A conceptual critique of remote warfare

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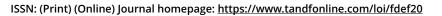
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a conceptual critique of "remote warfare." It argues that "remote warfare" is more of a trendy term than a robust concept. In support of this assessment, this paper makes two arguments. First, that there is a lack of clarity in the debate over what "remote warfare" is: namely, the literature is yet to explain what it entails. Second, that because of this lack of definitional specificity, we also lack an account of its analytical value: what intellectual leverage does it hold over existing terms making similar claims? The article discusses these points by expanding on the notion of "semantic field," which it uses to assess how "remote warfare" contributes and is shaped by the broader conceptual confusion in the study of contemporary war and warfare.

> "[*Regina George*]: Gretchen, stop trying to make fetch happen!
> It's not going to happen!" (Waters 2004)

A poor concept is a huge intellectual liability. It undermines theoretical thinking (Rosenau 1980), puzzlement (Zinnes 1980), measurement and operationalisation (Kalyvas 2003, 476), while hindering research cumulation and progress (Stanton 2019). The study of civil wars in recent decades provides ample evidence for this: contentious definitions never settling everyone's satisfaction (Florea 2012, 80; Armitage 2017, 12); absence of conceptual autonomy, yet ample conceptual competition (Kalyvas 2006, 16); excessive politicisation (Kalyvas 2009); and difficulties in bridging practitioner-academics perspectives (Canestaro 2016, 395). At the same time, it demonstrates the intellectual benefits of taking concepts seriously and thinking about them creatively and productively: from the consolidated study of different types of armed non-state actors such as rebels and militias (Jentzsch et al. 2015), to the closer theoretical integration of warfare in civil war research (Kalyvas 2005; Balcells and Kalyvas 2014), and to the development of robust typologies of wartime social order and institutions (Arjona 2014; Mampilly and Stewart 2021).

This is why a poor conceptual debate is even more troubling: it is a huge intellectual failure. Conceptual debates are enthusiastically and regularly ignored, often receiving the theoretical fast at the expense of empirical performance (Johnson 2003, 87). As Berenskoetter argues, "most of the time, we take the meaning of our concepts for

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granted" (2016, 1). Disregarded as meta-theoretical trivia (Rauta 2018), conceptual debates are presumed to be resolved by fiat or within political theory and philosophy (Schedler 2010), often resulting in "a *dialogue de sourds*" (emphasis in original, Kibrik 2021, 2). While in the clearest form not *the* most significant theoretical battlefield, conceptual debates are not unimportant (Diehl 2002, 13). They are about knowledge structures, regimes, praxis, communication, and transmission of how we think about what counts. They take stock of the origins and diversity of sites of knowledge, and present options for how to bridge some, abandon others, and potentially find new ones. They offer a theoretical starting point (Kalyvas 2005, 94) and "are needed to construct theories" (Berenskoetter 2017, 152) because "they enable us to intellectually frame issues and formulate theories in the first place" (Berenskoetter 2016, 1). At the same time, they provide clarity and comparative precision and "stand to correct theoretical and methodological ambivalences" (Rauta 2018, 449). In short, concepts and their debates are "critical to the functioning and evolution of social science" (Gerring 1999, 359) and "without solid conceptual foundations, the edifice of political science is insecure" (Schedler 2010).

In spite of the intellectual advantages brought by a thorough conceptual debate, recent discussions about contemporary war and warfare have succumbed to a *conceptual malaise* which has led to a general state of *conceptual envelopment* or *entrapment*. The former refers to what Ucko and Marks described as the "emergence of new – and not so new – terms to describe today's messy realities, starting with the re-discovery of *insurgency* and *counterinsurgency* in the late 2000s (in an ill-defined relationship with terrorism and counter-terrorism) and leading, more recently, to discussion of *hybrid* threats and *gray-zone* operations" (emphasis in original 2018, 207). The latter describes Kilcullen's observation that policymakers and academics alike have reached a situation in which an adversary's conception of war becomes so much broader than their own through subsequent flawed mischaracterisations of war and warfare (2020, 175–176). In short, we have *over*-conceptualised to the point of *out*-conceptualising ourselves. Some of the recent thinking about naming and typologising manifestations of political violence has largely taken place in the absence of concept analysis (Rauta 2021a), by ignoring its approaches and traditions (Berenskoetter 2017), and by reducing conceptual complexity to trendy terminologies to such an extent that we are "conceptually under-equipped to grasp, let alone counter, violent political challenges" (Ucko and Marks 2018, 208).

This article evaluates this broader problem by providing a conceptual critique of the notion of "remote warfare," around which this special issue is organised. In the *Introduction* to this special issue, my co-editors and I cast "remote warfare" as a moderately useful buzzword, one still trying to find its footing (Biegon et al. 2021). As one of the latest arrivals in the ever-expanding vocabulary of the study of political violence, "remote warfare" has contributed to a democratisation of the debate around war and warfare by appealing to the practitioner, policy, think tank, and academic worlds in some shape or form, thereby permitting an intellectual exchange relatively unconstrained by each worlds' modus operandi. Take for example Alyn Smith, MP for Stirling, whose bill on the prohibition of the use of lethal autonomous weapons, transparency in arms exports and the use of drones and other remote weapons praised the work of think

tanks such as the *Oxford Research Group, Article 36*, and the *Campaign to Stop Killer Robots*. This speaks, even if anecdotally, to our effort in the *Introduction* to find utility in the buzzword quality of "remote warfare."

Nevertheless, for "remote warfare" to make significant strides, its proponents need to engage with the notion's intellectual infrastructure, and in this way engage in the wider debate on how we think about political violence. On the one hand, if concepts on/for/ about political violence are signalling devices with which one might describe, assess, and then counsel on successful strategies in contemporary warfare, then the "remote warfare" debate must overcome its reluctance to justify its relevance and demonstrate awareness of its conceptual limitations.[1] In short, it should own its past and present errors. On the other hand, an unwillingness to do so should have us question, in the words of Regina George quoted at the start of the article, why some are trying to make "remote warfare" happen. Specifically, "why contribute to conceptual proliferation at a time when we are assailed with various notions" (Waldman 2018, 183), when there is little excuse, theoretically at least, for us to ignore one another's vocabularies?

The article proceeds as follows. It develops a framework of analysis that leverages recent developments in concept analysis with an emphasis on the relations of meaning within the semantic field of contemporary warfare. This is applied to reveal two pathways of conceptual emergence: first, *conceptual returnism* and its logic of comparative contextualisation; and, second, *conceptual reinvention* and its logic of terminological innovation. Against this background, it provides a conceptual assessment of "remote warfare." It shows that there is something fractal about the debate on "remote warfare," between its grand scope, the obvious intension-extension tensions, and its limited deliverables, which, taken together, invite this article's critique. In doing so, the article is not interested in discrediting this emerging research agenda on "remote warfare" – there is a strong likelihood it will move forward self-referentially following a sunk cost logic. Rather, it follows Wilkens and Kessler's understanding that a debate's shortcomings and biases "are important and productive" (2021). As such, a critical engagement with the debate's central concept provides the benefits of reflection and re-examination for its future development.

