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What lies over the horizon? Remoteness and the evolution of American global counterterrorism

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the War on Terror's shift to 'over-the-horizon counterterrorism' after the 2021 American withdrawal from Afghanistan. I argue that the concept of the 'horizon' provides temporal and spatial structures which both obscure and reveal the political dimensions of counterterrorism. Drawing on German historian Reinhart Koselleck's concept of the 'horizon of expectation', I demonstrate how the horizon shows the tensions between present uses of force and future security endeavours through a discourse analysis of speeches and communications on counterterrorism by the Biden Administration, inescapably inscribing counterterror violence at the heart of American security futures.

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As the last American soldiers left Kabul after a hurried airlift and evacuation,¹ United States President Joe Biden attempted to take stock of the shifting horizons of counterterrorism and recalibrate expectations for the future. 'Last night in Kabul', he declared, 'the United States ended 20 years of War in Afghanistan – the longest war in American history'.² Yet, as he concluded the War in Afghanistan – one he argued should have ended in 2011 with the killing of Osama Bin Laden – he nevertheless vowed to continue the Global War on Terror: 'To those who wish America harm, to those that engage in terrorism against us and our allies, know this: [...] We will hunt you down to the ends of the Earth, and [...] you will pay the ultimate price'.³

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¹Michael D. Shear, Lara Jakes, and Eileen Sullivan, 'Inside the Afghan Evacuation: Rogue Flights, Crowded Tents, Hope and Chaos', *The New York Times*, 3 Sept. 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/03/us/politics/afghanistan-evacuation.html>.

²Joe Biden, 'Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan, 31 August 2021', *The White House*, 31 Aug. 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>.

³Biden.

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Less than a year later, in an Afghanistan where the United States were no longer at war,⁴ the drone strike that killed al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri became the proof of concept for a new counterterrorism doctrine relying on 'over-the-horizon capabilities',⁵ which would operate 'without American boots on the ground – or very few, if needed',⁶ mostly through armed drones, special forces, and air power. Drone strikes bookended the War in Afghanistan: on 7 October 2001, the opening night of the war, a Predator drone targeted – and missed – Taliban leader Mullah Omar;⁷ on 29 August 2021, a drone strike in Kabul killed 10 civilians on the penultimate day of the American presence.⁸ Now, in its aftermath, such strikes seemed poised to remain a core instrument of counterterrorism, though in new strategic, spatial, and temporal frameworks.

This counterterrorism policy both hinted at a purported new phase of the War on Terror and a return to earlier practice. Biden, as vice-president, had famously supported an alternative to the Afghan 'surge' and counterinsurgency doctrine, informally dubbed 'CT-plus', relying on small numbers of troops and aerial deployments to counter threats without engaging in large-scale political transformation.⁹ Some, such as Audrey Kurth Cronin, have suggested 'over-the-horizon counterterrorism' represents an overdue return to something similar, reflecting the geographical expansion of American counterterrorism throughout the 2010s without territorial entanglements in nation-building.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Biden himself acknowledged, the geopolitical context of 'over-the-horizon counterterrorism' was different: the terrorist threat had 'metastasized across the world, well beyond Afghanistan',¹¹ and American security interests were no longer aligned with Afghanistan's. While

⁴Charlie Savage, 'Biden Rules Tighten Limits on Drone Strikes', *The New York Times*, 1 July 2023, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/01/us/biden-drone-strikes.html>.

⁵The White House, 'Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials on a Successful Counterterrorism Operation in Somalia', *The White House*, 27 Jan. 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/01/26/background-press-call-by-senior-administration-officials-on-a-successful-counterterrorism-operation-in-somalia/>; Peter Baker et al., 'U.S. Drone Strike Kills Ayman al-Zawahiri, Top Qaeda Leader', *The New York Times*, 1 Aug. 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/01/us/politics/al-qaeda-strike-afghanistan.html>; Adam Weinstein, 'Al-Zawahiri Killing Shows "Over-the-Horizon" Counterterrorism Can Work', *Responsible Statecraft*, 2 Aug. 2022, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/08/01/al-zawahiri-killing-shows-over-the-horizon-counterterrorism-can-work/>.

⁶Biden, 'Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan, 31 August 2021'.

⁷Richard Whittle, *Predator: The Secret Origins of the Drone Revolution* (New York: Picador 2015), 247–66.

⁸Eric Schmitt, 'A Botched Drone Strike in Kabul Started With the Wrong Car', *The New York Times*, 21 Sept. 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/21/us/politics/drone-strike-kabul.html>.

⁹Michael Hastings, *The Operators: The Wild and Terrifying Inside Story of America's War in Afghanistan* (London: Phoenix 2013) Ch.53, 134.

¹⁰Audrey Kurth Cronin, 'US Counter-Terrorism: Moving Beyond Global Counter-Insurgency to Strongpoint Defence', *Survival* 63/5 (September 2021), 112–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.1982201>.

¹¹Biden, 'Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan, 31 August 2021'; Liz Sherwood-Randall, 'Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Assistant to the President for Homeland Security, Dr. Liz Sherwood-Randall on the Future of the U.S. Counterterrorism Mission: Aligning Strategy, Policy, and Resources', *The White House*, 9 Sept. 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/09/09/remarks-by-assistant-to-the-president-for-homeland-security-dr-liz-sherwood-randall-on-the-future-of-the-u-s-counterterrorism-mission-aligning-strategy-policy-and-resources/>.

administration officials asserted a desire to work with partners on the ground,¹² the Afghanistan withdrawal and move to ‘over-the-horizon’ approaches entailed a loss of these partners and of precious intelligence networks,¹³ precluding any return to a ‘CT-Plus’ doctrine.

This article assesses how discourses of ‘over-the-horizon counterterrorism’ transformed the conceptual frameworks for American counterterrorism policy. Most centrally, it addresses the question of the new spatial and especially temporal underpinnings of American counterterror strategy, drawing on the concept of the horizon both as a key discursive mechanism and as an analytical conceptual device. Most centrally, I argue, this new – in this context – discourse of ‘over-the-horizon counterterrorism’ illustrates central tensions which lie at the heart of contemporary American counterterrorism, namely the relation of present military action to future security. In other words, ‘over-the-horizon counterterrorism’ is not merely a new rhetorical device to describe long-standing practices, nor does it entail a complete break between pre- and post-Afghanistan withdrawal practices.¹⁴

While going ‘over the horizon’ may recall certain lasting features of the expansive, globalising martial geographies of the War on Terror, I argue here that the concept of the ‘horizon’ raises the question of the political purpose of counterterror violence. It does so by centring the temporal dimension of counterterrorism, and how present uses of force relate to future security endeavours, threats, and concerns. In other words, where the horizon lies, what lies beyond it, and how one moves towards it is a political determination, yet one which simultaneously sets a moving target and which constantly questions the validity of this target.

The horizon, in Biden’s counterterror policy, acts as a temporalizing and political device as much, if not more, than a spatial one. In this article, I draw on Reinhart Koselleck’s concept of the ‘horizon of expectation’ to disentangle these dynamics, showing how the horizon situates actions in a historical temporality, both orienting action towards an imagined future and questioning the existence of this very future. Koselleck’s conceptual analysis employs

¹²Sherwood-Randall, ‘Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Assistant to the President for Homeland Security, Dr. Liz Sherwood-Randall on the Future of the U.S. Counterterrorism Mission’.

¹³Charlie Savage, ‘Afghanistan Collapse and Strikes in Somalia Raise Snags for Drone Warfare Rules’, *The New York Times*, 28 Aug. 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/28/us/politics/biden-drones.html>; ‘Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on Posture of USCENTCOM and USAFRICOM in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for FY24 and the Future Years Defense Program’, *U.S. Central Command*, 16 Mar. 2023. <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/3332606/senate-armed-services-committee-hearing-on-posture-of-uscentcom-and-usafricom-i/>.

¹⁴In this, I disagree with analysts who retrospectively apply the term ‘over-the-horizon’ to previous long-range counterterrorism practices. While historical analyses like Kim Cragin’s certainly hold value in evaluating its potential empirical effectiveness, they mask the fundamental conceptual change associated with *discourses* of going ‘over-the-horizon’. Furthermore, they foreground the spatial notion of the horizon, while discounting its temporal dimensions. See Kim R. Cragin, ‘The Elusive Promise of “Over-the-Horizon” Counterterrorism’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (27 June 2024), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2024.2371489>.

the 'horizon' as an analytical category which centres the temporal development of concepts, actions, and politics, one which allows us to question the relation of present and future threats and security imaginaries and show tensions between present and future-oriented actions.

