



New Tactics, Old Strategy: Remote Warfare and the War on Drugs

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18th March 2016

This briefing is based on the “Remote warfare and War on Drugs” [series](#) currently running on the [Remote Control Project blog](#) and [sustainablesecurity.org](#). It was originally published on [openDemocracy](#) on 17th March 2016.

Summary

In the long-running War on Terror, remote warfare is the growing and dominant method of choice. But it is not the only “war” in which these methods are being used. Drones, special forces, private military and security companies (PMSCs) and mass surveillance techniques are also emerging trends found in the US’s other long standing war, the War on Drugs. This briefing looks at the impact of the increasing reliance on private military and security companies (PMSCs) and advanced technologies, including drones, on theatres across Latin America where the War on Drugs is playing out. The weakening of the rule of law and legitimacy of the state in areas where these methods have been used shows how, rather than a break from the past, these new tactics are merely perpetuating long-standing strategic shortfalls of a militarised drugs policy.

Introduction

In April 2015 USA TODAY broke a story with the headline “[U.S. secretly tracked billions of calls for decades](#)”. At first glance this appears to be another Edward Snowden story concerning the National Security Agency (NSA), mass surveillance and the War on Terror. The article, however, detailed a mass surveillance operation that happened a decade earlier, not by the NSA but by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and aimed not at identifying terrorists but at detecting drug traffickers.

“It’s very hard to see [the DEA operation] as anything other than the precursor to the NSA’s terrorist surveillance” former NSA general counsel Stewart Baker said of the similarities between the two

operations. The now-discontinued DEA operation that began in 1992, was the government’s first known effort to gather data on Americans in bulk, sweeping up records of telephone calls made by millions of US citizens regardless of whether they were suspected of a crime. For more than two decades, the Justice Department and the DEA amassed logs of virtually all telephone calls from the USA to as many as [116 countries](#) linked to drug trafficking in order to track drug cartels’ distribution networks in the US.

Like the NSA’s mass surveillance programme, the operation has been criticised for its [threat to privacy](#) and its lack of [independent oversight](#) and was halted in September 2013 amid the fallout from the Snowden revelations. The DEA mass surveillance programme, however, serves as a reminder of how methods associated with the War on Terror are not unique to it. Running almost parallel to it, and at times borrowing from it, the US is increasingly relying on covert methods of warfare in its other long-standing war, its War on Drugs.

A New Method of Warfare

‘[Remote control](#)’ warfare describes the global trend towards countering threats at a distance without the need to deploy large military force. Pervasive yet largely unseen, it minimises its engagement and risk while extending its reach beyond conflict zones. Remote warfare includes not only mass surveillance techniques, but also the use of drones, Special Forces and private military and security companies (PMSCs).

In the long-running War on Terror, remote warfare is the growing and dominant method of choice. Both [armed](#) and reconnaissance drones have been used by the US to target terrorists in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq for over a decade. Moreover, the start of the millennium has seen a sharp increase in the use of Special Forces. In 2015, US special operations forces were deployed to [135 countries](#), a large amount in counter terrorism missions across the

Middle East, [North and West Africa](#). Adding to the mix are private military and security companies (PMSCs), which are playing an increasingly important role in both Afghanistan and Iraq, with over [5,000 contractors](#) employed in Iraq in 2014. Finally, Edward Snowden's mass surveillance [revelations](#) reveal the extent to which modern warfare is increasingly looking to infer knowledge from "phenomena", rather than through traditional intelligence gathering techniques.

These methods, in particular mass surveillance, PMSCs and drones, have also been increasingly used in the last decade in the global War on Drugs, for similar reasons. The appeal of remote warfare is in its perception as a cost-free form of warfare that plays to the West's technological strengths, increasingly attractive to a [war weary](#) general public hostile to 'boots on the ground'. However, concerns over the transparency and accountability of these methods of warfare, as well as the human cost, long-term impact and their ability to achieve long-term security are being increasingly challenged.

Privatising the War on Drugs

Increasingly militarised since the 1980s, US drug policy has more recently become increasingly privatised. Since the implementation of [Plan Colombia](#) in 2000, the US State and Defense Departments have contracted PMSCs to carry out activities related to US military and police aid to Colombia. For example, the 2007 [Reports to Congress On Certain Counternarcotics Activities](#) in Colombia mention that Telford Aviation provided logistical support for reconnaissance aircraft and ITT and ARINC were responsible for operating radar stations. Furthermore, in 2006, Chenega Federal Systems was in charge of maintaining an intelligence database, and Oakley Networks was responsible for Internet surveillance. Other [sources](#) reported that Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MPRI) [helped](#) restructure the Colombian armed forces to aid their fight against drugs, Northrop Grumman, under its contract, flew over the Colombian jungle with aircraft equipped with infrared cameras in order to track illegal activities related to drugs or guerrilla movements and DynCorp has been in charge of the fumigation of coca plants since 2000.