Thinking conceptually about war and warfare

Concept analysis and semantic fields

MacMillan recently argued that "we must, more than ever, think about war" (2020, 289), and a cursory glance at recent research on war reveals how much we have come to know on inter-state or intra-state conflict, as well as the causes and processes that account for and sustain them. Regardless of theoretical and methodological preferences, this research advanced, progressed, and cumulated from a simple baseline: the existence of some category of war or warfare as non-negotiable, making war a pressing, observable, and analysable issue. For some research clusters such as conflict research, aside from some of the above-mentioned ambiguities, the conceptual demarcation lines were clear inasmuch as they traced "standard" state and non-state types of conflict: *intra-, inter-, extra-*, etc.

Yet, the expansion of our knowledge of war across international relations, security, and strategic studies came with an expansion of the categories of war or warfare under observation, sometimes driven by trends, events, and policy, sometimes galvanised around *it* labels – fashionable/in vogue – and sometimes powered by the not-so-covert dynamics of professional recognition. These overlapped, competed, and tried to supersede one another in what is referred to as the wider *semantic field*, while being pushed and pulled through the extra-linguistic forces of the *discursive field* (the ideas, images, and practices of their use by agents and their audiences and their joint negotiation of meaning in context) (Berenskoetter 2016, 7; Wilkens and Kessler 2021). Both are key notions in concept analysis, yet rarely acknowledged and theorised – an unsurprising condition given that even the notion of "concept" itself is rarely questioned (Ophir 2018, 59).

This sub-section expands on recent work in concept analysis focusing on semantic fields as the background against which our conceptual knowledge of war and warfare has expanded – with the notion of "discursive field" taking a secondary place in the article's analysis, as its ability to link a concept's employment and performance requires an altogether different focus. The relevance of this interdisciplinary approach to concept analysis as applied to the study of contemporary conflict and/or international security should not be understated, nor qualified as "too left field." In fact, it has been a growing inter-disciplinary research avenue: Futter (2018) discusses "cyber semantics" in an effort to reach better policy formulation in the information age, while a recent paper located "proxy wars" in the semantic field of military intervention as a clearly indirect sub-type (Rauta 2021a).

With this in mind, the notion of "semantic field" is an import into political science from a branch of linguistics, semantics, which focuses on the study of meaning communicated through language (Goddard 1999, 1; Finch 2000, 142; Sartori 2009a, 97). In semantics, "semantic field" has been defined as a domain of relevant words in specific areas (Goddard 1999, 43), and Eco argues that "semantic fields give shape to the units of a given culture and establish portions of the world vision belonging to that culture" (1977, 76). The notion's intellectual heritage goes back to the seminal work of Ferdinand de Saussure, who argued that words are linked to other words in the same language, like a cell in a network (Allan 2001, 258). As such, concept analysis employing the notion of "semantic field" and its ability to link together neighbouring concepts adopts a structuralist framework, the essence of which is that "the meaning of any word is actually constituted by the totality of relationships this word has with the other words in the language" (Goddard 1999, 9).

Within the existing traditions of concept analysis, "semantic field" is most commonly associated with what Berenskoetter calls "the scientific approach," pioneered by Sartori's work on concepts in political science. Across Sartori's scholarship, "semantic field" is defined, first, as "a set of independent-interdependent terms, [. . .], which represent the conceptual structure, or the conceptual framework of a given field" (2009a, 92). Second, it is conceived as "[a] manageable breakdown and the most meaningful subunit of a whole linguistic system" (2009a, 102). Third, and more expansively, it comes to reference

[...] a clustering of terms such that each of its component elements interacts with all the others, and, [...], is altered by any alteration of the others. In other words, a semantic field consists of a set of associated, neighbouring terms that hang together under the following test: when one term is redefined, the other terms or some other terms also need to be redefined (2009b, 124).

Sartori identifies the semantic field as an area in which concepts occupy semantic space, the boundaries of which are determined by the concepts' relations to each other. He underscores this by developing a family of terms connected to "semantic field" which are deployed at various stages in his work. Overall, his treatment of the matter is similar to one of the most famous assessments in lexical semantics about word relations by Firth: "you shall know a word by the company it keeps" (1957, 11), and importantly, Sartori's arguments are not without criticisms, the most important of which being their excessive naturalism (Bevir and Kedar 2008, 509).

For the purposes of this article, "semantic field," therefore, refers to the intellectual playground hosting the clustering of terms used to identify a set of problems. It is "a group of terms and symbols that relate to each other in a particular way" (Berenskoetter 2016, 6). In a semantic field, the component elements interact and are altered "by any alteration of the others" (Sartori 2009b, 124), leading to an intellectual (pre)-condition of defining a concept "only in terms of its 'place' in relations to other concepts in its web" (Somers 1995, 136). Basically, if one concept changes, all others in the field change as "the movement of one piece will suffice to change all the relationships of the system" (Eco 1977, 76). This is because the semantic field is the space "in which a concept's meaning is mutually constituted in definitions, through an active process of assembling *semantic crossovers* (shared features) and *semantic nuances* (properties setting terms apart)" (emphasis in original, Rauta 2021a, 7). As Ophir explains, "concepts always appear in the plural, connected to each other, in need of each other, crossing, confronting, and complementing each other" (2018, 73). In short, the semantic field is where concepts hang out.

Against this background, within a semantic field, we can observe different relations of meaning between concepts that are relevant to determine when and how notions emerge and to assess research accumulation and progress. In a specific way, semantics allows us to distinguish equivalence (synonymy), opposition (antinomy), part-whole connection (meronymy), subordination (hyponymy), multiple meanings (polysemy), etc. In a general and more international relations-friendly way, following Berenskoetter, we can distinguish three broad relations: "with *supporting concepts* which are integral to the meaning of our concept [...]; with *cognate concepts* with similar meanings or whose meanings correspond with each other and bear what Wittgenstein called a family resemblance [...]; and with *contrasting concepts* that are opposite in meaning, sometimes even taking the form of counter-concepts [...], which relate to and (in)form each other through a dialectic" (emphasis added, in Berenskoetter 2016, 6).

As such, we can think of a semantic field as a marketplace and an intellectual battle-field where incumbent terms are "overthrown" in attempted conceptual *coups d'état* – in ways that subvert or support some of the above-mentioned relations of meaning. The end of the Cold War, the first Gulf War, and the rediscovery of intra-state violence in the 1990s (Kalyvas 2009), came with a wave of new concepts – "revolution in military affairs," "info wars," "network-centric war," and several "generations" of war – that peaked with

Kaldor's infamous "new wars" ([1999]/2012). By the end of that decade, however, complaints about the problem of competition coinages were in full swing: "virtual war, virtuous war, information war, net war, humanitarian war, spectator sport war – strive to capture the essence of the transformation" (Carruthers 2001, 673). Since then, the semantic field of political violence with an emphasis on war and warfare has been in overdrive, expanding almost to saturation point, and in the *Introduction* to this special issue, we listed some examples (Biegon et al. 2021). Yet, this was hardly a complete picture, which the following sub-section tries to reconstruct in more depth as a tool to identify some common conceptual problems, which, as the paper subsequently shows, are also shared by "remote warfare."