To this end, I undertake a discourse analysis of speeches, testimonies, and policy documents from the Biden administration. I trace uses of the 'horizon' in counterterrorism contexts through every speech, press briefing, and statement given by President Biden and other White House officials, as well as by the U.S. Department of Defense and by the U.S. Central Command which pertained to Afghanistan or counterterrorism policy.¹⁵ I evaluate these discourses alongside major security policy statements from the Biden Administration, including the 2022 National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, as well as the National Security Memorandum on International Counterterrorism Policy (NSM-13) and Presidential Policy Memorandum Governing Direct Action Counterterrorism Operations Outside Areas of Active Hostilities, both released in redacted form in response to Freedom of Information requests by the *New York Times*.¹⁶ In these documents, I trace usage of one specific term – the 'horizon', and 'over-the-horizon' activities, as well as associated practices and geographical concepts.

In this, I hold that statements of doctrines and discursive justifications of violence shape practices of war. Without entering into too much detail on the links between military discourses and practices – well-trodden elsewhere¹⁷ – how military action is presented as part of a strategic plan creates boundaries for possible and legitimate action. As Blake Ewing puts it in Koselleckian terms, 'political actors use language to set horizons while at the same time are conditioned, though not entirely hindered, by various institutional and linguistic structures'.¹⁸ Sometimes, political leaders may seek to subvert the

¹⁵The analysis ends at the end of September 2023, two years after the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

¹⁶'United States National Security Strategy', *Office of the President of the United States*, Oct. 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>; 'National Defense Strategy of the United States', *United States Department of Defense*, 2022. <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>; United States National Security Council, 'National Security Memorandum NSM-13: Memorandum on U.S. International Counterterrorism Policy', 6 Oct. 2022. <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/savage-nyt-foia-biden-national-security-memorandum-13-us-international-counterterrorism-policy/d82a1b4e20bd4222/full.pdf>; United States National Security Council, 'Presidential Policy Memorandum Governing Direct Action Counterterrorism Operations Outside Areas of Active Hostilities', 6 Oct. 2022. <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/savage-nyt-foia-biden-presidential-policy-memo-ct-direct-action-rules/91583cea8267d704/full.pdf>.

¹⁷Maja Zehfuss, 'Killing Civilians: Thinking the Practice of War', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 14/3 (August 2012), 423–40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2011.00491.x>; Johanna Rodehau-Noack, 'War as Disease: Biomedical Metaphors in Prevention Discourse', *European Journal of International Relations* 27/4 (December 2021), 1020–41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661211055537>; Stacie E. Goddard and Colleen Larkin, "'The Most Humane of All Weapons': Discrimination, Airpower, and Precision Doctrine', *European Journal of International Security* 8/4 (November 2023), 531–49. <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2023.21>.

¹⁸Blake Ewing, 'Koselleck's Historik and the Horizons of Politics', *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 13/2 (2018), 93.

discursive restrictions they have themselves set through further discursive and conceptual innovation.¹⁹ Nevertheless, strategic posture doctrines and relations of means, operations, and strategic-political ends condition how and why force (and other means) is employed.²⁰ Furthermore, the junctures and disjunctures between strategic statements and practices reveal underlying structures of thinking about force spatially and temporally.²¹ In the case of the Biden administration, there is a certain overt alignment between a declared strategy predicated on a reduction in direct military action and a preference for working through allies, and practices of counterterrorism. In addition to the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, data collected by Airwars demonstrates a sharp reduction in airstrikes²² by the end of the Biden presidency, there had been 39 declared Coalition airstrikes under the Biden presidency in Iraq and Syria (16058 under Trump),²³ 99 declared and alleged air strikes in Somalia (281 under Trump),²⁴ and 23 declared and alleged air strikes in Yemen since 2021 (327 between 2017 and 2020).²⁵

This paper proceeds in four stages. First, I provide a brief overview of discussions of spatial imaginaries and remoteness pertaining to the War on Terror. Second, I provide a contextual account of the term ‘over the horizon’ by examining its use in radar technology as well as in future-oriented political discourse, where it refers to long-term, uncertain threats. This section,

¹⁹Consider, for instance, the Biden administration carving out a collective self-defence exception to its ‘moratorium’ on out-of-active-hostilities airstrikes, later reinforced by press secretary Jen Psaki’s distinction between self-defence and ‘over-the-horizon’ operations. Eric Schmitt and Declan Walsh, ‘U.S. Military Conducts a Drone Strike Against Shabab Fighters in Somalia’, *The New York Times*, 20 July 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/20/us/politics/us-drone-strike-shabab-somalia.html>; Jen Psaki, ‘Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, September 20, 2021’, *The White House*, 20 Sept. 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/09/20/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-september-20-2021/>. See also Quentin Skinner, ‘Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action’, *Political Theory* 2/3 (August 1974), 277–303. Quentin Skinner, ‘Rhetoric and Conceptual Change’, *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* 3 (1999), 60–73.

²⁰See the discussion of doctrine in Joseph MacKay, *The Counterinsurgent Imagination: A New Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2023). 26; Consider also the discussion of declaratory and action policy in Edward Kaplan, *To Kill Nations: American Strategy in the Air-Atomic Age and the Rise of Mutually Assured Destruction* (Ithaca: Cornell UP 2015).

²¹For instance, several analysts argue that David Petraeus’ discourse on ‘COIN’ and the actual practice of the surge diverged sharply due to the constrained timescale imposed by Presidents Bush and Obama’s ‘surges’ in Iraq and Afghanistan; the Trump administration professed a move away from conflicts in the broad Middle East and a drawdown in Afghanistan, just as it expanded both the number of troops deployed and the intensity of airstrikes in Afghanistan.

²²Anna Zahn, Clarie Alspektor, and Sanjana Varghese, ‘US Airstrikes Fell to Historic Low in 2022, despite Fresh Operations’, *Airwars*, 1 Feb. 2023. <https://airwars.org/research/us-airstrikes-fell-to-historic-low-in-2022-despite-fresh-operations/>.

²³This total includes the large-scale Operation Inherent Resolve against ISIS, which significantly diminished in intensity after the capture of Raqqa in October 2017. ‘Coalition Air-Released Munitions in Iraq and Syria 2014–2020’, *Airwars*, 27 July 2023. <https://airwars.org/conflict-data/coalition-air-released-munitions-in-iraq-and-syria-2014-2020/>; ‘Declared Strikes by US President in Iraq and Syria’, *Airwars*, 29 Jan 2025. <https://airwars.org/conflict-data/declared-strikes-by-us-president-in-iraq-and-syria/>.

²⁴‘Strikes by US President in Somalia’, *Airwars*, 27 July 2023. <https://airwars.org/conflict-data/strikes-by-us-president-in-somalia/>.

²⁵‘Declared and Alleged US Actions in Yemen’, *Airwars*, 29 Jan 2025. <https://airwars.org/conflict-data/declared-and-alleged-us-actions-in-yemen/>.

furthermore, provides a brief *exposé* of Koselleck's concept of the horizon of expectation. Third, I analyse the discursive record concerning the new counterterrorism strategy and how the Biden Administration has portrayed the change in doctrine surrounding the August 2021 Afghanistan withdrawal. Finally, I return to Koselleck's notion of the horizon and examine its implications for understandings of the role of remoteness in American contemporary counterterrorism, arguing that the horizon demonstrates the uneasy contingency of multiple temporal scales and rhythms at play in American counterterrorism and the political determination of these shifting horizons. This analysis, therefore, contributes to the study of the role of discourse in the making of security policy, and provides a concrete analysis of the ways through which technical, depoliticised rhetoric can mask and normalize the political operations which make counterterrorism possible. It contributes, furthermore, to a thriving 'temporal turn' in the study of military violence and the operations of counterterrorism.²⁶

Space, containment, and global counterterrorism

Extensive work has demonstrated the preeminent importance of spatial imaginaries in shaping the American security posture.²⁷ Whether through the interwar development of strategic air power to ward off distant seaborne threats,²⁸ the discursive construction of territory as either foreign or American to justify military action after Pearl Harbor,²⁹ or the causal tying of remote threats to American security through 'dominos' and 'chain reactions' in the Cold War,³⁰ American security recurrently relies on means of externalising and eliminating threats before they reach the American homeland, an

²⁶See for instance the 2022 special issue on 'wartime' in *International Relations*, as well as the discussion of liberal justifications of targeted killing through emergency discourses by Amélie Férey. Andrew R. Hom and Luke Campbell, 'Wartime in the 21st Century', *International Relations* 36/4 (December 2022), 525–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178221134341>; Amélie Férey, *Assassinats Ciblés: Critique Du Libéralisme Armé* (Paris: CNRS éditions 2020).

