BOOK REVIEW

Is Remote Warfare Moral? Weighing Issues of Life + Death from 7,000 Miles, by Joseph O. Chapa, New York, PublicAffairs, 2022, 272 pp., US$29 (hardback), ISBN 978-1541774452

The argument: remote warfare is moral

In 2002, on the heels of the 9/11 terrorist attacks a year earlier, U.S. President George W. Bush ushered in the use of armed and networked Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) or drones to kill terrorists in both declared (e.g. Afghanistan) and undeclared (e.g. Pakistan) theaters of operations. Every president since then has used drones with more or less transparency and oversight (Lushenko 2022). The literature on “drone warfare,” which is a concept that scholars often use but rarely define, has evolved over three waves to understand this advancing practice. Scholars have explored the proliferation of drones, the effectiveness of strikes, and the legal, moral, and ethical implications of a respatialization of war. Drones also impose costs on the global order, – that is, the pattern of relations between countries, – encouraging some experts to propose a new, fourth wave of scholarship (Lushenko, Bose, and Maley 2022). Indeed, the corpus of literature is now so sprawling that specialists often refer to it as a veritable “drone-a-rama” (Kaplan 2017). Despite or because of this, younger scholars, especially those experienced in managing U.S. drone strikes abroad, have begun to re-engage key questions that frame successive generations of drone warfare scholarship.

In his book, Is Remote Warfare Moral?, U.S. Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Chapa tackles a question that bedevils observers of drone warfare, as well as those who authorize, execute, and study drone strikes. To be sure, there is no shortage of books on this contestable topic. What differentiates Chapa’s analysis is his bird’s eye view on the moral status of drones. His purpose is to provide “careful analysis of the ethics of remote warfare written from the perspective of one who has both studied military ethics and participated in remote warfare” (16). Chapa positions his study within “the principles that govern war,” which is to say the classical Just War Tradition that encompasses jus ad bellum (justice of war) and jus in bello (justice in war) components (5). He most clearly articulates his argument in chapter four. Chapa contends that remote warfare is moral but not for the reasons generally offered by other moral philosophers.

Contrary to consequentialist and deontological accounts that link the morality of drones to enhanced battlefield protections for soldiers (Strawser 2010) and civilians (Renic 2020), respectively, Chapa argues that the morality of drones has “much more to do with who poses an unjust threat” (133). He understands an unjust threat as something, if eventuated, would result in wrongful harm to soldiers and civilians during a just war. What constitutes an unjust threat seems to be a matter of interpretation, though it could range from a sniper to a terrorist to a dictator, even. By casting his argument in terms of an unjust threat, Chapa is able to bridge countervailing perspectives on the morality of drones, although he never states this intent.

Chapa adopts an inductive method to support his argument (Knobe and Nichols 2008). He uses this method to triangulate evidence drawn from his experiences as a drone pilot, earlier developments in remote warfare technologies, and the body of scholarship for the moral philosophy and psychology of drone warfare. Chapa’s book is easy to read. The book, nearly 300 pages, is also engaging. It consists of eight chapters that canvass the prevailing norms that
inform the debate for the morality of drone warfare, and that also address looming questions about the emergence of enhanced capabilities, including Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML). Drawing on a central theme of the book, Chapa argues that human restraint will minimize anti-drone advocates’ concerns, especially objections to fully autonomous capabilities prefigured on a lack of supervisory oversight (Riza 2013).

Given this overview of Chapa’s purpose, argument, and method, the remainder of my review unfolds in three parts. First, I address Chapa’s contributions. Chapa benchmarks the debate for the moral status of drones, expands our understanding of different types of strikes, and emphasizes the durability of the Just War Tradition to contend with the moral challenges imposed by remote warfare technologies. Second, I address several considerations that affect the internal and external validity of Chapa’s argument. It is unclear if unjust threat, rather than reciprocal risk between combatants and their inalienable right to self-defense, really does shape the perceived morality of strikes. This concern is part and parcel of how we understand evolving patterns of drone warfare as a function of varying uses and constraints of strikes in the context of limited war. Indeed, while informative, Chapa’s book does not engage the wider debate for the just use of drones in conflicts short of war. I close by emphasizing the central contribution Chapa makes to a broad audience of non-expert and expert observers of drone warfare alike.