Semantic fields and conceptual quicksands: too many terms, too few concepts

Since the 1990s, the vocabulary with which we have described and analysed war and warfare has expanded considerably. A quick review permits us to count non-exhaustively the following: "accelerated warfare" (Hayward 2020), "algorithmic warfare/AI warfare" (Scharre 2018; Coker 2019; Bellanova et al. 2021), "ambiguous war" (Mumford and McDonald 2014), "anthropogenic war" (Merrin 2020), "asymmetric/guerrilla/irregular war" (Taber 2002; Arreguín-Toft 2006, 2012; Scheipers 2015), "auxiliary warfare" (Rauta 2016; Scheipers 2017) "code wars" (Schmidt and Cohen 2013), "cool wars" (Rothkopf 2013) "composite warfare" (Hartwig 2020), "compound warfare" (Huber 2002), "cosmo-politan war" (Fabre 2012), "counter-insurgency" (Scheipers 2014), "cyber deterrence/war/warfare/security" (Rid 2012; Gartzke 2013; Futter 2018; Harknett and Smeets 2020; Levinson 2020; Arquilla 2021; Borghard and Lonergan 2021), "digital and post-digital war" (Merrin 2018; Bousquet 2020a; Merrin and Hoskins 2020; O'Loughlin 2020), "drone warfare" (Gilli and Gilli 2016; Boyle 2021; Doctor and Walsh 2021; Theussen 2021), "electronic warfare" (Adamy 2015), "fake war" (Kriel 2017), "frozen conflicts" (Klosek et al. 2021), "high/low-intensity conflict/war/warfare" (Smith 2005), "hybrid war" (Hoffman 2009, 2014, 2016; Galeotti 2016; Renz 2016; Almäng 2019), "[new] generations of war/warfare" (Hammes 2005; Junio 2009), "genetic warfare" (Biberman 2021), "grey zone war" (Stoker and Whiteside 2020; Rauta and Monaghan 2021), "information warfare" (Hellman and Wagnsson 2017; Golovchenko et al. 2018; Lupion 2018; Fridman et al. 2019; Jonsson 2019), "like war" (Singer and Brooking 2018), "liminal war" (Kilcullen 2020), "limited war" (Freedman 2014) 'liquid warfare (Demmers and Gould 2018), "metro war" (Coker 2015) "mosaic warfare" (Magnuson 2018), "net-centric/network warfare" (Niva 2013), "non-linear warfare" (Galeotti 2016), "non-obvious war" (Libicki 2012), "non-state warfare" (Biddle 2021), "political warfare" (Hoffman 2014; Robinson et al. 2018; Polyakova 2019), "positional warfare" (Kaushal 2018) "postmodern warfare" (Ehrhart 2017), "proxy wars" (Rauta 2018, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b; Fox 2019, 2020; Groh 2019; Moghadam and Wyss 2020), "revolutionary warfare" (Whiteside 2016; Kalyvas 2015), "robot wars" (Singer 2009; Roff 2014; Shaw 2017), "[global] shadow warfare" (Barno 2014), "semi-proxy wars" (Cragin 2015), "small wars" (Barkawi 2004), "society-centric warfare" (Levite and Shimshoni 2018), "space warfare" (Bowen 2020), "spectator-sport war" (McInnes 2002), "surrogate warfare" (Krieg and Rickli 2018; Rauta et al. 2019; Karagiannis 2021), "uncomfortable wars" (Fishel and Manwarin 2006), "unconventional warfare" (Votel et al. 2016), "unrestricted

warfare" (Qiao and Wang 1999), "urban warfare" (King 2021), "vicarious warfare" (Waldman 2018, 2021). To complicate matters further, all of these war/warfare categories sit next to other cognate notions such as "complex political emergencies" (Goodhand and Hulme 1999), "comprehensive approach," the "American/Western way of war" (Marks and Bateman 2019), "nation building," "hyperactive battlefields" (Osborn 2021) "full spectrum dominance" (Ryan 2019; Stacey 2020), "omni-/multi-domain" (Perkins 2017), "by-with-through" (Cragin 2020), "subversion" (Lee 2020), "war amongst people" (Marks and Rich 2017), and the newly re-emphasised "great power war/competition." With this in mind, one wagers the next account will be one telling us that everything is warfare.

Clearly, the foundations of the semantic field of political violence have given in to some deep conceptual quicksands. What explains this conceptual barrage? To begin with, we know that any concept "tends to be attached to a word, although – and this is important – not necessarily always to the same word and, as such, is more than a word" (Berenskoetter 2016, 4). Nevertheless, does this expansion amount to anything beyond terminological overdrive? Is it not a case of too many terms, too few concepts? Returning to Berenskoetter's above-mentioned relations of meaning, we can clearly see contrasting relations – conventional/unconventional; regular/irregular; symmetric/ asymmetric; low/high-intensity – as well as the predominance of cognate concepts, or, simply put, synonyms of various degrees of equivalence: for example, the terms "ambiguous," "non-obvious," or "shadow" come to identify the same fogginess of warfare; of "by-with-through" presented as a politically more palatable "proxy war."

Then, there are also numerous supporting concepts, those concepts integral to the meaning of the concept. This applies to the contentious "hybrid warfare," in and of itself a conceptual system that can easily double as a semantic field, or to "irregular warfare," recently defined as combining information warfare, ambiguous or denied proxy operations, and subversion (Petit et al. 2021). Similarly, the recently proposed notion of "vicarious warfare" is a complex concept – a meronym in semantic terms – that combines "delegation," "danger-proofing," and "darkness" (Waldman 2018, 2021). In many ways it reinvents by mixing "proxy," "shadow," "asymmetric," and "low-intensity warfare" in an account that emphasises the tactical advantages of drone warfare as key to the socio-political demands for war on the cheap. Krieg and Rickli's (2018) "surrogate warfare" covers pretty much the same intellectual terrain, however with an empirical terrain of questionable extension – everything from great power competition and hybrid war to artificial intelligence, as well as with a term redolent of the Cold War superpower competition.