²⁷For an early – and controversial – example, see for instance Carl Schmitt's highly ideological analysis of the Monroe Doctrine as a defensive form of spatial ordering predicated on the exclusion of threatening European influences in the Americas. Carl Schmitt, 'Großraum Versus Universalism: The International Legal Struggle over the Monroe Doctrine', in Stephen Legg, (ed.), Matthew Hannah (trans.), *Spatiality, Sovereignty and Carl Schmitt: Geographies of the Nomos* (London: Routledge 2011), 46–52; See also Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States* (London: The Bodley Head 2019); David Vine, *Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World* (New York: Henry Holt & Co. 2015). For a non-American example, see Malte Riemann and Norma Rossi, 'Remote Warfare as "Security of Being": Reading Security Force Assistance as an Ontological Security Routine', *Defence Studies* 21/4 (2 October 2021), 489–507. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2021.1994392>.

²⁸Michael S. Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven: Yale UP 1987), 29–30.

²⁹Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire*, 3–7.

³⁰James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press 2000), 75; Jerome Slater, 'The Domino Theory and International Politics: The Case of Vietnam', *Security Studies* 3/2 (December 1993), 186–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419309347547>.

approach transferred to counterterrorism starting with the Reagan administration.³¹ The 'everywhere war'³² which followed the 11 September 2001 attacks further entrenched this externalisation and endeavour to eliminate threats away from the Homeland.³³ As the Global War on Terror went on, 'global borderlands'³⁴ were expanded, made and remade, flattening the terrorist threat into an indistinct 'other', opposed to the American 'homeland'.³⁵ Cronin criticized this conception of al-Qaeda as a 'global insurgency', noting how it flattened complex dynamics of local and global insurgency into an undifferentiated single whole.³⁶ As Élie Tenenbaum and Marc Hecker further noted, this form of counterterrorism 'was no longer only a security issue: it became the structuring axis of the uncertain and fluid post-Cold War world order'.³⁷

Later on, in the Obama years, the War expanded to other theatres in Yemen, Somalia, Iraq and Syria, and Africa more widely,³⁸ even as the number of drone strikes in Pakistan sharply decreased after 2011.³⁹ As Luca Trenta has exposed, the Obama administration's justifications for counterterrorist violence relied on the close yet malleable temporal proximity between unsafe zones abroad and the American homeland.

³¹ Markus Gunneffo, *Targeted Killing: A Legal and Political History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2016); Luca Trenta, 'Death by Reinterpretation: Dynamics of Norm Contestation and the US Ban on Assassination in the Reagan Years', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6/4 (December 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogab012>. Note also that the terrorist threat in the 1980s targeted geographically dispersed American interests. American counterterror interventions were significantly spurred by attacks such as the 1983 bombing of Marine Corps barracks in Beirut, the 1985 killing of Leon Klinghoffer on the Achille Lauro cruise ship in the Mediterranean, and the 1986 bombing of La Belle discothèque in West Berlin.

³² Derek Gregory, 'The Everywhere War', *The Geographical Journal* 177/3 (September 2011), 238–50. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4959.2011.00426.x>.

³³ The 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force thus authorized 'the President [...] to use all necessary and appropriate force [...] in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons'. Joint Resolution, United States Congress, 'Authorization for the Use of Military Force', *S. J. Res. 23 §* (2001). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/senate-joint-resolution/23/text/enr>.

³⁴ Gregory, 'The Everywhere War', 239.

³⁵ See Katharine Hall Kindervater, 'Drone Strikes, Ephemeral Sovereignty, and Changing Conceptions of Territory', *Territory, Politics, Governance* 5/2 (April 2017), 207–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2016.1260493>; Michael Dillon and Julian Reid, *The Liberal Way of War: Killing to Make Life Live* (London: Routledge 2009); Katharine Hall, 'Drone Strikes and Spaces of Exception. Reflections on Derek Gregory's "Midnight's Victims"', *Area Development and Policy* 8/4 (2 October 2023), 387–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23792949.2023.2259449>.

³⁶ Cronin, 'US Counter-Terrorism', 100–101.

³⁷ Marc Hecker and Elie Tenenbaum, *La guerre de vingt ans: djihadisme et contre-terrorisme au XXIe siècle* (Paris: Robert Laffont 2021), 79. My translation.

³⁸ See Jolle Demmers and Lauren Gould, 'An Assemblage Approach to Liquid Warfare: AFRICOM and the "Hunt" for Joseph Kony', *Security Dialogue* 49/5 (October 2018), 364–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010618777890>.

³⁹ Neta C. Crawford, 'War-Related Death, Injury, and Displacement in Afghanistan and Pakistan 2001–2014', *Costs of War* (Providence: Watson Institute of International & Public Affairs, Brown University 22 May 2015). <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2015/War%20Related%20Casualties%20Afghanistan%20and%20Pakistan%202001-2014%20FIN.pdf>.

As a series of failed attacks traced back to Yemen showed,⁴⁰ geographically distant areas could present salient threats to American security, prompting a radical expansion of notions of ‘imminence’, which were shaped discursively to encompass general, ongoing, diffuse menaces.⁴¹ As will be detailed later, ‘over-the-horizon counterterrorism’ builds explicitly on these developments, retaining the distinction between a secure ‘homeland’ (and U.S. persons and infrastructures) and a dangerous outside.⁴² The concern with a ‘metastasizing’ threat of terrorism is also a mainstay of the Obama and Biden approaches, the phrase being used both by John Brennan (then U.S. Homeland Security advisor) and by Biden and his officials.⁴³ The technological response – over the horizon ‘find, fix, and finish’ capabilities⁴⁴ – equally has been developed over the last 20 years, presenting the new counterterrorism approach as a logical conclusion of technological, operational, political, and ideological developments in the War on Terror.⁴⁵

Radar horizons

Within these spatial imaginaries, the term ‘over the horizon’ is not specifically new, though its application has changed significantly. The Department of Defense terminological Dictionary references two uses: first, and most prominently, ‘over-the-horizon radar’ refers to ‘a radar system that makes use of the atmospheric reflection and refraction phenomena to extend its range of detection beyond line of sight’.⁴⁶ Such radar systems operate at very long

⁴⁰Charlie Savage, *Power Wars: Inside Obama’s Post-9/11 Presidency* (New York: Little, Brown & Co 2016); Scott Shane, *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, a President, and the Rise of the Drone* (New York: Tim Duggan Books 2015).

⁴¹Luca Trenta, ‘The Obama Administration’s Conceptual Change: Imminence and the Legitimation of Targeted Killings’, *European Journal of International Security* 3/1 (February 2018), 69–93. <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2017.11>.

⁴²United States National Security Council, ‘National Security Memorandum NSM-13’, 3.

⁴³Daniel Klaidman, *Kill or Capture: The War on Terror and the Soul of the Obama Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2012), 23; Joe Biden, ‘Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan, 14 April 2021’, *The White House*, 14 April. 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>.

⁴⁴‘House Armed Services Committee Hearing on National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activities in The Greater Middle East and Africa’, *U.S. Central Command*, 17 Mar. 2022, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/2971126/house-armed-services-committee-hearing-on-national-security-challenges-and-us-m/>.

⁴⁵Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken Hold Press Conference With Qatar Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defense Affairs Dr. Khalid Bin Mohammed Al Attiyah and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammed Bin Abdulrahman Al Thani’, *U.S. Department of Defense*, 7 Sept. 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2766036/secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-secretary-of-state-antony-j-blinken-hold-pr/>.

⁴⁶‘Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms’, *Joint Publication* (Washington, D. C.: Department of Defense 12 April 2001), 403. <https://dcsg9.army.mil/assets/docs/dod-terms.pdf>.

ranges, notably for missile launch and attack warning.⁴⁷ Recent interest in over-the-horizon radar surveillance has led to the deployment of such systems among others for counter-narcotics operations,⁴⁸ in Palau,⁴⁹ and in the Canadian Arctic.⁵⁰ The 2022 National Defense Strategy's Missile Defense Review contains a single mention of 'over-the-horizon', stating that 'modern over-the-horizon radar capabilities are essential to improving warning and tracking against cruise missile and other threats to the homeland'.⁵¹ The U.S. Air Force, meanwhile, requested \$429 million in Financial Year 2024 for research on over-the-horizon radar capabilities.⁵² More generally, 'over-the-horizon' can refer to detection, surveillance, and targeting at long range, beyond the visual horizon: a 1996 article in *Mechanical Engineering* touted the ability of early surveillance drones such as the MQ-1 Predator to 'peer over the horizon' and 'extend the vision of military commanders by thousands of miles'.⁵³ Similarly, in recent years, the development of the 'Over-the-horizon Weapons System' – a surface-launched, long-range anti-ship missile since renamed the Naval Strike Missile⁵⁴ – has extended the use of this terminology into offensive capabilities.