Three contributions: moral norms, uses of strikes, and just war tradition

Chapa’s book is marked by several contributions. First, Chapa contextualizes his argument against the canonical literature for the morality of drone warfare, which philosophers link to moral norms. A moral norm is a special standard of behavior (Katzenstein 1996). It is thought to be independent of political authority, universal in scope, and relates to the suffering of others, which is a hallmark of war (Machery and Mallon 2010). Philosophers often relate the moral status of drones to three such norms, including battlefield courage (Burri 2018), force protection (Vilmer 2021), and duties of care to civilians (Dill 2015). Chapa introduces this normative landscape in order to differentiate his argument that an unjust threat, rather than person-centered or act-based interpretations of moral behavior, informs the probity of drones. Chapa notes that “in addition to the traditional martial virtues of courage, honor, and loyalty, remote warfare crews must also cultivate respect for human dignity” (177). Chapa acknowledges that drones allow a government to use force “without exposing its own military to combat risks” (4). Chapa contends that countries using drones also have an obligation “to cause as little harm as they can” (136). Indeed, it is easy to conflate the morality of drones with the unintended consequences, namely, civilian casualties. Given his focus, Chapa does not engage with this claim, which requires empirical study. Rather, his intent is to outline the debate in an accessible manner, while also discussing different uses of drone strikes that help us formulate unique moral questions that other philosophers often ignore.

Chapa draws on Cook’s earlier research (2015) on different uses of drone strikes, and this is the book’s second key contribution. While it may appear self-evident that countries can use drones differently from each other, scholars do not usually differentiate between patterns of strikes globally. Most researchers conflate drone warfare with the platform itself, such as the General Atomics MQ-9 Reaper, which is the most advanced armed and networked drone in the world. Gusterson refers to this trend as “drone essentialism” (2019). Others reduce drone warfare to the targeted killing of terrorists, though drones are often used for a range of other purposes, including the disruption and destruction of enemy capabilities and networks (Meisels and Waldron 2020; Hardy and Lushenko 2012). To the extent that scholars
distinguish between patterns of drone use, they conceive of these in terms of “pure” and “mixed” types. Gusterson notes that drones can be used separately from or in support of expeditionary ground forces (2015).

Building on Cook, Chapa clarifies the “tactical” and “strategic” uses of drones. The tactical use of drones, which is Chapa’s principal unit of analysis, encompasses strikes conducted during an active engagement between combatants (18). According to Phelps, this characterizes a majority of strikes, meaning drones loiter for prolonged periods of time above combat zones waiting to identify “someone to be killed or something to be destroyed” (2021, 72). Political officials can also use drones strategically, that is, as a “foreign policy tool” (17). Renic defines this modality as “UAVs as war, rather than in war” (2020, 159). These differences are important because, as Chapa argues, the “moral questions function in a different way” for each unique kind of use. “By focusing on warfare and the level of the individual warfighter or practitioner,” Chapa states, “I am better able to describe remote warfare as a category and what it means for the future of warfare” (18). Chapa’s focus on tactical strikes also allows him to circumvent difficult questions about the moral status of strikes in non-active conflict zones, such as Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. Rather, he directly explores the moral significance of battlefield risk, the moral psychology of remote killing, and a drone operator’s ability to demonstrate martial virtue.

Finally, Chapa renews the debate about the extent to which Michael Walzer’s position within Just War Tradition, sometimes referred to as the “orthodox” view or “conventionalism,” best allows us to negotiate the moral status of drone warfare. To be clear, Chapa never actually uses these terms nor explicitly contrasts them with competing perspectives on the moral status of wartime conduct, such as contractarianism and revisionism, which is also sometimes referred to as reductive individualism. Whereas contractarianism relates to combatants’ negotiated liability to be harmed in war, revisionism concerns the moral inequality of combatants based on their contributions to a war effort (Benbaji and Statman 2020; McMahan 2009; Pattison 2018; Renzo 2018). Yet Chapa explicitly draws on the language of Just War Tradition as this is codified in the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, including the jus in bello principles of distinction, necessity, and proportionality. He argues that drone strikes against so-called “high-value targets” are “morally justified only if killing the high-value target is discriminate, proportionate, and necessary” (131). He also concludes by claiming that “the restraints inherent in just war theory remain our best hope of preventing the calamities of war in the age of AI” (196). Chapa, then, agrees with other moral philosophers such as Steinhoff who posit “just war theory can be adapted to the circumstances of extreme asymmetric warfare” (2013, 195), which drone warfare unarguably constitutes (Calcara et al. 2022).

