

Climate Security Cannot Ignore the Military

Article by Ben Cramer

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It grows increasingly obvious that climate change is a security question. But as generations mobilise to save the climate, more traditional military mobilisations are doing much to destroy it. After the disappointment of COP 25 in Madrid, and looking ahead to future negotiations, the carbon footprint of the military needs to be on the table.

“What today’s Europe lacks is real projects, which both look to the future and might make Europe once again a motivating force in public opinion.” [1]

While COP 26 in Glasgow has been postponed, it is becoming urgent to see how the question of military activities can be integrated into decision-making processes on the future of the climate.

The climatic state of emergency

Can climate change transform the security landscape? The climate movement has taken a warlike turn with the introduction of the concept of a “climate emergency”. The call is to get stuck in and “mobilise like in 1940”. A new Marshall Plan is invoked, as at the beginning of the Cold War, and so is the creation in France of a Natural Council of Resilience, an allusion to the National Council of Resistance. In the words of the French Liberal MEP Pascal Canfin, “It is a real war that must be fought today, using all means”. [Bill McKibben](#), founder of the international environmental organisation [350.org](#), echoes the idea that climate change is a sort of Third World War, adding: “Our only hope is to mobilise like we did in WWII.”

Behind this rhetoric lie contradictory currents. We want to fight, but against whom? Who is the enemy? Is it those who seek to delay the energy transition, who have no interest in climate justice? Or are some on the lookout for substitute enemies to justify their military addiction to methods?

Atmospheric tinkerers

Ever since the climate came to be considered a “threat multiplier”, the military has been working on the subject, for reasons both good and bad.^[2] It has a certain legitimacy granted by early recognition of the climate question, even if the military was never a whistle-blower. As early as June 1947, the Pentagon organised a meeting devoted to the military consequences of melting Arctic ice. The military tried to disrupt the climate machine even before trying to control it, including with a militarised vision of geoengineering (hence the establishment of the [Environmental Modification Convention](#) of 1977^[3]). They drew on the “earth sciences” to better calibrate the misdeeds of their

atmospheric tests. They can claim to have driven advances in glaciology thanks to their engineers, whose research served to distract attention from the deranged project for a nuclear missile base under the ice pack at Camp Century in Greenland.

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Today, the military has gained a reputation for conflict foresight. According to their think tanks, a nuclear conflict cannot be excluded among the political consequences of global warming. [4] Politicians have recognised the quality of military analyses and have tried to make room for them. In 2009, the British Royal Navy's Admiral Neil Morisetti was appointed to lead the UK's climate and energy security diplomacy for four years. On August 29 2019, the defence ministers of the European Union met in Helsinki to discuss – for the first time – the links between defence and climate change.

The Kyoto blind spot

The military's ability to capture minds with seeming climate mastery and know-how is the result of several factors. Among them: impunity. The military-industrial complex still benefits from a separate system of rules. Its power (including its nuisance capacity) allows it to disregard the polluter-pays principle and, more generally, exert pressure to gain exemption from certain environmental regulations.

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When the Kyoto Protocol in 1992 was drawn up, military demands were met and the footprint of military activities was not covered. During the UN negotiations, the US imposed a clause specifying that its military operations around the world would be completely exempt from any reductions obligation – a gift for one of the world's biggest CO₂ emitters, the Pentagon, which produces more greenhouse gases than Sweden or Portugal. 70 per cent of its energy consumption comes from the use and movement of troops and weapons. [5]

That footprint is still off the radar, as if the emissions reductions linked to destruction matter less than those linked to consumption. But now the subject is no longer taboo: the fifth Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report timidly broached the matter, writing that “armed forces may have to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.” Since the COP 21 Paris Agreement, states are not obliged to reduce their military emissions but the exemption is no longer automatic in the calculations.

Denial and operational constraints

The Pentagon stubbornly denies that its consumption of fossil fuels is a major contribution to the climate disaster. With rhetoric about “greening the army”, as can be found in a report by the [Energy and Environment Programme](#) at the European Defence Agency, armies are boasting about their use of renewables. But between 2011 and 2015, the Pentagon's greenhouse gas emissions fell by only 1 per cent.