The second definition from the Department of Defense dictionary points to a broader, geographical use as a marker of great distance: 'over-the-horizon amphibious operations' consists in 'an operational initiative launched from beyond visual and radar range of the shoreline'.⁵⁵ In addition to these technical uses, the term is employed routinely in metaphorical, temporal senses, pointing to distant forecasts. A number of scholars employ it in this

⁴⁷B. S. Dandekar and J. Buchau, 'The AN/FPS-118 OTH Radar: Chapter 5, OTH Handbook', *Environmental Research Papers, OTH Handbook* (Hanscom Air Force Base: Phillips Laboratory, Air Force Materiel Command 11 January 1996), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA333470>.

⁴⁸'Raytheon to Operate and Maintain US Navy's ROTH System', *Naval Technology*, 25 Mar. 2021. <https://www.naval-technology.com/news/raytheon-to-operate-and-maintain-us-navys-rothr-system/>.

⁴⁹Emma Helfrich and Tyler Rogoway, 'U.S. Building Advanced Over-The-Horizon Radar On Palau', *The Drive*, 30 Dec. 2022. <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/u-s-building-advanced-over-the-horizon-radar-on-palau>.

⁵⁰Malte Humpert, 'US and Canada to Step up Arctic Capabilities with Over-the-Horizon Radar and Facilities for F35', *High North News*, 27 Mar. 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/us-and-canada-step-arctic-capabilities-over-horizon-radar-and-facilities-f35/>; 'Fact Sheet: NORAD Modernization Project Timelines', *Department of National Defence of Canada*, 24 Mar. 2023. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/allies-partners/norad/norad-modernization-project-timelines.html>.

⁵¹'Missile Defense Review', in *National Defense Strategy of the United States* (United States Department of Defense 2022), 9. <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

⁵²'FY24 U.S. Department of the Air Force Budget Overview' (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force Financial Management & Comptroller), 20, 26 July 2023. <https://www.saffm.hq.af.mil/Portals/84/documents/FY24/Budget/FY24%20Budget%20Overview%20Book.pdf>; David Roza, 'NORAD Boss: Over the Horizon Radar "Not the End-All, Be-All" For Defending Homeland', *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 10 May 2023. <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/norad-vanherck-over-the-horizon/>.

⁵³Steven Ashley, 'Robot Spy Planes Peer Over the Horizon', *Mechanical Engineering*, Mar. 1996, p. 84.

⁵⁴Sam LaGrone, 'Raytheon Awarded LCS Over-the-Horizon Anti-Surface Weapon Contract; Deal Could Be Worth \$848 M', *USNI News*, 31 May 2018. <https://news.usni.org/2018/05/31/raytheon-awarded-lcs-horizon-anti-surface-weapon-contract-deal-worth-848m>.

⁵⁵'Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms', 402.

sense, such as Peter J. Roman discussing changes in the U.S. Air Force's identity 'over the missile horizon'⁵⁶ or James J. Wirtz and Peter R. Lavoy, as well as David Edelstein, discussing indeterminate, future threats of nuclear proliferation⁵⁷ or great power transition.⁵⁸ This temporal uncertainty entailed with going 'over the horizon' is routinely reflected in American policy statements and discourses. In several cases, officials point to uncertain forecasts 'over the horizon': then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks thus defined the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency's (DARPA) mission as 'looking over the horizon and around corners to prototype and experiment and drive forward science and technology breakthroughs for our national security',⁵⁹ while former White House Office of Science and Technology Policy head Alondra Nelson touted investments in energy 'technologies just over the horizon'.⁶⁰ In bilateral meetings, Joe Biden similarly referred to common, indeterminate futures: at the Canadian Parliament, he suggested that 'the essence of democracy [...] is] what allows us to reach beyond the horizon';⁶¹ alongside Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, he praised the Irish-American friendship, as 'we dream together over horizons we can't even see. And we build together a future that may be'.⁶²

This overview points at several key characteristics of the imaginaries of 'over the horizon counterterrorism' which are relevant in the analysis below. American security relies on temporal constructions of threats, and 'over-the-horizon' combines both of these dimensions, spatial distance being equated to increased warning times.⁶³ The American strategic outlook has always

⁵⁶Peter J. Roman, 'Strategic Bombers over the Missile Horizon, 1957–1963', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 18/1 (March 1995), 198–236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399508437584>.

⁵⁷James J. Wirtz and Peter R. Lavoy, *Over the Horizon Proliferation Threats* (Stanford: Stanford UP 2012).

⁵⁸David M. Edelstein, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Powers* (Ithaca: Cornell UP 2017). Edelstein employs the concept of the horizon to distinguish between political leaders' short-term and long-term temporal perspectives and how their attitudes towards power transition dynamics affect cooperation and competition. Power transitions, he argues, are often marred by epistemological uncertainty over the horizon, leading leaders to often prefer short-term cooperation with rising powers rather than competition.

⁵⁹Kathleen Hicks, 'Deputy Secretary of Defense Dr. Kathleen Hicks Provides Virtual Keynote Remarks to the DARPA Forward Conference, Fort Collins, Colorado', *U.S. Department of Defense*, 1 Sept. 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3146950/deputy-secretary-of-defense-dr-kathleen-hicks-provides-virtual-keynote-remarks/>.

⁶⁰Alondra Nelson, 'Statement of Dr. Alondra Nelson on Senate Passage of the Inflation Reduction Act', *The White House*, 7 Aug. 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ostp/news-updates/2022/08/07/state-statement-of-dr-alondra-nelson-on-senate-passage-of-the-inflation-reduction-act/>.

⁶¹The White House, 'Remarks by President Biden in Address to the Canadian Parliament', *The White House*, 24 Mar. 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/03/24/remarks-by-president-biden-in-address-to-the-canadian-parliament/>.

⁶²The White House, 'Remarks by President Biden and Taoiseach Leo Varadkar of Ireland at Shamrock Bowl Presentation', *The White House*, 17 Mar. 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/03/17/remarks-by-president-biden-and-taoiseach-leo-varadkar-of-ireland-at-shamrock-bowl-presentation/>.

⁶³This is the basic justification for long-range over-the-horizon radar. See 'Joint Statement on NORAD Modernization', *U.S. Department of Defense*, 17 Aug. 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2735041/joint-statement-on-norad-modernization/>.

relied on the externalization of the threats and still does, Biden's foreword to the 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance hailing 'our power and our ability to disrupt threats before they can reach our shores' through alliances.⁶⁴ Over the horizon, however, also lie uncertainty, potential threats, and unknown futures. The horizon, and the ability to go over the horizon, provides a structuring concept both spatially and temporally, highlighting the transmutation of time and space in facing threats to the American 'homeland'.

Koselleck's horizon of expectation

It is, therefore, to a temporal conception of the 'horizon' that I now turn, one building on Reinhart Koselleck's category of the 'horizon of expectation' (*Erwartungshorizont*). For Koselleck, the horizon is part of a theory of human temporality: the human present is suspended between 'spaces of experience' and 'horizons of expectation' which shape how we understand the world, our position in it, and potential futures.⁶⁵ Political concepts, therefore, are constituted both in reference to their multiple histories – the space of experience – and the range of possible futures which they open – the horizon of expectation. Through these categories, Koselleck sought to make sense of the experience of historical time and the relation of past, present, and future.⁶⁶ What Koselleck perceived – and which is relevant here, both temporally and spatially – is that horizons are constantly remade, reconfigured, made past, and reborn from the perspective of an ever-changing present. Political action, in other words, is future-oriented; as Anna Friberg states, 'politics can be understood as a temporal activity in which the present is managed and the future is shaped'.⁶⁷ As such, the concept of the horizon provides a spatial rendering of temporal political dynamics,⁶⁸ as political actors project themselves towards imagined, possible futures which serve as guides for action. Political action, for Koselleck, is therefore always inherently temporal, located

⁶⁴'Renewing America's Advantages: Interim National Security Strategic Guidance' (Office of the President of the United States March 2021), 4, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

⁶⁵Reinhart Koselleck, "'Space of Experience' and 'Horizon of Expectation': Two Historical Categories', in Reinhart Koselleck, Keith Tribe (trans.) *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, (New York: Columbia UP 2004), 267–88.

⁶⁶Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Keith Tribe (trans.) (New York: Columbia UP 2004); Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, ed. and trans. Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Stanford: Stanford UP 2018); Michael Pickering, 'Experience as Horizon: Koselleck, Expectation and Historical Time', *Cultural Studies* 18/2–3 (May 2004), 271–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950238042000201518>; Anna Friberg, 'Venturing beyond Koselleck's Erwartungshorizont: On the Category of the Utopian', *Rethinking History* 25/3 (July 2021), 263–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2021.1936819>.

⁶⁷Friberg, 'Venturing beyond Koselleck's Erwartungshorizont', 265.

⁶⁸Koselleck, "'Space of Experience' and 'Horizon of Expectation': Two Historical Categories', 273; Niklas Olsen, 'Spatial Aspects in the Work of Reinhart Koselleck', *History of European Ideas* 49/1 (2023), 136–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2021.1937891>.