Three critiques: strawman, uses and constraints of strikes, and jus ad vim

Notwithstanding these contributions, I believe Chapa makes three tradeoffs that may threaten the internal and external validity of his analysis. First, Chapa’s argument that the morality of drone warfare is a function of an unjust threat may be a strawman. Chapa contends, for instance, that if “the moral justification for killing in war depends on reciprocal risk, – even if it is risk to one’s own fellow combatants or fellow citizens, – then the use of force to defend foreign soldiers or foreign citizens can never be justified” (127). Empirical research suggests this may not be true, and substituting unjust threat, however defined, for combatants’ structural risk as well as inalienable right to self-defense, is dubious. For Americans, at least, contrasting threat with risk may be a distinction without a difference. Polling data and survey experiments consistently show that Americans often take the threat – particularly
terrorism – at face value, especially because U.S. political officials are given wide latitude to use strikes that evade public scrutiny unless or until mistakes are made (Boddery and Klein 2021; Rowling and Blauwkamp 2021; Ceccoli and Bing 2018; Kaag and Kreps 2014). One recent example of this dynamic is the Biden administration’s botched strike in Kabul, Afghanistan in August 2021. Instead of killing a suspected Islamic State terrorist, the strike killed ten civilians, including women and children. The public outcry encouraged the Pentagon to develop a Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan as well as a Civilian Protection Center of Excellence (Kreps and Lushenko 2021).

The results of my own research reinforce this trend. Americans’ support for drones, as well as their perceptions of legitimate strikes, are mainly conditioned by the perceived compliance with International Humanitarian Law and the unintended consequences, especially civilian casualties (Lushenko, Raman, and Kreps 2022; Lushenko and Kreps 2022). What this suggests, then, is that considerations of reciprocal risk and self-defense may do more to moderate Americans’ understanding of the moral status of strikes than does the threat, an idea that U.S. citizens acknowledge even if they do not fully appreciate what this means in terms of intent and capability. This is because International Humanitarian Law is predicated on considerations of reciprocal risk and self-defense that not only bound the moral status of countries’ wartime behavior but are broadly recognized by casual or non-expert observers of conflict as doing so (Dill and Schubiger 2021; Dill 2019). Part of the problem is methodological. Chapa’s intuition, while understandable, is non-falsifiable and deserves more empirical study to adjudicate. Part of the problem is also conceptual. My research suggests that variation in the use and constraint of drones belies considerations of reciprocal risk and self-defense that combine to shape the public’s perceptions of morally legitimate strikes (Lushenko 2021).

Second, evolving patterns of drone warfare globally are demarcated by why and how countries exercise strikes. Besides varying uses of strikes, that is, countries can also adopt different types of constraints. Indeed, Galliott contends that while countries may have “an obligation to utilise unmanned systems, their deployment should be subject to strict oversight” (2015, 4). To the extent that Chapa recognizes this additional attribute, he mentions that “organizational constraints” can shape drone crews’ judgments to use strikes (151). Rather, I contend that countries can also adopt unilateral (self-imposed) or multilateral (externally-levied) constraints. These consist of different “near” or “reasonable” certainty standards for civilian casualties during strikes and international approval for strikes. Shifts in the use and constraint of drones are important to recognize because they shape distinct patterns of strikes that my research suggests can moderate the public’s perceptions of morally legitimate strikes in unique ways and in cross-national contexts.