This denial of reality has its own logic: the military wants to militarise the climate problem. [6] Since the effects of climate change are accelerating in “conflict hotspots”, the military in the US as in Europe considers it legitimate to

advocate an increase in its budget – a doubling in the space of 10 years. As a result, EU states account for 25 per cent of world defence spending. One third of global arms production is European. Using climate change to seek extra funding obscures the fact that the biggest emitters of CO₂ are the biggest military powers. Furthermore, the new arms race torpedoed those efforts that have already been carried out to mitigate climate damage. The military-industrial complex is not equipped to face an “enemy” as unusual as global warming. Those most reluctant to see any shift from khaki green to just plain green will invoke the duty of climatic intervention and the need to fight the real or presumed culprits of ecological woes.

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The military-industrial complex will take advantage of the budget windfall to secure its infrastructures threatened by floods or droughts. It is even prepared to redirect its interventions and carry out more civilian missions. As its Secretary General confirmed at the Copenhagen Summit in 2009, NATO is ready to play the role of “first responder in case of natural disasters”. This has not prevented NATO from regretting that the climate issue is being overshadowed by more traditional security concerns. Meanwhile, some senior officers want to stay in control: the head of the International Military Council on Climate and Security considers that “governments cannot rely on environment ministers to find the solution.”

The mission of armed forces is to fight wars, not global warming, but the two fronts are linked and intertwined. Global warming tends to aggravate crises, whilst the use of weapons tends to accelerate climatic disruption. The maintenance (and even increase) of military activities is one of the threats posed by climate disruption. Since militarisation threatens the climate, turning to it for a solution makes little sense. Such a move could easily see the climate emergency hijacked or sabotaged.

Towards a “climate-compatible” defence?

The chances of reaching targets of less than 2 degrees Celsius of warming without military infrastructures being affected are illusory. In short, militarisation is incompatible with a decarbonised economy. Civilians must proclaim this loud and clear. Academics must demonstrate it. And the military must acknowledge it by integrating environmental and climatic factors into their strategic equations.

Inventing a climate-compatible defence means the suspension of “force projection” and a break from the frenzy of energy-intensive interventionism in far-flung places. Military aviation consumes a quarter of the world’s kerosene. In a [2007 interview](#), former IPCC President Rajendra Pachauri advised NATO to move away from its modus operandi based on military operations, adding that it is more important to prevent these conflicts than to intervene when they break out.

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Will we demand an immediate slowdown in fighter aircraft and missiles to reduce their emissions, just as the International Maritime Organisation plans to do for oil tankers and cargo ships? Or will we advocate a tax on the arms industry? Whatever the options, climate change makes it imperative to solve problems in ways other than

through war.

Rather than seeing a proliferation of “pampered” states living beyond their military means, might it be time to launch a (European) initiative for a moratorium on the nuclear and the conventional arms race? A manifesto for military degrowth? An arms freeze, as advocated by Randall Forsberg in the early 1980s? The point is not to repeat the old pacifist refrains but to sound an alarm: the sustained arms race and the use of weapons are completely undermining efforts to mitigate climate damage.

On the website of the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament, security is a subsection of international policy. But why is “climate security” absent from political manifestos, and absent from the work of the European Parliament’s Subcommittee on Security and Defence? Security has long been the blind spot of environmentalist thinking. Let us hope that today’s ecologists can come to see that the fight to safeguard the climate represents an investment in peace.

Footnotes

[1] Report of the European People on the State of the Union of Europe 1979. Paris, Stock.

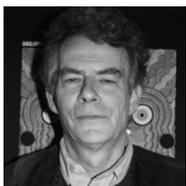
[2] [2008 Solana report](#).

[3] This international treaty, which entered into force in October 1978, prohibited the hostile use of environmental modification techniques with widespread, long-lasting or severe effects – for example, weather warfare.

[4] See the [2007 report](#) of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

[5] “If it was a country, the Pentagon would be the 55th biggest emitter of CO₂”, claims Neta Crawford, co-director of the Brown University’s “Costs of War” project, in a [June 2019 paper](#).

[6] Global Militarization Index, which covers 152 countries based on data from SIPRI, the IMF, the WTO, and the BICC (Bonn International Center for Conversion).



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