'in-between' moving horizons.⁶⁹ If 'experience is present past', a consolidated consciousness of past events, the horizon of expectation contains 'the future made present; it directs itself to the not-yet, to the non-experience, to that which is to be revealed'.⁷⁰

History, therefore, is made of a succession of future horizons which are constantly made, remade, transformed, jettisoned, and replaced. To act in historical time is to select among multiple potential, though unknown, futures, to choose to orient oneself towards a certain future to the exclusion of other, possible futures.⁷¹ Political action, for Koselleck, is necessarily teleological, aiming at imagined futures – 'the titles of legitimation of political action'.⁷² As a result, horizons are necessarily situated and shifting, as from the perspective of the present, standing on layers of 'sediments of time',⁷³ we project ourselves towards the horizon of imagined futures, temporalized utopias.⁷⁴ These horizons, furthermore, contain elements both of progressive temporal history and of cyclical recurrence. Historical experience, for Koselleck, consists in relating individual events – unique actions, moments which each have their own characteristics – to longer-term historical recurrences, cycles and patterns which repeat themselves.⁷⁵ The horizon, as such, contains possible futures which comprise elements of both historical continuity and change, both recurrences and unique events.⁷⁶

Through this theorisation of historical time, Koselleck demonstrates how conceptual horizons structure political action. As Blake Ewing argues, 'horizon lines can also be seen primarily as horizontal boundaries, set out to restrict or cut off alternative possibilities. They are movable boundaries that orient, open up, and constrain political activity'.⁷⁷ For Koselleck, the horizon of expectation is discursively produced from a present situation and restrains the range of possible actions in the future. In other words, the horizon

⁶⁹Ewing, 'Koselleck's Historik and the Horizons of Politics', 86.

⁷⁰Koselleck, "'Space of Experience" and "Horizon of Expectation": Two Historical Categories', 272.

⁷¹Ewing, 'Koselleck's Historik and the Horizons of Politics', 89.

⁷²Koselleck, "'Space of Experience" and "Horizon of Expectation": Two Historical Categories', 279; Reinhart Koselleck, 'The Unknown Future and the Art of Prognosis', in Reinhart Koselleck, Todd Samuel Presner (trans.) *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, (Stanford: Stanford UP 2002), 131–47.

⁷³Koselleck, *Sediments of Time*.

⁷⁴Reinhart Koselleck, 'The Temporalization of Utopia', in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, by Reinhart Koselleck, (trans.) Todd Samuel Presner (Stanford: Stanford UP 2002), 86–93.

⁷⁵In a counterinsurgency setting, Julien Pomarède builds on this to expose the tension between individual airstrikes – events – and repeated patterns of targeted strikes. Each strike is unique, being justified in itself, having a unique target, but nevertheless remains one instance in a constant recurrence of targeted strikes sharing procedures, purposes, and outcomes. Each strike is both different and the same as others, and historical analysis consists in capturing both the individual events and the recurring patterns. Julien Pomarède, 'Archipelagos of Death: The Assemblage of Population-Centric War in Afghanistan', *Defence Studies* 20/3 (July 2020), 202–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2020.1776614>.

⁷⁶Koselleck, 'The Unknown Future and the Art of Prognosis', 135; 144.

⁷⁷Ewing, 'Koselleck's Historik and the Horizons of Politics', 96.

delineates the range of one's 'spatio-temporal field of vision',⁷⁸ separating possible, expected futures from other, unconceivable courses of action. Horizons of expectation, therefore, are both politically determined from a present situated standpoint and stretching into the future, representing discursively the range of possible futures while excluding others.

The Biden Administration's over-the-horizon discourses

The Biden Administration came into office with the avowed intention to correct the 'mistakes'⁷⁹ of prior administrations' foreign and counterterrorism policies, as they 'committed to engage with the world once again'.⁸⁰ Biden claimed to oppose attempts at regime change, refusing to continue conflicts which are 'not in the national interest of the United States',⁸¹ and rejecting the notion of a 'forever war'.⁸² Immediately upon his inauguration, Biden decreed a pause in aerial counterterror operations outside designated areas of active hostilities which his National Security Council elaborated a new presidential policy memorandum (PPM) on counterterror operations.⁸³ The introduction of 'over-the-horizon' counterterrorism, therefore, was claimed to be a new departure in American counterterror policy, one which would contrast markedly with the Bush, Obama, and Trump approaches, a 'moment' in which horizons of expectation would be remade anew.⁸⁴

This need for a new approach, the Biden administration argued, was driven not only by a change in policy and a desire to disengage American ground troops from nation-building in Afghanistan, but by a change in the geopolitical environment and in the terrorist threat. Repeatedly, they argued, 'new crises demand our attention'⁸⁵ as the counterterrorist mission receded in the face of a renewed focus on great-power competition.⁸⁶ Explicitly, the 2022 National Security Memorandum on U.S. International Counterterrorism Policy (NSM-13) highlighted the need to revise the United States' counterterror approach in order to 'continue to protect our vital interests from terrorism while also allocating resources to other high-priority national security issues'.⁸⁷ The

⁷⁸Ewing, 85.

⁷⁹Joe Biden, 'Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan, 16 August 2021', *The White House*, 16 Aug. 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/>.

⁸⁰'Interim National Security Strategic Guidance', 3.

⁸¹See also 'United States National Security Strategy', 42.

⁸²Biden, 'Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan, 31 August 2021'.

⁸³As Charlie Savage from the *New York Times* has repeatedly noted, however, this moratorium did not apply to strikes undertaken in self-defence or collective self-defence, allowing for the continued use of air power in certain situations, notably in Somalia. Savage, 'Biden Rules Tighten Limits on Drone Strikes'; Schmitt and Walsh, 'U.S. Military Conducts a Drone Strike Against Shabab Fighters in Somalia'.

⁸⁴Ewing, 'Koselleck's Historik and the Horizons of Politics', 94.

⁸⁵'Interim National Security Strategic Guidance', 3.

⁸⁶'United States National Security Strategy', 11.

⁸⁷United States National Security Council, 'National Security Memorandum NSM-13', 3.

Biden administration's approach, seeking to reduce resource costs to focus on other, more pressing threats, thus echoed Edelstein's discussion presented in the last section of leaders eschewing longer-term threats 'over the horizon' to focus on pressing concerns.⁸⁸ Similarly, it also echoes Thomas Waldman's discussion of 'vicarious warfare', an attempt to achieve military-political successes 'on the cheap' by externalising costs onto other partners and by prioritizing short-term successes rather than longer-term gains.⁸⁹

The Biden Administration also claimed to be responding to changes in the terrorist threat itself. The 2022 National Security Strategy states that 'today's terrorist threat is more ideologically diverse and geographically diffuse than that of two decades ago'.⁹⁰ In repeated discourses, Biden and his advisors employed the term of a 'metastasizing' threat which, like a cancer, spread far beyond Afghanistan.⁹¹ In response, the 'over-the-horizon' approach to counterterrorism would be one which, as Homeland Security Advisor Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall highlighted, would provide 'flexibility' in combatting a fluid, 'diffuse and dispersed threat'.⁹² Faced with this 'metastasizing' threat, the policy abandoned any hope of a comprehensive defeat of terrorism.⁹³ Rather, in dealing with a 'resurgent' al-Qaida,⁹⁴ the objective would be to 'maintain pressure on terrorist groups'⁹⁵ to achieve the continued 'protection of the Homeland and U.S. persons and facilities overseas'.⁹⁶ In the face of a terrorist threat presented as 'degraded' yet 'persistent', American counterterrorism must 'disrupt' terrorist networks,⁹⁷ 'disrupt and degrade' terrorist groups,⁹⁸ 'deter' state support of terrorism, 'degrade transnational enablers' of terrorism,⁹⁹ and deny safe haven in Afghanistan and elsewhere.¹⁰⁰

⁸⁸Edelstein, *Over the Horizon*. Ironically, *contra* Edelstein, great power competition is here presented as the more pressing threat, rather than the one shunted over the horizon.

⁸⁹Thomas Waldman, *Vicarious Warfare: American Strategy and the Illusion of War on the Cheap* (Bristol: Bristol UP 2021).

⁹⁰'United States National Security Strategy', 30.

⁹¹Biden, 'Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan, 16 August 2021'; Sherwood-Randall, 'Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Assistant to the President for Homeland Security, Dr. Liz Sherwood-Randall on the Future of the U.S. Counterterrorism Mission'; see Rodehau-Noack, 'War as Disease', 1026.

⁹²Sherwood-Randall, 'Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Assistant to the President for Homeland Security, Dr. Liz Sherwood-Randall on the Future of the U.S. Counterterrorism Mission'; 'Interim National Security Strategic Guidance', 19.