Therefore, what are the intellectual merits of requalifying war and warfare through new adjectives when existing terms already do the job? Why observe a war-related process, for example, delegation of war to rebels, through countless alternatives when they mean the same and existing terms are already in place? What do we gain by getting lost in this maze of jargon? More importantly, can we get out? This latter question is relevant inasmuch as it also points to the problem of conceptual proliferation in the absence of conceptual analysis and its broader consequences on knowledge cumulation and even erasure. And, more broadly, two twin considerations deserve our attention: first, what has happened within the study of contemporary war and warfare for it to be so many not-so-different things at the same time? And, second, do these concepts map onto

policy imperatives? These are pressing matters to consider at a time of conceptual flux for transatlantic military policy and strategy with implications "for how states envision the character of conflict shapes how they plan and prepare for war, from defence policy to procurement and from doctrine to training" (German 2019, 759). Currently, the United States military is in the process of overhauling its joint war-fighting concept after it failed recent wargames (Copp 2021), while the United Kingdom is trying to make sense of the direction of Global Britain in the context of its recent Integrated Review and France is walking away from the Sahel and preparing for high-intensity warfare (The Economist 2021).

These questions invite some observations relevant to the aims of the article of offering a critique of "remote warfare" because they set the background against which the notion has emerged. They also address the first aim of the article, which is to discuss the state of conceptual malaise through the analytical utility of the notion of "semantic field" and its dynamics. More importantly, as mentioned previously, they help locate some problems with "remote warfare" which can largely be excused as a function of the politics of concept development or understood as part of the generally poor practices of concept engagement in international relations and security/strategic studies, which – to reiterate – is widely acknowledged and only recent work has started to rectify this problem (Wilkens and Kessler 2021).

Observation I – "A normal state of affairs"

Counter-intuitively, up to a certain extent, the current state affairs is a normal state of affairs. This is because all these terms seek to say something about an inherently troubled root concept – political violence. We now know that political violence is "a genuinely multifaceted and varied phenomenon" (Kalyvas 2019, 11), complicated by the fact that it "has always been, the essence of politics" (Bufacchi 2005, 193). Moreover, it is acknowledged as "an exceedingly broad and ill-defined term" whose meaning and contents "can be stretched almost infinitely" (Kalyvas 2019, 12). Therefore, if the central problem under observation is itself "a conceptual minefield" (Kalyvas 2006, 19), then attempts at disaggregating its empirical manifestations conceptually and theoretically are bound to inherit some of these tensions.

Second, this generalised tendency towards over-conceptualisation is a function of the changes through which the study of political violence and its forms has gone, as well how it has adapted to big policy shifts or driven by events – the interest in guerrilla warfare in the 1960s during the Kennedy administration's preoccupation with Vietnam; in terrorism and counterinsurgency after 9/11; or the more recent resurgence of great power politics with the rise of China. Take the case of "war," for example: on the one hand, we have observed a series of remarkable intellectual shifts: (1) from the study of aggregate indicators of instability to "disaggregating the broad category of political violence into different types of violent activity" (Boyle 2012, 527); (2) from a single level of analysis to an emphasis on integrating and even going beyond micro–macro-level linkages and towards integrated frameworks refocusing the study of civil war violence on the armed politics that drive and support it (Staniland 2017); and (3) towards the more refined sociological study of war as an alternative to accounts informed by narrow variables (Malešević 2017, 457). On the other hand, we have been confronted with robust, and

diametrically opposed, claims that the study of war has been so neglected that it remains, actually, entirely absent. "Why then does the Anglo-American academy lack a discipline of 'war studies'?" asked Barkawi and Brighton (2011, 127). Elsewhere, Barkawi decried the "breakdown in the dialogue between the study of security and knowledge about war, a breakdown that is neither appreciated nor mourned" (2011, 702), and invited scholars to embark upon a critical study of the phenomenon of war, with Aradau (2012) picking up the gauntlet and offering an integrated middle-ground between the study of security and war, and Bousquet et al. presenting, more recently, a research agenda for the study of war grounded in martial empiricism by way of "embracing war's incessant becoming" (2020b).

These tensions reverberate powerfully into an assessment of this conceptual overdrive as normal. First, they betray an acknowledgement that "if war is as old as humanity itself, so too is the human effort to define and control it, differentiating warfare from other forms of violence and conflict and establishing rules to govern and constrain it" (Brooks 2017, 170). In short, conceptualising organised forms of political violence has been around since time immemorial and is the expected first step of theorising. Second, and linked to this, is the recognition of the fact that "the organising role of conceptual categories is not only classificatory but also constitutive: unless we can say what we are examining, we cannot relate anything to anything else" (Humphreys 2011, 263). Therefore, it is an essential precondition, which draws the borders of the empirical phenomenon under observation. Third, this endeavour implies language choices that are subject to change: "the words commonly used to signify a concept may remain the same while the meaning and use of the concept change dramatically. Furthermore, often there will be a number of words or terms for one concept, while at other times certain concepts will not yet have any signifying word" (Martin 1997, 420). Finally, this demarcation is in equal parts semantic and symbolic, with concepts being part of language, and as such intersubjective (Guzzini 2005, 498). Recognising these four assumptions is categorically important because it frames the article's discussion of the current conceptual malaise with an important caveat: the unassailable intellectual prerogative of conceptual choice over phenomena inherently difficult to distinguish and classify, coupled with the invisibility of the epistemological commitments on which scholars might rely and might remain hidden to the article's framework (Eagleton-Pierce 2011, 805).

Observation II – "A not so normal state of affairs"

However, aside from this set of explanations accounting for a certain degree of normalcy, the following observations identify a "not-so-normal" state of affairs. In doing so, the article draws on the above clarification of the notion of "semantic field" and focuses on how concepts emerge and relate to one another in the process, while providing some tentative answers to the questions above in line with the first aim of the paper, while setting the scene for the second aim of the paper, namely the conceptual critique of "remote warfare." To this end, this sub-section distinguishes between two modes of conceptual emergence, each with its own logic: first, *conceptual returnism* and its logic of comparative contextualisation; and second, *conceptual reinvention* and its logic of terminological innovation.

Heng argued that scholars continually revisit their traditional notions and often fall in the trap of returnism: "it can refer to the persistent rehashing of notions [...] but it can also likewise describe the persistence of, and desire to return to familiar ways of thinking and assumptions" (2010, 540). Deibert called it the process of making the familiar unfamiliar again (1997). The article draws on this idea and argues that conceptual returnism describes the most common approach to the development of new concepts: reinterpretation of existing concepts by relocating their conceptual schema – "term" and "features" – onto a manifestation of an empirical phenomenon in a new context, both intellectual and socio-political. As McAllister Linn remarked about concepts in American military thought, returnism is cyclical with terms "being heralded as revolutionary or 'transformational,' then quickly going out of fashion, only to re-emerge under a new rubric a decade or so later" (2011, 34). Quite often, conceptual returnism is marked by prefixes such as "neo-" or "post-" or through adjectives of gradable or scalar qualification such as "new" or "semi." The "new wars" thesis and its current disrepute is a case in point.