This finding raises questions about a key assumption that justifies Chapa’s focus on U.S. strikes abroad. “As the technological and operational leader in remote warfare,” Chapa argues, “the United States is setting the precedent and establishing the norms to which other states will eventually be held” (19). This may not be correct. Other countries are acquiring drones and using them in ways that differ markedly from the United States. Previous studies on public attitudes for U.S. strikes, therefore, may not relate to other countries’ adoption of drones. I show this in a recent survey experiment that I administered among nationally representative samples in America and France. I find that respondents perceive the moral legitimacy of strikes much differently based on how they are used and constrained to prevent unintended consequences, primarily civilian casualties. Americans perceive the strategic use of a strike as the most legitimate, and the type of constraint is conditioned by civilian casualties. On the other hand, French respondents’ perceptions of legitimacy are strongest
when a strike is used tactically and with multilateral constraint, regardless of a civilian casual-
ties (Lushenko and Kreps 2022).

Third, the generalizability of Chapa’s findings to other strategic contexts is unclear for additional reasons as well. A key tradeoff in positioning his analysis within the classical Just War Tradition is that Chapa does not consider that the “ethical use of force lies on a spectrum, which spans the severely restrictive use permitted in law enforcement to the more per-
missive use permissible under the rules of war” (Brunstetter 2021, 8). This points to a gap in the moral status of wartime behavior that Walzer (2007) links to so-called “in-between spaces” and Brunstetter and Holeindre (2018) relate to “contested and fragmented sovereignty,” where states do not enjoy a monopoly on the just use of force. If this construction fairly characterizes the contemporary security environment, “drone warfare” may be a mis-
nomer. Rather, strikes may be better conceptualized in terms of a limited use of force. In this case, drones should be governed by a different moral framework including *jus ad vim* (justice of using limited force), *jus in vi* (just use of limited force), and *jus post vim* (justice of using limited force following conflict).

This observation raises important questions that Chapa’s book does not address. How can countries balance a drone capability against the imperatives to exercise restraint and deesca-
late conflict, which Brunstetter (2021) argues are the guiding moral principles of *jus ad vim*? This question is exacerbated by competing conceptualizations of drone strikes. Gusteron distin-
guishes between mixed and pure strikes. Chapa identifies two types of tactical and strategic strikes. Brunstetter (2021) characterizes strikes in terms of self-defense and cooperation. Self-
defense strikes consist of the unilateral use of drones for targeted killing from a distance. Cooperation-based strikes consist of strikes in support of internationally approved interven-
tions. I further complicate these constructions by suggesting that variation in the use and con-
straint of drones shapes different patterns of strikes globally. It is unclear which approach allows countries best to meet the requirements of *jus ad vim*. How do these approaches relate to considerations of *jus in vi* (the moral principles governing how limited force is used), which Brunstetter (2021) conceives of as important recalibrations of the *jus in bello* principles of distinction, necessity, and proportionality? How does *jus post vim* allow us to reconcile considerations of order and justice in terms of drone strikes to constitute a sustain-
able peace following conflict, both within and between countries? These are challenging ques-
tions that deserve more attention, as they are crucial to countries’ evolving adoption of drones.

The value: a wide scope of readers

Ultimately, Chapa’s book makes an important contribution to the drone warfare scholarship. Chapa integrates a mastery of moral philosophy and psychology with his warfighting expert-
tise to fill an important lacuna in the literature addressing the morality of drone strikes. Often, contributions are written by scholars who lack military experience or military practitioners who lack an appreciation for the complex moral dimensions of evolving remote warfare tech-
nologies. Chapa’s analysis, then, is rare and commendable. Few practitioners take the time, assuming they have the interest and training, to weigh in on such heavy issues and at a high level of scholarship. Regardless of the concerns I have flagged for the validity of his analysis (and there may be more), Chapa’s book sets an important benchmark for a wide scope of readers. This includes casual observers interested in key considerations that inform the morality of strikes at the tactical level of war; practitioners, – especially drone pilots, – reflecting on the morality of their professional obligations to use force abroad in support of military and political objectives; political officials navigating the role of drones
in modern conflict; and, scholars interrogating the implications of drones based on broader theoretical, conceptual, and methodological concerns.

Notes

1. As a matter of record, and to the extent “drone warfare” is a meaningful concept, I define it as countries’ use of armed and networked drones in concert with expeditionary forces to achieve military and political objectives, limited or maximal, across the continuum of competition and in conflict. See Lushenko, Bose, and Maley (2022).
2. Unless otherwise mentioned, the page numbers refer to Chapa’s book.

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