⁹³By contrast, on September 20, 2001, then-president George W. Bush proclaimed that 'Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated'. George W. Bush, 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People', *The White House – President George W. Bush*, 20 Sept. 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

⁹⁴'National Defense Strategy', 2022, 5.

⁹⁵United States National Security Council, 'National Security Memorandum NSM-13', 4.

⁹⁶United States National Security Council, 3.

⁹⁷'Interim National Security Strategic Guidance', 15.

⁹⁸'United States National Security Strategy', 31.

⁹⁹United States National Security Council, 'National Security Memorandum NSM-13', 13–14.

¹⁰⁰'Interim National Security Strategic Guidance', 15; 30; John F. Kirby, 'Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds a Press Briefing', *U.S. Department of Defense*, 6 July 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2683654/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-holds-a-press-briefing/>.

Overall, the Biden administration asserted its desire to downrank the use of 'direct action'¹⁰¹ in counterterrorism, pursuing 'partner-led, U.S.-enabled' approaches, and avoiding 'military-centric policies' in favour of whole-of-government actions.¹⁰² Alliances with local partners were presented not only as achieving cost reductions, but also qualitative improvements: 'when we strengthen our alliances, we amplify our power and our ability to disrupt threats before they can reach our shores'.¹⁰³ Partners who 'are providing security for their own citizens'¹⁰⁴ thereby strengthen American security as an epiphenomenon of their own security. In the limited role devoted to over-the-horizon 'direct action', working with partners remained the preference: by default, such operations should be undertaken with the consent of the country of operation or on 'another basis under international law',¹⁰⁵ taking into account regional policy dynamics and relations with allies.¹⁰⁶

Despite this overt move away from 'military-centric' strategies,¹⁰⁷ 'over-the-horizon' has generally been taken as a shorthand for militarized operations. Indeed, before the Senate Arms Service Committee, Lloyd Austin defined the term as such: 'when we use that term, we refer to assets and target analysis that come from outside the country in which the operation occurs. These are effective, and fairly common, operations'.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, on 16 August 2021, Biden proclaimed that 'we've developed counterterrorism over-the-horizon capability that will allow us to keep our eyes firmly fixed on any direct threats to the United States in the region and to act quickly and decisively if needed'.¹⁰⁹ In his 31 August 2021 remarks, he reiterated this equation of over-the-horizon counterterrorism with direct action: 'We have what's called over-the-horizon capabilities, which means we can strike terrorists and targets without American boots on the ground – or very few, if needed'.¹¹⁰ It is in this sense that the Ayman al-Zawahiri strike in August 2022 was taken as a proof of concept: the October 2022 National Security Strategy explicitly cites it as a demonstration of the 'ability to maintain the fight against al-

¹⁰¹The PPM on direct action defines it as 'lethal and non-lethal uses of force against terrorist targets outside areas of active hostilities, including capture operations'. United States National Security Council, 'Presidential Policy Memorandum Governing Direct Action Counterterrorism', 1.

¹⁰²'United States National Security Strategy', 30; 42.

¹⁰³'Interim National Security Strategic Guidance', 4.

¹⁰⁴'United States National Security Council, 'National Security Memorandum NSM-13', 3–4.

¹⁰⁵'United States National Security Council, 'Presidential Policy Memorandum Governing Direct Action Counterterrorism', 2.

¹⁰⁶'United States National Security Council, 8.

¹⁰⁷'United States National Security Strategy', 30.

¹⁰⁸Lloyd Austin, 'Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Remarks Before the Senate Armed Services Committee (As Prepared)', *U.S. Department of Defense*, 28 Sept. 2021, www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/2791954/secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-remarks-before-the-senate-armed-service/.

¹⁰⁹Biden, 'Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan, 16 August 2021'.

¹¹⁰Biden, 'Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan, 31 August 2021'.

Qa'ida, ISIS, and associated forces from over the horizon',¹¹¹ a claim repeated in other briefings by senior administration officials and spokespersons.¹¹²

In other briefings, however, senior officials were considerably fuzzier on what was intended by 'over-the-horizon counterterrorism'. Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall closely espoused the administration's stated policy, highlighting the flexibility offered by 'over-the-horizon options' not only in striking, but in 'monitoring' threats, as part of a continuum of diplomatic means alongside local partners. While she described 'over-the-horizon' tools with specific reference to Afghanistan, she nevertheless highlighted the 'metast-sized' threat of terrorism and the 'flexible', 'adaptable', 'nimble' approach characterised by 'the agility to evolve as our adversaries do'.¹¹³ Other officials employed the concept of the horizon in a yet broader sense to describe the broader relation between 'partner-led' and 'U.S.-enabled' counterterrorism.¹¹⁴ Repeatedly, Department of Defense spokesperson John Kirby described logistical, political, financial, and technical support as 'over-the-horizon'; on 6 July 2021, for instance, he stated that 'we're still going to have a relationship with Afghan forces. It'll be over-the-horizon, it'll take place in a different way. We're not going to have boots on the ground, if you will, advising and assisting them in – in – in real operations, but – but that relationship will still exist'. That support will, furthermore, 'be over-the-horizon support in terms of logistical and technical and aviation maintenance support'.¹¹⁵

Despite this attempt to broaden the scope of its counterterrorism approach to prioritise approaches other than the use of force in official policy, the Biden administration found itself foregrounding 'over the horizon' uses of force in ways which skewed its discursive presentation of policy. In repeated

¹¹¹'United States National Security Strategy', 30.

¹¹²The White House, 'Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials on a Successful Counterterrorism Operation in Somalia'; Karine Jean-Pierre and John F. Kirby, 'Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby', *The White House*, 6 April. 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/04/06/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-national-security-council-coordinator-for-strategic-communications-john-kirby-9/>.

¹¹³Sherwood-Randall, 'Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Assistant to the President for Homeland Security, Dr. Liz Sherwood-Randall on the Future of the U.S. Counterterrorism Mission'.

¹¹⁴'United States National Security Strategy', 30.

¹¹⁵Kirby, 'Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds a Press Briefing'. To this end, the DoD established a 'Defense Security Cooperation Management Office, Afghanistan' and an 'Over-the-horizon Strike Cell', both in Qatar. According to a former commanding officer's Air Force biography, the formal name of the Strike Cell is 'Special Operations Joint Task Force – Central', based at al-Udeid Air Base. Jim Garamone, 'Austin Approves Plan to Transfer Authority, Retrograde Should Be Done by End of August', *U.S. Department of Defense*, 2 July 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2681650/austin-approves-plan-to-transfer-authority-retrograde-should-be-done-by-end-of-;> 'Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby and Air Force Lt. Gen. Sami D. Said Hold a Press Briefing', *U.S. Department of Defense*, 3 Nov. 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2832634/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-and-air-force-lt-gen-sami-d-said-hold-a-p-;> 'Maurizio D. Calabrese', *United States Air Force*, Aug. 2023, <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/3082598/maurizio-d-calabrese/>.

press interviews and testimonies to Congress, senior officials found themselves justifying their ability and willingness to engage in direct action. In particular, following the collapse of the Afghan government, whose security assurances proved to be hollow from Biden's perspective,¹¹⁶ officials countered this major challenge for a policy predicated on collaboration with regional partners by emphasising direct, 'over the horizon' action. Repeatedly, Department of Defense spokesperson John Kirby presented over-the-horizon strikes as the principal means 'to not allow attacks on the homeland to emanate from Afghanistan again'.¹¹⁷ Similarly, in announcing the killing of al-Zawahiri, Biden spoke generally of 'a promise to the American people that we'd continue to conduct effective counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan and beyond', fulfilled by this killing.¹¹⁸ A few months earlier, CENTCOM commander Kenneth McKenzie agreed that 'without sustained CT pressure terrorist groups are more able to focus on planning and preparing for external attacks' as Senator Debra Fischer expressed her concern over the lack of strikes in Afghanistan.¹¹⁹ In spring 2023, Erik Kurilla – McKenzie's successor as CENTCOM commander – sought to highlight some 'non-kinetic' 'finishes' within the broad 'find, fix and finish counterterrorism', without challenging the primacy of direct, 'over the horizon' action.¹²⁰ Even State Secretary Anthony Blinken explicitly referred to 'over-the-horizon' 'measures' to 'deal' with any resurgent terrorist threat.¹²¹

Despite claims to avoid military-centric approaches, and to prioritise working with partners, at least in Afghanistan this approach fell apart quickly: in Austin's words, 'In the span of just two days – from August 13th to 15th – we went from working alongside a democratically elected, long-time partner government to coordinating warily with a long-time enemy'.¹²² As a result,

¹¹⁶Biden, 'Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan, 16 August 2021'.

¹¹⁷Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby and Major General Hank Taylor, Deputy Director of the Joint Staff For Regional Operations Press Briefing', *U.S. Department of Defense*, 27 Aug. 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2753586/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-and-major-general-hank-taylor-deputy-dire/>.

