of irregular or insurgent forces adapting to new circumstances often generated by state repression.¹³² In any case, criminal organizations in Latin America seem to mirror the operative principle behind remote warfare in a way that could be classified as 'remote drug trafficking': Both spatially and socially, criminal actors use technology as well as surrogates to distance themselves more and more from the illegal operations that generate their wealth, for reasons of both safety and profit.

One example is the use of long-range submarines to deliver cocaine directly to Spain, and possibly onwards to the United Kingdom.¹³³ This trend may be partly driven by the evolutionary improvement of already existing technological possibilities as well as by the commercial opportunity to cut out middlemen, yet expert assessments determine that the principal motivation for the construction of narco-submarines stems from advanced detection technologies provided mainly by U.S. security assistance.¹³⁴ If the trend continues, maritime trafficking routes will become truly global, interdiction even more difficult, and trafficking patterns more and more unpredictable and geographically flexible. Other tendencies continue to parallel the techniques of remote warfare. For instance, in one case, a transnational drug trafficking organization paid for the development of a transport drone which would be able to attach itself to passing cargo ships, be carried over

long distances, and then detach automatically and, by GPS, broadcast its location to be picked up with its illicit cargo. The project failed only because of an accident,¹³⁵ it does illustrate, however, that criminals and security agencies sometimes compete on a nearly level technological playing field.

This may also soon be the case regarding the use of armed drones, simple variants of which have already been used by cartels in Mexico.¹³⁶ If illegal actors - and their funds would certainly permit such a project - were able to not just outfit commercial drones with simple explosives, but to actually deploy sophisticated weaponized versions with targeting optics and, for example, simple warhead launchers, very problematic developments would become possible. So far, weaponized commercial drones seem to have been used as a rather ineffectual, improvised outgrowth of existing smuggling practices. But a directed effort at capabilities to attack law enforcement agencies, rivals, or even critical infrastructure such as refineries, gas tanks or power stations with sophisticated sensor-strike complexes built from easily available components is at least thinkable.

Finally, drug traffickers have also become socially even more detached from the more risky and violent aspects of their trade. The so-called "invisibles" - criminals who lead outwardly normal and seemingly respectable lives and conduct drug trafficking activities behind a thick veneer of impeccable corporate structures, and often with good political connections, have become dominant figures of organized crime in Colombia.¹³⁷ The ultimate consequence of remote warfare in narcotics enforcement might not be the more effective repression of the drugs trade, but rather the emergence ultra-resilient, stealthy and complex organizations. These organizations may also use advanced technologies to a higher degree than previously thought possible, mirroring the long-distance remote strategies pioneered by the US drug war. The risks inherent in such developments necessitate further research, and scenario development to enable strategic foresight.

CONCLUSIONS

What can be said regarding the overall consequences of the application of remote warfare practices in the Latin American drug wars? The easiest and most obvious result is that it has not been terribly effective at achieving its aim if that aim is indeed the reduction of drug trafficking and other forms of criminality. The growing international movement towards the decriminalization and legalization of different forms of narcotics is testament to the increasing awareness of that failure.¹³⁸ However, this is not only because of the lacking effectiveness of remote warfare, but quite possibly due to the aims of the drug war in general.

The specific consequences arising from remote warfare should be considered apart from the overall failure of repressive drug policies. While this separation of remote warfare from the overall conflict may be a difficult or ontologically problematic aspiration,¹³⁹ we argue that remote warfare practices seem to have led, besides the human rights problems inherent in many of them, to at least three distinct types of problems, namely (1) unpredictable or counterproductive effects regarding the original policy aims, (2) serious problems of legitimacy for the intervening actor due to the clandestine nature of its operations, and (3) the possible dependence on local actors, who may pursue aims that may be entirely different or from or even incompatible with those of the intervening actor, (4) the use of remote warfare practices, instead of leading to the annihilation of criminal actors, may simply effect their transformation into more technologically capable, concentrated, and therefore more dangerous actors through the influx of money and capabilities. These results are not altogether different from the expectations found in current literature on remote warfare.¹⁴⁰

Furthermore, the reputational effects of remote warfare in Latin America becomes clear in the widespread assumption that the U.S. government is the main culprit for events with which they may only be tangentially or partially related - a much noted effect by

historians of coups d'état in Latin America, who often call for a renewed emphasis on the agency of local actors in such events.¹⁴¹ It appears that the adoption of remote warfare by an outside actor may lead to the automatic association of that outside actor with other, superficially similar, events. And finally, the cooperation with local actors in the context of counternarcotics operations - including significant violators of human rights, such as in Colombia or Peru - will enable these local actors to pursue their own aims within the established relation, even to the potential detriment of the intervening actor.¹⁴²

It appears plausible that in the context of the drug wars in Latin America, as well as in other geographical contexts, remote warfare methods are mainly utilized in order to address situations abroad that appear to need some sort of remedy, but do not justify the overt deployment of significant national capabilities. A sort of band-aid logic thus applies, and that logic may lead to the escalation of the original problem in ways not originally envisioned. Beyond the original problematique of drug wars, the remote warfare aspects thus deserve future critical attention, especially with regards to their potentially disastrous, and little researched, long-term effects.

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Global Drug Policy Observatory

School of Social Sciences

Department of Politics, Philosophy and
International Relations

James Callaghan Building

Swansea University

Singleton Park

Swansea, SA2 8PP

Tel: +44 (0)1792 604293

www.swansea.ac.uk/gdpo



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