Antoine Perret, a research fellow at Columbia Law School who has written extensively on how the privatization of the war on drugs is endangering human rights, [explains](#) how in Colombia all US personnel working in Colombia through Plan Colombia, including PMSC employees, have been granted immunity from Colombian jurisdiction by bilateral treaty with the US. This lack of control and supervision has been observed on many occasions, including by US authorities. A [report](#) on contracting oversight by the United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs concluded that the "State Department, which has awarded over \$1 billion in counternarcotics contracts in Latin America to one

company, DynCorp, has conducted sporadic oversight of that company." This poses a particular concern for human rights.

There have been [numerous allegations](#) of human rights violations at the hands of PMSCs operating under Plan Colombia, but, so far, none of these violations have been brought to justice. For example, in 2004, a pornographic movie [went public](#) that included US contractors from the Colombian base Tolemaida sexually abusing minors. No investigation took place and no one was ever punished. DynCorp's activities, particularly the fumigation of coca plants, have also caused concern. In 2008, Ecuador [filed suit](#) against Colombia at the International Court of Justice, arguing "Colombia has violated its obligations under international law by causing or allowing the deposit on the territory of Ecuador of toxic herbicides that have caused damage to human health, property and the environment." In August 2013, the governments of Colombia and Ecuador announced an agreement ending the dispute, with Colombia [paying reparations](#) for the damage caused.

In Mexico too, the drugs war is becoming increasingly privatised. The [Merida Initiative](#) in 2007, cemented a plan between the US and Mexico to cooperate in fighting drug trafficking and increasing security in the region. It established full cooperation between the two countries, with the US providing an anti-crime and counter-drug assistance package to Mexico that included training and equipping Mexican forces. Crucially, the provision of Merida Initiative assistance to Mexico has included contracting PMSCs to train local forces.

As in Colombia, the War on Drugs in Mexico has been widely criticised for resulting in human rights abuses.

Indeed, Human Rights Watch (HRW) [reported](#) in 2011 "credible evidence of torture in more than 170 cases across the five states surveyed" and documented "39 'disappearances' where evidence strongly suggests the participation of security forces." HRW concluded that "rather than strengthening public security in Mexico, Calderón's [and now Peña Nieto's] 'war', has exacerbated a climate of violence, lawlessness, and fear in many parts of the country." The activities of PMSCs, operating in this environment and hired by the US, raise additional human rights concerns. In fact, contractors have been accused of training Mexican police in torture techniques. "As is the case in Colombia", Perret [argues](#) "the use of PMSCs by the US government to perform security tasks in another country tends to adversely affect human rights, when the purpose should be the contrary".

Privatization is often resorted to as a strategy when the use of public resources is seen as risky. Indeed, in both Colombia and Mexico, public forces have been involved in massive human rights violations. However, turning to PMSCs is not the solution. According to Perret "the unrestrained use of PMSCs is not the best strategy for improving security and upholding the rule of law, as

instead (of improving security and upholding the rule of law) they become another element endangering human rights in an already complex environment”.

Drones: From Surveillance to Smuggling

As well as the increasing privatisation of the War on Drugs, the US and local law enforcement-military actors are also increasingly relying on advanced technologies, in particular drones. Drones have been used in three main ways in the drug wars in Latin America. Firstly, US surveillance drones are being used to detect and track drug trafficking routes across the region. In 2011 an official briefing – obtained via the Freedom of Information Act – revealed that the US Air Force is working to make its RQ-4 Global Hawk high altitude long endurance drones available to its allies in Latin America and the Caribbean in order to help “[find drugs fields and helping plan offensives against rebel groups](#)”. In the same year, a *New York Times* article [reported](#) that, in an effort to step up its involvement in Mexico’s drug war, the Obama administration began sending drones deep into Mexican territory to gather intelligence to help locate major traffickers. Furthermore, US Customs and Border Protection operates [10 MQ-1 Predator drones](#), including two based in Cape Canaveral, Florida, that patrol a wide swatches of the Caribbean through the Bahamas and down to south of Puerto Rico as part of the drugs fight, and, in 2013, it was [reported](#) that the US Navy was testing a new type of drone that can be hand-launched from a ship’s deck to help detect, track and videotape drug smugglers in action across the Caribbean Sea.

Secondly, Latin American law enforcement and military agencies are turning to drones to help fight drug cartels themselves, with [at least 14](#) Latin American and Caribbean countries having used or purchased drones. In Mexico, the [National Defense Secretariat](#), the Federal Police, the Procuraduría General de la República (the Attorney General’s office), as well as the Army and Air Force fly drones to gather intelligence to combat organized crime, mainly drug trafficking. In Brazil, Colombia, Panama and Trinidad and Tobago too, drones are used to [monitor drug trafficking and find drug smuggling routes](#).