¹¹⁸Joe Biden, 'Remarks by President Biden on a Successful Counterterrorism Operation in Afghanistan', *The White House*, 2 Aug. 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/08/01/remarks-by-president-biden-on-a-successful-counterterrorism-operation-in-afghanistan/>.

¹¹⁹Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on the Posture of United States Central Command and United States Africa Command, March 15, 2022', *U.S. Central Command*, 16 Mar. 2022, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/2968166/senate-armed-services-committee-hearing-on-the-posture-of-united-states-central/>. The words are by Senator Fischer; McKenzie agreed with the statement.

¹²⁰Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on Posture of USCENTCOM and USAFRICOM in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for FY24 and the Future Years Defense Program'.

¹²¹'Secretary Antony J. Blinken With Jake Tapper of State of the Union on CNN', *United States Department of State*, 15 Aug. 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-jake-tapper-of-state-of-the-union-on-cnn/>; 'Secretary Antony J. Blinken With Major Garrett of CBS Face the Nation', *United States Department of State*, 22 Aug. 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-major-garrett-of-cbs-face-the-nation/>.

¹²²Austin, 'Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Remarks Before the Senate Armed Services Committee (As Prepared)'.

'over-the-horizon counterterrorism' focused on direct action dominated discourses and policy critiques, which proliferated in the aftermath of the Kabul evacuation. *Just Security's* Brianna Rosen highlighted the paradox of Biden claiming an end to war just as he entrenched an 'over-the horizon strategy' of endless violence governed by the Laws of armed conflict. Douglas London and Andy Forney criticized an over-reliance on lethal counterterrorism at the expense of holistic, strategically-minded approaches.¹²³ Sarah Kreps and Paul Lushenko cast doubt on the feasibility of the strategy itself, highlighting its heavy and complex geopolitical costs and resource, airspace access, basing, and infrastructure requirements, while Kim Cragin cast doubt on the existence of sustained political commitment.¹²⁴ Thus, while the Biden administration sought to relegate direct action to a minor role in its counterterrorism posture and largely dropped the term 'over the horizon' from later policy documents,¹²⁵ in many ways 'over the horizon' came to stand in for the broader Biden approach, a 'metonymy'¹²⁶ which defined the whole. It is, therefore, to the horizon of counterterrorism itself I turn in the last section.

The horizons of expectation of counterterrorism

Koselleckian horizons provide means of spatio-temporal orientation in the world, though ones which are necessarily relative and particular. The relativity of these horizons also impacts experiences of temporality, which are central to counterterrorism policy. Not all temporal activities are experienced in the same rhythms, as they are conditioned by historical-conceptual contingencies. The Biden administration thus emphasises the need to work both on long-term, underlying structural 'root causes' through slow partner-led

¹²³Douglas London, 'The Overhyping of Over the Horizon', *Just Security*, 13 Oct. 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/78582/the-overhyping-of-over-the-horizon/>; Andy Forney, 'Drone Strikes Forever: The Problems with Over-The-Horizon Counterterrorism and a Better Way Forward', *Modern War Institute*, 28 Oct. 2022, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/drone-strikes-forever-the-problems-with-over-the-horizon-counterterrorism-and-a-better-way-forward/>. Cronin's proposed 'strongpoint defence' policy, while leveling a similar long-standing critique of American counterterrorism, hews much closer to Biden administration policy statements. Cronin, 'US Counter-Terrorism'. Most of these critiques are from 2021 – while the Interim Guidance had been published by then, the National Security Strategy would only be published in 2022, and the NSM-13 would be declassified only in June 2023. Nevertheless, these critiques all highlight an aporia between the stated aim of the Biden strategy and the discursive emphasis on 'direct action'.

¹²⁴Paul Lushenko and Sarah E. Kreps, 'The Mirage of Clean "over-the-Horizon" Air Strikes', *Responsible Statecraft*, 19 Oct. 2021, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/10/19/the-flaws-of-bidens-over-the-horizon-approach-to-counterterrorism-in-afghanistan/>; Cragin, 'The Elusive Promise of "over-the-Horizon" Counterterrorism'. These issues were also repeatedly echoed by CENTCOM commanders in Congressional hearings. 'Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on the Posture of United States Central Command and United States Africa Command, March 15, 2022'; 'Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on Posture of USCENTCOM and USAFRICOM in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for FY24 and the Future Years Defense Program'.

¹²⁵The term features only once in the 2022 National Security Strategy and not at all in NSM-13, the PPM on Direct action, or the National Defense Strategy (except the Missile Defense Review, concerning radar), in marked contrast to its repeated use as a policy definition throughout 2021.

¹²⁶Férey, *Assassinats Ciblés*, 89.

action, while emphasising the need for 'direct action' against 'continuing, imminent threats'. Collective self-defence strikes – which are different from 'over-the-horizon' strikes, according to Press Secretary Psaki¹²⁷ – call forth yet another temporal rhythm, one much more pressing and subjugated to a partner's time horizons. These sedimentary layers of temporal rhythms act upon each other, as short-duration recurring actions impact underlying, longer-duration historical changes.¹²⁸ The 'horizon' of counterterrorism, therefore, finds itself at the uneasy intersection of repetitive, cyclical strikes and progressive dynamics of long-term security building through partners. The counterterrorist approach proposed by the Biden administration thus combines elements of progressive policy and cyclical action: 'over-the-horizon' strikes serve to suppress 'continuing, imminent threats' in a repetitive fashion, while other 'partner-led' actions work towards a future security horizon. Yet, as Pomarède emphasises, there is a real possibility that the immediate 'structures of repetition'¹²⁹ of targeted strikes act against the progressive structures of diachronic security-building, calling into question the very nature and possibility of the future itself.¹³⁰

Blake Ewing, building on Koselleck, thus distinguishes 'chronological' and 'kairological' time, that is, politically-ideologically meaningful time, in which 'events are not only dealt with, but also employed'.¹³¹ In American counterterrorism, the conception of the terrorist threat as a 'continuous, imminent threat' which, while 'degraded', is nevertheless potentially 'resurgent' plays on disjointed temporalities of imminence, permanence, contingency and *longue durée*. As Luca Trenta has noted, the expanded concept of imminence put forth by the Obama administration – and which continues to hold sway in the Biden PPM's references to 'continuing, imminent threat[s]'¹³² – introduces the notion of moments of opportunity for targeting, interruptions in the unfolding of time, and 'surprising' events which lead towards new future horizons.¹³³ Horizons provide both unity and relativity to different temporalities, as 'multiple layers that refer to each other in a reciprocal way' act upon each other and shape historical change and singular events.¹³⁴ The Biden Administration's counterterrorism strategy, however, is strikingly vague on

¹²⁷Psaki, 'Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, September 20, 2021'.

¹²⁸Koselleck, *Sediments of Time*; Ewing, 'Koselleck's Historik and the Horizons of Politics', 92.

¹²⁹Koselleck, *Sediments of Time*, 4.

¹³⁰Pomarède, 'Archipelagos of Death'.

¹³¹Blake Ewing, 'Conceptual History, Contingency and the Ideological Politics of Time', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 26/3 (2021), 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2020.1855766>.

¹³²United States National Security Council, 'Presidential Policy Memorandum Governing Direct Action Counterterrorism', 3.

¹³³Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann and Sean Franzel, 'Introduction: Translating Koselleck', in *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, by Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, ed. Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Stanford: Stanford UP 2018), ix; Ewing, 'Conceptual History, Contingency and the Ideological Politics of Time', 271.

¹³⁴Koselleck, *Sediments of Time*, 4; 6–7.

these temporal construction, eschewing any conceit of victory, success, or final security, while accepting the need for recurring military strikes.¹³⁵

The choice by the Biden administration of a seemingly technical phrase, recalling prosaic uses in radar and weapons technology, is likely not anodyne. The construction of 'over-the-horizon counterterrorism' is presented as a technical, apolitical fix to a technical problem. In response to a 'metastasizing' threat which exists for reasons which are not specified, the United States, it seems, has no choice but to act to suppress 'continuous, imminent threat[s]' to the Homeland and U.S. persons.¹³⁶ The solution to this endemic threat, seemingly existing independently of the United States, is equally technical – it is a question of 'counterterrorism capabilities',¹³⁷ technological in nature, which solve a policy problem of endless troop deployments, and which can be 'carefully calibrated [...] where that's appropriate to address such threats when they reach the level of requiring us to act, ourselves, to address it'.¹³⁸ The construct of 'over-the-horizon counterterrorism', as such, is that the United States is forced to react when 'imminent' threats irrupt, threatening to pierce the distant horizon and interrupting its ongoing security-building efforts.¹³⁹ It is no accident, in this respect, that multiple critics have likened its implementation to the euphemistically-termed, technically-rendered Israeli counterterrorism approach of 'mowing the grass' by regularly engaging in violence to eliminate an ever resurgent crop of terrorists.¹⁴⁰

By distinguishing the apparent technological act of venturing 'over-the-horizon' with the rejected policy choice of waging a ground war, Joe Biden and his administration sought to reify the horizon, naturalise its existence and position, and depoliticise the action of violence which takes place beyond it. In other words, as much as he attempted to diminish the prominence of military action, Biden – through the use of discourses of 'over-the-horizon' counterterrorism, naturalizes the very existence of the 'horizon'. It locates military counterterrorism firmly in the American future, and centres these expected security futures around military action. The possibility – and necessity – of going 'over-the-horizon', thus, makes it impossible to imagine American security without the recurring recourse to 'direct action', military

¹³⁵Liane Hartnett et al., 'Winning? The Politics of Victory in an Era of Endless War', *International Studies Review* 24/1 (1 March 2022), viac006, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viac006>; Audrey Kurth Cronin, 'The "War on Terrorism": What Does It Mean to Win?', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37/2 (23 February 2014), 174–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2013.850423>.