More recently, the same can be said by the use of "new Cold War" to describe both US-Russia and US-China relations. On the one hand, it has been used to argue that "the Kremlin has launched a strategy of political warfare against the West in the form of disinformation campaigns, support for far-right political parties in Europe, cyberattacks, money laundering, and other tools of influence that allow Moscow to undermine its perceived adversaries at very little cost" (Polyakova 2019). On the other hand, such assessments grew after former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev argued at the 2016 Munich Security Conference that "we are sliding, in fact, into a period of a new Cold War" and former leader of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev, cautioned that the world is on the brink of a new Cold War that "has already begun" (in Rotaru 2019). Naturally, scholars followed, the essence of this Cold War II is supposedly the Chinese and Russian resistance to American hegemony (Lind 2018), an inappropriate assessment rooted in mutually flawed attempts at reviving ghosts of the past "to cope with frightening presents" (Lieven 2018, 128). This evidences, even if partly, the logic of comparative contextualisation behind conceptual returnism, where analogy functions to (mis)-inform conceptual choices.

Nevertheless, conceptual returnism also takes place in the absence of such qualifiers. Some of the concepts listed above have come back stronger than the 1990s trend from which they originated. As early as 1998, the Defense Department was alerted to the realities of cyber-attacks with John Hamre, the then Deputy Secretary of Defense, informing Congress that the US was "in the middle of a cyberwar" following repeated attacks by the Russian Federation on key military and intelligence infrastructure (in Sanger 2018, 13). And the gravitational pull of 1990s scholarship applies also to "information warfare" (Libicki 1995; Harknett 1996; Feaver 1998; Thayer 2000), "network warfare" (Cebrowski and Garstka 1998), "non-linear warfare," "political warfare," and "generational assessments of warfare" (Lind et al. 1989). "Proxy war" has been re-conceptualised away from its antecedent usages (Moghadam and Wyss 2018; Rauta 2018, 2021a; Fox 2019, 2020) to such an extent that assessing contemporary proxy wars as being of Cold War vintage simply amounts to a deliberately perfunctory reading of the literature. Some concepts have been reconstructed genealogically in intellectually refined ways, as is the case with "mercenary warfare" (Riemann 2021) or "auxiliary warfare"

(Scheipers 2015). Finally, several concepts have returned, either narrowed or expanded in meaning. For example, "information warfare" has recently been used as a placeholder for analyses of Russian disinformation (Golovchenko et al. 2018). Conversely, the problems emerging in the cyber domain saw the notion go beyond questions of whether cyber war will take place or not, and actually becoming a semantic field itself with an array of terms trying to make sense of its complexity: from war/warfare/security/threats to governance/ crime/terrorism. Futter called this "cyber semantics" (2018), and Branch (2021) sketched the foundational metaphors through which cybersecurity language became entrenched in the United States military thinking.

Conceptual reinvention, however, is premised on a reinterpretation of existing concepts by replacing part of their conceptual schema, the "term," in an effort that at best innovates linguistically, but not conceptually. Conceptual reinvention amounts to reassigning properties and features of existing concepts under new labels. Terminology-driven conceptual reinvention identifies the demands placed by the appeal of logo-centric language on knowledge and knowledge production. Many of the notions listed above are terms attached to concepts "in the same way that price tags are attached to goods" (Wilkens and Kessler 2021), and, quite clearly, the label machine has been in full tilt over the last few decades. To return to the previous example, the study of proxy wars presents ample evidence for this problem. Over the last decade, proxy wars have been essentially reinvented in search of knowledge gaps in spite of the fact that all this research talked about the issue of the external support/sponsorship/backing of armed non-state actors in the context of terrorism or insurgencies: "semi-proxy wars," "third-party proxies," "proxy alliances," and more recently "by-with-through," "surrogate warfare," and "subversion." As Fox aptly puts it, some of these serve to "soften or hide the coarseness of proxy warfare" (2019, 1; Fox 2020), and others to offer politically acceptable narratives to flawed counterinsurgency campaigns. So terminology is not just a meta-theoretical problem, but a political one too. The latter is exemplified by recent American efforts to label its support of rebels in COIN theatres as strategically productive partnerships – "by-with-through" – in contrast to the malign search for strategic depth of inimical states – Iran – essentially engaged in the same type of action: different degrees of airpower combined with a mix of covert and overt support for armed non-state actors. Yet, curiously, one scenario sees trustworthy partners and allies, the other pernicious proxies. No wonder then that Rondeaux and Sterman remarked that "a lack of clarity as to what is meant by 'proxy warfare' and what qualifies a useful proxy strategy [...] have been on display since the 9/11 attacks" (2019, 11).

Away from the particular case of proxy wars, the terminological innovation behind conceptual reinvention often privileges the lowering of the barrier of entry to the debate by shifting the focus onto analytical compartmentalisation. This is something shared with conceptual returnism and accounts for some standard conceptual problems. First, there is conceptual stretching, leading to concepts having too many empirical issues to contribute to the cumulation of knowledge. This is the classic Sartorian problem of the ladder of abstraction (1970, 1034), and this was covered when discussing "vicarious" and "surrogate" warfare, but it applies to a great number of notions. It is important to note that conceptual stretching also presents the challenge of distinguishing between

deliberately complex notions that cluster issues within their internal structure precisely because they seek to observe the interconnectedness between the constituent terms, i.e. "vicarious" or "hybrid warfare."

Second, conceptual borrowing occurs from within and across disciplines, and is more prominent with concepts emphasising technological developments. The majority of these concepts travel across disciplines with their vocabulary leading to different degrees of impenetrability of the resultant debate. At the same time, they challenge the ability to take long views of a concept's history, resulting in unclear, overlapping categories, and a tendency towards facile dismissal of concepts as anachronistic or context bound. For example, Bilms remarked recently that "irregular warfare has an image problem [. . . and] needs a new market strategy that shakes these misconceptions" (2021), whereas "the phrase [proxy war] gets tossed around too carelessly" (Beehner 2015). But more importantly, it leads into a third conceptual problem: the development of vague, ambiguous, poorly defined concepts whose contradictions are deemed resolvable by appealing to their essential contestability (Gallie 1955). The core of the issue is the reluctance to outline robust conceptual schemas integrating necessary and sufficient attributes that distinguish the concept and allow it to leverage its analytical uniqueness in a meaningful way vis-à-vis existing terms. The resulting definitions are, therefore, stipulatively minimal and a bird's eye view of the semantic field of contemporary warfare permits us to distinguish between categories of terms on the basis of the property they seek to emphasise and what they seek to observe: (1) *outcomes-focused* notions – "ambiguous warfare," "frozen wars," "revolutionary warfare," "subversion" or "vicarious warfare"; (2) *process-oriented* notions – "asymmetric/irregular/guerrilla warfare," "low/high-intensity warfare," "gradient warfare," "limited warfare" or "protracted warfare"; (3) *tool-centric* terms – "algorithmic warfare," "code wars," "like wars," or "robot wars"; (4) *actor-centric* terms – "auxiliary warfare," "proxy warfare," or "surrogate warfare"; (5) *domain-focused* notions – "cyber warfare," "digital war," "electronic warfare," "hybrid war," "mosaic warfare," or "space warfare"; (6) *context-affirming* notions – "anthropogenic war," "cosmopolitan warfare," "liquid warfare," or "post-modern warfare."

