In 1999, in a book titled "Unrestricted Warfare," Qiao Liang and Wang Jingsui, two colonels in China's People's Liberation Army, predicted that violent conflict would soon transcend all limits: “The battlefields will be everywhere” and the boundaries between “the worlds of war and not war, of military and non-military, will be destroyed.”

After Sept. 11, 2001, Rosa Brooks declares, “the two Chinese officers look chillingly prescient.” The job of soldiers, she indicates, is no longer what drill sergeants once declared it to be: “to kill people and break stuff.”

In “How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything,” Brooks provides a masterful analysis of how global connectedness has created vast new responsibilities (and vulnerabilities) for the armed forces of the United States, including cybersecurity, intelligence gathering, the interdiction of drugs, guarding and prosecuting “detainees,” conducting drone strikes against suspected terrorists, apprehending pirates, training judges, building Ebola isolation wards, distributing relief to people suffering from famine, natural disasters and civil war.

Brooks brings unique qualifications to this task. A senior fellow at the New America Foundation, a professor of law at Georgetown University and a consultant for Human Rights Watch, Brooks also worked as a senior adviser at the U.S. Department of State and as counselor to the undersecretary of defense for policy at the Pentagon.

She can parse Pentagon jargon, like the doctrine MOOTW, Military Operations Other Than War, and its successor, which laid out a “six phase,” soup to nuts approach to conflict: prevention to stabilizing to nation building. And she can step back to assess the relevance of existing legal, moral and political categories to the murky realities of the 21st century.

Throughout her detailed book, Brooks demonstrates that the blurring lines between peace and war have taken a toll on civilian-military relations. Although the military is better educated and more professional than it has ever been (recruits are more likely than their age group cohort in the civilian population to have graduated from high school, and more than 80 percent of officers have bachelor's degrees), she points out, morale in the armed forces is low, and decision making has been flawed.

More provocatively, Brooks breaks with her colleagues in the human rights and civil liberties communities, who maintain that counterterrorism, cyberthreats and economic conflicts should not be viewed through the lens of war.

The “best route to upholding human rights and the rule of law,” she argues, “lies in recognizing that war and peace are not binary opposites, but lie along a continuum” — and developing “new rules and institutions to manage the paradoxes of perpetual war.”

Brooks takes on the toughest problems that lie along this continuum. Compared with the alternatives, she acknowledges, precision drone strikes reduce the financial and political costs and the number of civilian casualties associated with the use of lethal force in foreign countries.

However, although we tell ourselves that we only target “combatants” in the war with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, their “associated forces,” and those who pose “imminent threats” to our nation, we don’t make public any evidence about the identity of targets and rarely acknowledge the strikes themselves.

Classified CIA reports obtained by news outlets, Brooks reveals, indicate that fully half of those killed between September 2010 and 2011 were not senior al Qaeda leaders but individuals identified only as “foreign fighters” and “other militants.”

To bring greater transparency and accountability to drone strikes, Brooks recommends that independent commissions review policies and practices and that judicial bodies be empowered to issue “strike warrants” or order damages for mistakes.

Brooks also outlines the potential abuses of a policy that force can be used to prevent an “imminent threat.” The claim of a Justice Department white paper that any operational leader or associate of al Qaeda by definition presents such a threat, she points out, “turns the traditional international law interpretation of the concept on its head.”

Constraining the lack of knowledge (as opposed to specific information) as a justification, Brooks writes, is reminiscent of Alice in Wonderland reasoning that annuls assessments of whether the attack is, indeed,
necessary, and proportionate to preventing a future attack of unknown magnitude.

And Brooks clarifies the nature of the conflict between human rights (the idea that people have inalienable rights) and the sovereignty of nation-states. Humanitarian emergencies — in Kosovo, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Ukraine — often "lie in the eye of the beholder." Sympathetic to the goals of "Responsibility to Protect," a doctrine developed by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, Brooks indicates that R2P in essence limits sovereignty.

It's all well and good to argue that states lose legitimacy "if they fail to protect human beings from harm," she writes. "But once you assert that every state can decide for itself that a military intervention inside another state's borders is justified, regardless of the Security Council, you're on a very slippery slope."

In addressing these issues, Brooks urges Americans to balance individual rights with the need to keep the nation safe; re-establish meaningful democratic control over government decisions in the face of often excessive claims that secrecy is necessary; knock down walls between civilian and military agencies; and "bluntly," with regard to the international system, accept "some loss of sovereignty" in exchange for better mechanisms to solve global problems.

It won't be easy, she concludes. But "as war's toxins begin to bleed into ordinary life, it's time to try again."

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How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything

Tales From the Pentagon

By Rosa Brooks

(Simon & Schuster; 438 pages; $29.95)