Finally, drones are being used by drug cartels themselves, to smuggle drugs between countries. In January 2015, a drone crashed in a supermarket parking lot in Tijuana, Mexico – carrying [three kilograms of crystal meth](#) and in August 2015, two Mexican citizens were convicted of utilizing a UAV to fly [13 kilograms of heroin](#) from Baja California, Mexico, into California. This led US authorities to deem drones an “[emerging trend](#)” employed by transnational criminal organizations to smuggle narcotics into the US. Remote warfare technology is not only being used by drug cartels to smuggle and distribute contraband, but is also being used by cartels to fight each other, dominate the criminal markets, control local populations and deliver

lethal action against their enemies.

What impact is this reliance on increasingly advanced technology, in particular drones, having? According to Brookings Institution senior fellow [Vanda Felbab-Brown](#), an expert on illicit economies and organised crime, the proliferation of remote warfare capabilities among criminal groups in Latin America is having a detrimental effect as it is, “[undermining deterrence, including deterrence among criminal groups themselves over the division of the criminal market and its turfs](#)”. This is because “remotely delivered hits will complicate the attribution problem – i.e., who authorized the lethal action — and hence the certainty of sufficiently painful retaliation against the source and thus a stable equilibrium”.

The reliance on technology by state actors more generally, Felbab-Brown argues, has had damaging effects from a strategic perspective as the “[allure of signal intelligence](#)” has led to the discounting of other key intelligence techniques. As well as failing to develop a strategic understanding of criminal groups’ decision-making to anticipate their responses to law enforcement actions, it also fails to cultivate a broad and comprehensive understanding of the motivations and interests of local populations that interact with criminal and insurgent groups and, crucially, to identify the importance of establishing good relationships with local populations to advance anti-crime and counterinsurgency policies. In Colombia, [for example](#), drug eradication policy antagonized local populations to national government and strengthened the bonds between them and rebel [groups](#). Ultimately, the desire to infer knowledge from “phenomena” in modern warfare, has come at the expense of traditional intelligence gathering techniques, in essence “[the tactical tool, technology... has trumped strategic analysis](#)” Felbab-Brown concludes.

The increase in advanced technologies have had other, less predictable impacts too. As organized crime actors have adopted advanced technologies in response to law enforcement agencies, they have also responded in the opposite way, by developing [primitive technologies and methods](#) to counter the advanced technologies used by law enforcement, according to Felbab-Brown. At the same time, society has adapted to criminal groups and violence in a similar way, by adopting its own “back-to-the-past” response with, for example, [anti-crime militias](#). The implication of this, Felbab-Brown warns, is deeply worrying as citizens’ militias “fundamentally [weaken the rule of law and the authority and legitimacy of the state](#)” and is ultimately a “dangerous and slippery slope” to greater breakdown of order.

New Tactics, Old strategy

The unforeseen consequences of remote warfare in theatres across the globe where the War on Terror is playing out are starting to emerge. As well as the transparency and accountability vacuums associated with these methods and the [human costs](#) they incur, remote warfare techniques are also having broader, negative implications in the theatres in which they are being used. From increased [radicalization](#) caused by drone strikes in Pakistan, to [instability](#) resulting from special forces and private military companies in Africa, the notion that remote warfare is making us safer in the face of terrorism is being questioned.

Unsurprisingly, remote warfare methods are having similar consequences in theatres across Latin America where the War on Drugs is playing out. As mass surveillance techniques and the use of private military companies raise concerns over human rights violations and a lack of transparency and oversight, the broader strategic shortfalls of remote warfare are also becoming apparent. Indeed, covert warfare techniques and, in turn, the responses they spur, have been found to weaken the rule of law and legitimacy of the state in areas where they've been used, rendering these methods ineffective and counterproductive in achieving security in the long-term.

Like the War on Terror, the War on Drugs can only be solved by addressing the root causes of insecurity. In the case of the War on Drugs, this must be done by addressing the costs and unintended consequences of a militarized and enforcement-led global 'War on Drugs' strategy and, as the LSE Expert Group on the Economics of Drug Policy [report](#) concluded, should ultimately concentrate on the shifting of resources and focus towards effective evidence-based policies that ensure population security, economic development and protecting human rights. Remote warfare does not offer a new approach to the problem of illicit drug trafficking, rather it represents an unchanged strategy, dressed up with new tactics.

The Remote Control Project is a project of the Network for Social Change hosted by Oxford Research Group. We examine and challenge changes in military engagement, in particular the use of drones, special operations forces (SOF), private military and security companies (PMSCs) and cyber and intelligence activities.

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Published by the Remote Control project, March 2016