Some of these terminological templates have been pushed enthusiastically as harbingers of new and ground-breaking research agendas conflating units and levels of analysis, quickly becoming lost in a definitional morass resulting from repeated semantic borrowing and conditioned by the more recent pressure of research impact. Whether returning or reinvented, the resulting situation makes a case for what Gates called "next-war-itis" (2009) whose pre-existing condition was the absence of some form of semantic responsibility. Aside from this, several of these terms-masquerading-as-concepts are caught in a cause-effect loop, contributing and being affected by the general tendency to think of the semantic field of political violence as a browser, a search engine in which one can scroll indefinitely until one finds a suitable concept. Therefore, a look at the wider semantic field points to the collective disinterest, at least, and inability, at most, to think theoretically about the concepts we design to make sense of the empirical problems under observation. At the same time, it invites a broader conversation about the degree to which the wider discipline reproduces and rewards knowledge positioning and research relevance through vacuous concept development. Specifically, if we institutionalise labels as conceptual novelty and intellectual breakthroughs, then we no longer ask key questions: what is wrong with the current concepts? What do alternatives bring? How much of this

branding is, in fact, false advertising? As the next sub-section shows, the "remote warfare" debate has played directly into this, eschewing answers to these questions yet pretending to disrupt established lines of inquiry "even when substantive concerns remain essentially the same" (Schedler 2010).

Remote warfare – the little concept that couldn't

As discussed, if the semantic field of contemporary war/warfare is troubled by sudden tectonic shifts of meaning, this is a function of the degree to which scholars pursue new concepts defined on a universe of trendy events, policy shifts, and searches for professional recognition. Against this background, this section examines the contribution of "remote warfare" to this overall state of semantic confusion, appreciating the endogeneity presently at work for "remote warfare" and all other concepts: they contribute to and are shaped by these dynamics in equal measure. The article argues that "remote warfare" is far from a robust concept and that the intellectual record stacks against the notion. The charge sheet against "remote warfare" is long inasmuch as it has achieved the remarkable feat of being a terminological newcomer yet instantly becoming an overused cliché – a reason why the *Introduction* to this special issue placed it on a delicate balance between a useful buzzword and a disquieting buzzkill. This section makes two arguments. First, there is a lack of clarity over what "remote warfare" entails: namely, the debate is yet to explain what it is, with a paper in this special issue making a first attempt at explaining why this is the case by providing a nuanced breakdown of meanings of remoteness, albeit discussing the public consumption of warfare instead of the production of warfare (Watts and Biegon 2021). Second, that because of this lack of definitional specificity, we also lack an account of its analytical value: specifically, what intellectual leverage does it hold over existing terms making similar claims?

What isn't "Remote warfare"?

Sartori's proposed system of concept analysis carefully distinguishes between *term* and *concept*. Much of the discussion presented so far stressed this difference between the term one selects and the concept one ends up refining through the set of properties assigned to the term. As Sartori explains, "when we settle for a given term (the term that designates the concept) our selection has a semantic projection, and this means [. . .] that our choice entails a way of conceiving and perceiving (things or processes)" (2009b, 124). The "remote warfare" debate has largely focused on the supposed novelty of the term at the expense of the concept. In doing so, it has fallen into a trap: it assumed, contrary to the logic of concept formation, that "the meaning of concept [. . .] is the meaning of the word [. . .] by which it is expressed" (Oppenheim 1975, 286). As a consequence, there has been a lot of buzz about remote warfare – as explained in the *Introduction* to the special issue – without much emphasis on what it is, what it tries to explain, and what properties it seeks to establish as a system of meaning under the term "remote warfare." The result is a lot of ventriloquist verbiage that uses "remote warfare" or "remoteness" by borrowing conceptual properties from the literatures of the phenomena it submits for analysis under its always expanding empirical remit, as well as from the sub-fields in which it has been

studied, i.e. law (Ohlin 2017a, 2017b) or cultural studies (Adelman and Kieran 2020). "Remote warfare" is, therefore, merely a term which rents its meaning from the set of problems it observes.

The debate does a poor job of explaining what happens to a problem – war, warfare, etc. – when it is qualified as "remote." Biegon and Watts argue that "noun 'warfare' is qualified by the adjective 'remote' precisely to imply that, for its architects, the violence of war-fighting (and its socio-political impact) is to be geographically and politically 'distanced' from the state that said planners are nominally responsible for defending" (2020). In the clearest way, this applies to military intervention writ large and says nothing specifically about this form of warfare. Perhaps, such explanations should take note from Waldman's robust reasoning behind "vicarious warfare": "the defining characteristic of vicariousness is the attempt by societies . . . to loosen or untether the cords that bound the practice of war to its manifold costs and requirements while still seeking to reap its potential rewards" (2021).

As determinants, adjectives collocate to narrow/broaden meaning, to identify by specification, or to help classification. We might want a new label for precision or to "zoom" into a problem's sub-types. We name things because we want them to be seen as something, and to make a set of observations starting from the property/characteristic which we are trying to isolate. So what is meant by "remote"? Is it a matter of distance, closeness, or dispersion? And to what does this apply? "Remote" is an adjective of "place," "locus," or "space" that has been used to discuss direction or positionality: how far from? Its essence is locative, almost cartographic. From above, the literature opens a discussion that does not define, to begin with, what it means by "war" or "warfare," then expands its foci indefinitely (thus covering everything from military assistance to artificial intelligence). This is largely a function of its embrace of "complexity" as an intellectual prerogative, which is treated as a blank check on conceptual clarification.

One of the paradoxes of "remote warfare" is that it legitimises its existence through the intractability of twenty-first-century security challenges, expanding its extension to include everything from great power competition to artificial intelligence, and then, reducing this very complexity to a debate about "distance" as the shift in today's types of wars or warfare. This is troubling, first, because the core role of a concept is to function as a device used "to order and make sense of a messy reality by reducing its complexity naming and giving meaning to its features" (Berenskoetter 2016, 1). And second, because it falls into what Gray called the "temptation to misread recent and contemporary trends in warfare as signals of some momentous, radical shift" (2005, 15). As Waldman argues, "it is perhaps quixotic to expect any single term to capture the complexity of reality" (2018, 182), and there are few discussions on contemporary war and warfare which do not set the scene by telling the audience something trite about complexity. Or, for that matter, something about pessimistic change, uncertainty of dawns of new eras, and the erosion of whatever order one might seek to favour or uphold. However, "remote warfare" doubles – even "triples" – down on this issue, in spite of the fact that to say "international security is complex" is "trivially true, and does not offer any particular insight into international processes" (Gunitsky 2013, 36). Because of this, "remote warfare" is at the same time a way of fighting, a mode of intervention, the future of wars, a mode of consuming and visualising warfare, a new domain of battle, and a measure of how the legal/ethical conduct of war has succumbed to techno-dominance.