¹³⁶United States National Security Council, 'Presidential Policy Memorandum Governing Direct Action Counterterrorism', 3.

¹³⁷Biden, 'Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan, 14 April 2021'.

¹³⁸The White House, 'Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials on a Successful Counterterrorism Operation in Somalia'.

¹³⁹See Paul W. Kahn, 'Imagining Warfare', *European Journal of International Law* 24/1 (February 2013), 199–226, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chs086>.

¹⁴⁰Forney, 'Drone Strikes Forever'; Michael Nagata, 'An Intellectual Reckoning on Counterterrorism', *Atlantic Council*, 7 Sept. 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/article/an-intellectual-reckoning-on-counterterrorism/>.

strikes, and other acts of military violence. If security on this side of the horizon rests on venturing 'over-the-horizon', the two become inextricably linked, to the extent that an alternate future security policy becomes plainly unthinkable without a radical discursive change. What matters, therefore, is not so much the meaning of going 'over' the horizon, but the admission that to go 'over the horizon' necessarily entails the creation and location of the very horizons beyond which counterterrorism takes place.

This 'horizon' acts as a veil, masking the 'political choices which were made and which could have been not made',¹⁴¹ which rendered this violence possible, beneficial, and necessary. Through Koselleck's concept of the horizon of expectation, we see that the 'horizon' structures counterterrorism action in spatial as well as temporal dimensions, providing a way to juxtapose multiple temporal layers and locate terrorist threats into the future. Mary Dudziak likened the 'over-the-horizon' counterterrorism approach to *The Wizard of Oz*, where evil is defeated in an imagined other world, away from the Homeland.¹⁴² Indeed, as Koselleck's horizon of expectation shows, Biden's security policy locates the object of counterterrorism firmly in a possible future, 'over' the horizon which can be grasped from our present situatedness. In this conceit, it is not only terrorist threats which are reified and presented as natural, their 'metastasising' as inevitable as it is normal: counterterrorist activity, and particularly its 'direct action' component, is equally presented as a natural, cyclical activity, one through which American forces must regularly venture 'over the horizon' to maintain the possible future which is apparent in this horizon of expectation.

In so doing, 'over-the-horizon counterterrorism' is more than a mere change in the means through which counterterror operations take place: it provides a new orientation for political action towards future security, one which sits uncomfortably at the intersection of 'continuing, imminent threats' and long-term 'root causes' of insecurity. As the Biden administration both presents 'over-the-horizon' strikes as a means to react to pressing menaces and as planned, deliberative long-term oriented actions, it raises anew the question of uncertainty concerning what lies 'over-the-horizon', how security horizons are determined, and how uses of force 'over-the-horizon' shape future security. As a final point, one major criticism of Koselleck's conception of historical time is that it leaves little room for political agency in shaping spaces of experience and horizons of expectation,¹⁴³ accordingly, the Biden counterterrorist approach is one which – while 'commit[ing] to engage with the world once again'¹⁴⁴ – adopts

¹⁴¹Férey, *Assassinats Ciblés*, 35.

¹⁴²Mary L. Dudziak, 'Somewhere "Over the Horizon"', *American Quarterly* 74/3 (September 2022), 552–55, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2022.0035>.

¹⁴³Hagen Schulz-Forberg, 'The Spatial and Temporal Layers of Global History: A Reflection on Global Conceptual History through Expanding Reinhart Koselleck's "Zeitschichten" into Global Spaces', *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 38/3 (145) (2013), 40–58.

¹⁴⁴'Interim National Security Strategic Guidance', 3.

a rather passive approach to shaping the threats and horizons of security. Threats 'metastasize' largely independently from the United States' actions, and the horizons of counterterrorism are rendered as technical, fixed, given realities. Meanwhile, at the same time as the United States ventures 'over the horizon' to confront terrorism threats, it is confronted by a menace very much on this side of the horizon, that of domestic terrorism which does not threaten the homeland from abroad, but which is already within it.¹⁴⁵

Conclusion: Remote warfare over the horizon

The character of modern warfare, as the story goes, is increasingly remote and vicarious. 'The horizons for remote warfare are always receding', write Rebecca Adelman and David Kieran, as new forms of violence appear, undertaken in ever more remote spaces and for even more distant places.¹⁴⁶ 'Over-the-horizon counterterrorism' seems to situate itself in this vein. The logical conclusion of a form of remote vicariousness made possible by the armed drone and modern communications technology, it builds on trends made manifest throughout the Global War on Terror, until it finally overcomes the very need for theatres of war at all. The 'outside' of zones of active hostilities overtook the zones of hostility themselves, making the whole world potentially a zone both in and outside of war.¹⁴⁷

Yet, examining critically the concept of the horizon shows that the situation may be somewhat more complex. The 'horizons' of war are not only receding but are made to recede. War does not liquefy, but is made liquid.¹⁴⁸ Horizons shift, move, change, and sometimes bounce back uncomfortably, as Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall inadvertently highlighted in tying domestic and international counterterrorism just as she sought to distinguish them.¹⁴⁹ Most importantly, 'over-the-horizon counterterrorism' does not constitute the vindication of a future-less present, where grass is ever mown without purpose. Rather, as it claims a possibility to remain constantly 'fixed' on emerging threats, ready to 'act decisively' at any instant, 'over-the-horizon counterterrorism' lays a claim to progress towards a safer future, one secured by allies and partners, a progress which even the collapse of such partners and allies in Afghanistan cannot

¹⁴⁵Sherwood-Randall, 'Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Assistant to the President for Homeland Security, Dr. Liz Sherwood-Randall on the Future of the U.S. Counterterrorism Mission'; 'Interim National Security Strategic Guidance', 19; 'United States National Security Strategy', 16; United States National Security Council, 'National Security Memorandum NSM-13', 2.

¹⁴⁶Rebecca A. Adelman and David Kieran, 'Introduction: Rethinking Killing at a Distance', in Rebecca A. Adelman and David Kieran (ed.) *Remote Warfare: New Cultures of Violence*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2020), 1.

¹⁴⁷Brianna Rosen, 'The Longest War is Over the Horizon', *Just Security*, 1 Nov. 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/78818/the-longest-war-is-over-the-horizon/>; Dillon and Reid, *The Liberal Way of War*.

¹⁴⁸Demmers and Gould, 'An Assemblage Approach to Liquid Warfare'.

¹⁴⁹Sherwood-Randall, 'Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Assistant to the President for Homeland Security, Dr. Liz Sherwood-Randall on the Future of the U.S. Counterterrorism Mission'.

interrupt. However, it simultaneously pushes back any realisation of this vision of security beyond the horizon, beyond the perceptible futures. American security, therefore, will not only be secured in remote lands, over spatial horizons, but can only be conceptualised beyond temporal horizons, in indeterminate futures unrelated to present politics. Even a total failure of the security partnership – between the United States and Afghanistan – which undergirded this vision of counterterrorism cannot dent the elusive promise of a security future, ever always out of reach, just beyond the horizon of expectations.¹⁵⁰

The horizon demonstrates these contradictions, tensions, paradoxes, and uncomfortable juxtapositions, laying bare the political choices which make counterterrorism possible. In other words, it is not sufficient to question the end of ‘over-the-horizon counterterrorism’, the strategic end-state towards which it strives, and the logical causality meant to achieve it. The critical examination of the concept of the horizon questions how this imagined future *makes* present violence, how the future shapes the present, and how temporally remote security makes spatially remote war. And most importantly, despite efforts to banish counterterrorism beyond spatial and temporal horizons, the very naturalisation of these horizons inextricably makes counterterrorist violence part of the American future, and present.

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¹⁵⁰On the relation of present counterterrorism and future security, see Pomarède, ‘Archipelagos of Death’; See also Dudziak, ‘Somewhere “Over the Horizon”’.

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