Therefore, under the rubric "remote warfare" we see so much, we end up seeing almost nothing clearly. Even if Ohlin argues that its nature is "the elephant in the room" (2017a, 2), as a term, "remote warfare" does not provide insights into the characteristics of what might make this phenomenon intelligible.

Because "remote warfare" literature places so much weight on its central adjective, it does not pay close attention to what would turn the term into a concept: a robust description of its constituent properties and how these are configured to give meaning. What does "remote warfare" stipulate? What are its key dimensions? What is the conceptual structure to which they contribute? At times, we are provided with spurious "listings" of uses of "remote warfare" as placeholders for adequate conceptual history, which prove useful at best to get a sense of the many entry points into the discussion (Watts and Biegon 2021). Beyond this, "remote warfare" has been defined in vague ways and usually as "[an] approach used by states to counter threats at a distance" (Watson and McKay et al. 2021, 7), while the defunct Oxford Research Group argued that it "describes approaches to combat that do not require the deployment of large numbers of your own ground troops" (Knowles and Watson 2018a, 2). The first one is deficiently vague inasmuch as it presents no specification of what is meant by approach, and the second one qualifies "remote warfare" as reduced military intervention. McDonald's argument in this special issue compares existing definitions and shows the extent to which they are incompatible with one another, so this issue need not be re-litigated here (2021).

All of this returns to the drone literature-heavy anchorage of the "remote warfare" debate (Chapa 2021; Graae and Maure 2021). It creates a baseline in which distance is an enabler, condition, and context of war and warfare. Why this literature has been reified and how to deal with this issue is best left to remote warfare scholars. Yet, to make some conceptual progress, several avenues can be considered. First, what if "remote" was placed on a spectrum of distance: as boundary, as cleavage, as difference, as disconnect, yet also as connection? This would speak to what Watts and Biegon argue in this special issue, namely approaching "remoteness as a continuum; as a fluid and changeable process, imbued with contingency, rather than an objective, 'either/or' condition determined exclusively by the physical space between various agents and places" (2021). Second, what if distance was thought of as an expression of position from which one can think of instrumentality, mechanisms, and processes? Third, this could then translate into thinking about what unique set of characteristics a problem might share when observed as "remote warfare." Finally, there is the argument presented in this special issue by McDonald (2021), namely that "remote warfare" should not be thought of as a category or warfare.

However the debate might want to move forward, these issues matter because the current absence of conceptual properties translates directly into what "remote warfare" comes to reference empirically. In short, across the debate, the term hops across empirical lily pads from military assistance to partner armies, to private military companies, to counter-terrorism, and applications of artificial intelligence in warfare. At the same time, wars in Libya, Syria, Yemen, counter-terrorist campaigns in Somalia, or counter-insurgency operations in the Sahel have been labelled "remote warfare" – in this special issue, see Stoddard and Toltica (2021); elsewhere, see McKay et al. (2021) for an edited volume in which "remote warfare" is everything on the horizon, naturally disguised as

"interdisciplinarity." The literature has been telescoping past, present and future from a curious vantage point: some relationship to manifestations of distance. But this does not remove the core of the problem: "trying to connect a diverse range of conflicts and political actors purely on the basis of their tactical similarity provides a poor, even non-existent, foundation upon which to explicate a particular military phenomenon" (Smith 2005, 36–37). What happens to context specificity? What happens to local factors, dynamics, or strategic cultures? These issues are glossed over, and, what is more, we are invited to assume that this empirical aggregation validates the use of the term within the semantic field of contemporary warfare (Watts and Biegon 2021). The folly of this argument can be reduced to Sartori's description of the "Hegelian night in which all the cows look black (and eventually the milkman is taken for a cow)" (1970, 1040).

Even more troubling, these assessments retroactively consider events, processes, or cases – chiefly of which military interventions – through the lens of "remote warfare" in the absence of evident links. The same applies to Trenta's (2021) discussion in this special issue on assassination, which adds assassination to the analytical mix in an empirical assessment that bends contextualisation ever so slightly. For a debate that is supposedly so anchored in the present and ambitious about the future, the remote warfare argument is curiously anachronistic. In fact, in focusing so much on distance as space and speed, it entirely forgets to account for the temporal dimension (both in the practice of warfare it tries to describe and in the historiographical situation of this practice). The debate needs reminding that just because preference is given to a term, it does not mean it can re-write events under said term by appealing to some flawed logic of the benefits of hindsight. Even in this special issue, "remote warfare" is elastically expanded or contracted in ways that see it discussed as or linked to assassination (Trenta 2021), spectatorship of war (Watts and Biegon 2021), and Special Forces assistance and training (Riemann and Rossi 2021a). This elasticity is even extended to the use of the notion to analyse one single problem, military intervention. In the case of Watts and Biegon's paper in this special issue, there is a tension behind using "remote warfare" as a process-focused notion that is, however, retroactively used to analyse American involvement in the Libyan war as a mode of viewership, spectatorship, or consumption of its outcome. This is even more problematic given that elsewhere the authors make similar arguments yet define remote warfare as security assistance (see McKay et al. 2021, 152–172). If "remote warfare" cannot mean the same within one research agenda, what can we say about the broader debate?

The problem here is not that "remote warfare" might link these somehow in a narrative about the changes in contemporary conflict on its way to becoming a cluster concept, or what Heuser called a bureaucratically convenient concept (2010). It is not a question of "remote warfare" denoting a combination of some phenomena/problems/ domains, as it is the case – albeit imperfectly – with hybrid or vicarious warfare. Rather, it is that "remote warfare" is deemed to be all of these empirical problems at the same time, indiscriminately, and that this debate takes no exception with its central term being almost everything under the security challenges umbrella (again, see McKay et al. 2021). In concept analysis language, the broadening of meaning that occurs within the remote warfare literature ignores the fact that the relationship between intension and extension

is an exchange: the more conceptual properties one adds, the less the empirical domain becomes. The reverse applies, as Sartori explains in his canonical analysis: "one's gains in extensional coverage tend to be matched by losses in connotative precision" (1970, 1035).

Moreover, in its hyperbolic attempts at claiming some empirical relevance, "remote warfare" is employed as a tool of seeking some form of empirical dominance or at least omnipresence in violation of the heuristic value of concepts of not being "considered an accurate representation of reality/the world – regardless of the fundamental question of whether such representation is possible" (Berenskoetter 2016, 4). As a consequence, the "remote warfare" argument makes empirically dubious statements in an effort to position itself as "central to modern state-sponsored violence" (Adelman and Kieran 2020, 3) and "the most common form of military engagement used by states" (Watson and McKay et al. 2021, 7). We know that "concepts are central for understanding and producing social reality" (Wilkens and Kessler 2021), so, logically, if one's concept "picks up" everything from the empirical realities of security, then one validates its relevance and prominence rather tautologically. This problem demands the debate's attention urgently because, empirically, "remote warfare" falls down Sartori's ladder of abstraction. Moving forward, one can think of the debate working in reverse: trying to establish what the concept is not. By drawing a negative space, it can focus on regaining a more stable analytical footing because "even the simplest concept requires its other form which it has to be distinguished and through which it is negated" (Ophir 2018, 59).

A term, not yet a concept, in search of relevance

In what way do remote warfare scholars offer a realistic conception of the sort of wars that are being fought? When compared to other concepts – "hybrid," "surrogate," "proxy," and "vicarious warfare" – "remote warfare" offers a curatorial experience of the complexity of international security, which, as discussed above, is perfunctory at best. "Remote warfare" does not tell the audience much about the monopoly of violence, or for that matter about who fights. We are informed about "how" violence might be produced, mediated or consumed, and even if one bought into the argument, it is far from groundbreaking: the elevation of the tactical advantage of some form/degree of distance to the strategic level resulting in a false requalification or reassessment of war itself.

So, to what is "remote warfare" an alternative? "Proxy warfare" is analysed as a mode of indirect intervention that tries to make statements about the degrees of closeness – formality or informality – of a relationship between an intervening power and the actor doing the intervention. Surrogate warfare, however troubled by its Cold War conceptual legacy, provides an assessment of replacement of foreign policy options in contemporary conflict. "Hybrid warfare" is, to a certain degree, an evaluation of the diversity and simultaneous combinations of strategies and tactics. As it has been employed, "remote warfare" is conceptually non-competitive. First, this is because it side-lines conceptual analysis and picks comparison with selected concepts. If we think about the above-mentioned relationships of meaning hosted by a semantic field, "remote warfare" fails to become a meronym used to understand classification, and at best can be used as a synonym to some of these notions. Biegon and Watts (2020), for example, make an argument about remote warfare referencing surrogate and vicarious warfare arguments because of their relative hype, side-lining proxy war literature on flawed grounds. Second,

this debate undermines cumulation and progress of knowledge. If a problem can be identified as something else, then why call it "remote warfare" after all? Ground-breaking research is currently being published on Obama's military intervention in Libya and Syria (Rees 2021), on the coercive logic of drone use (Doctor and Walsh 2021), on the effects of distance on military intervention and performance (Patrick and Gartzke 2021), and on strategic culture and US military intervention (Boyle and Lang 2021). And this is without any conceptual reconfiguration of these contexts as "remote warfare" or something else. So, what do we gain differently in our analysis by employing "remote warfare"?

The final point is a broader one. Concepts "express and reproduce ontological assumptions about what constitutes an object or social phenomenon" (Wilkens and Kessler 2021). So what ontological position does "remote warfare" offer? Riemann and Rossi take this issue to task in the present special issue (2021a), and elsewhere write compellingly about the detachment from the burden of war (2021b). Schulzke notes some of these tensions in his analysis of the moral aspects of remote weaponry (2016). However, the techno-dominance behind this literature has the unintended effect of treating wars as helpless, distant, mediated by the supposedly exceptional condition of the otherwise normal geographical distance. If the debate on concepts on contemporary warfare tends to dismiss old concepts as contextually irrelevant – see "surrogate warfare" for Cold War anchorage – then, as a new term, "remote warfare" should be questioned, at least, against the demands it makes of the present. In many ways, "remote warfare" reproduces existing narratives that privilege an exculpatory attitude of disengagement. It follows the same reductionist description of war: small, distant, and hapless, in faraway places, end-less, uncomfortable, or merely quagmires. This in spite of how many oxy-moronic intimacies it claims to observe. The titles of some of this research partly trivialise these issues through ludic rhyming in their search for even present lesson learning, i.e. "lawful but awful" (Knowles and Watson 2018a, 2018b). "Remote warfare" does nothing to counter the long-standing tendency of under-writing war:

> [...] somehow in social and political inquiry, war as a concept is imagined primarily in provincial terms, those of the West and its major wars. Real war is interstate war between nation-states, fought between regular armed forces. All other conflicts are relegated to derivative categories. They are Small Wars, insurgencies, emergencies, interventions, upris-ings, police actions, or something other than war proper (Barkawi 2016, 199).

As Strachan put it, "Western powers have become accustomed to waging limited wars, while using the vocabulary of major war" (2020), and "remote warfare" sits perfectly well in this vocabulary because it postulates the permissibility of disengagement. It is a ready-made concept that does not stand apart by much and offers a meme version of the complexity of contemporary conflicts. Therefore, not only does it fail to translate into an actual concept, but remains a term that reproduces some of the poorer practices in conceptual development over the last few decades.

Conclusion

In providing a critique of "remote warfare," this article proposed opening a broader discussion about how we think conceptually about contemporary warfare. Does one have to re-label reality to make sense of it? Perhaps. Does one have to poorly re-label reality to

make sense of it? The article attempted to answer this latter question in the negative. It sought a discussion on concept analysis that aimed at understanding the state of the semantic field of war and warfare, a background against which it presented a critique of the relatively new notion of "remote warfare." Employing the heuristic value of the semantic field and its ability to showcase relations of meaning, the article showed how the emerging "remote warfare" debate seems to be caught somewhere between *terra incognita* and *terra nulla*, the unknown and ownerless land of a literature in search of a sub-field and relevance.

In critiquing "remote warfare," the article followed Laitin's observation on the benefits of sharing a common research language: "if we all share a common vocabulary and common standards for evaluation of evidence in light of a theory, we can become a community of scholars in common pursuit of valid knowledge" (1995, 454). The analysis pointed to the over-reliance on the term and the absence of conceptual structure. It pointed to the leaps of empirical logic: over-aggregation and retroactive refitting of empirics. Does "remote warfare" revolutionise how we think about security more broadly? No. Does it reconstruct how we think about it? It most certainly tries, but with caveats and even errors at times – the most significant being that it conflates the methods of war with war itself. There is a telegenic quality, a sound bite power to "remote warfare" which makes it seemingly popular. However, while "remote warfare" is good for a tweet, it is not – yet – good for theory. While it is good for a podcast, it is not ready for the paradigm it seeks to posit. Until some of the questions raised here are addressed so as to work out some of the term's problems – ambiguity, vagueness, lack of definition – the article errs on the side of caution: we should stop trying to make "remote warfare" happen.

Notes

1. I thank one of the reviewers for this observation. I agree with their assessment that the initial problems with "remote warfare" stem from its intention to function as a forum and space in which people from different academic, journalistic, and policy guises gathered to discuss and address broadly related security issues. Therefore, this article takes note of the "big tent" quality of the initial thinking behind the concept.

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