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War and military mobilisation are drivers of climate change

Investing more in the military is not a solution to climate change, argues **Neta Crawford**

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Hard edged national security leaders talk about climate change as a “threat multiplier.”¹ By this they mean climate change may cause instability and potentially provoke armed conflict as regions become dangerously hot, wet, or dry, and as societies and governments are stressed beyond their capacity to cope.^{2,3} The US military, the UK Ministry of Defence, NATO, and the UN Security Council have all used the climate change as a threat multiplier frame.^{4,5} Following this logic many governments have now added climate change related threats to their rationales for increased defence spending and military capability.⁶

Framing and acting as if climate change is a threat multiplier ignores how war is a climate change multiplier. The greenhouse gas emissions from war and preparations for it make climate change worse. And adding climate change to the military’s portfolio may be unnecessary and counterproductive.

The consequences of climate change are becoming as deadly as war—in some regions, climate change intensified heat waves, wildfires, increasingly violent storms, and flooding kills more people annually than armed conflicts. For instance, more than 1100 deaths in England and Wales were attributed to climate change during the May and June heatwaves of 2026.⁷

And in the long run, climate change could and will likely kill many more people than war. But that does not mean that climate change will inevitably lead to war.

The climate change as threat multiplier logic is pernicious for several reasons. Most importantly, war and military mobilisation are the climate change multipliers. Military emissions and war are a major source of mostly uncounted greenhouse gas emissions.

Overlooked emissions

The most consistent source of military related greenhouse gas emissions is the military’s day-to-day energy use, including powering their bases and operational energy for training and mobility. Furthermore, current US and NATO military doctrine stresses offensive mobility, including long range air strikes, which are generally higher in emissions than more defensively oriented doctrines.⁸

These business-as-usual military emissions are not included in national inventories of greenhouse gas emissions and thus have been essentially uncounted.⁹ This lacuna was driven by the US Department of Defence, which pushed to have a military emissions exemption in the Kyoto Protocol negotiations because it feared it would be required to reduce emissions since it was the largest petroleum user in the US at

the time. And it still is.¹⁰ Today, its annual emissions are larger than those of most countries.¹⁰

Arms industries, which are in general more greenhouse gas intensive than civilian industries are another major source of emissions. BAE Systems—the largest defence company in the UK and the world’s third largest military corporation—reports that its global scope 1 and 2 emissions in 2025 were 341 686 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent.¹¹

Wars themselves also cause large spikes in military, military industrial, and war related emissions. For example, the Initiative on Greenhouse Gas Accounting of War found that during the first four years of war in Ukraine, military operations generated an estimated 114 million metric tons (MMT) of CO₂e. The destruction of forests and other landscapes in Ukraine led to 70 MMTCO₂e emissions. And because civil aviation avoids the airspace near the war zone, often leading to longer journeys, an additional nearly 30 MMTCO₂e have been emitted. Although Ukraine’s economic activity has been reduced because of disruption from the war, rebuilding is likely to result in an additional 73 MMTCO₂e emissions.¹²

Wartime emissions are even greater when the targets include oil and natural gas infrastructure. An estimated 465 000 metric tons of methane were released when Russia’s natural gas pipelines to Europe, Nord Stream 1 and 2, were sabotaged in September 2022. This is equivalent to about 13.85 MMTCO₂e—three times Albania’s annual emissions in 2024.¹³ In September 2026, Ukraine attacked the oil infrastructure in Russia with drones. The US-Israel war with Iran this year has also resulted in targeting of oil and natural gas infrastructure in the Middle East.¹⁴ Although the supply disruptions and price increases resulting from these strikes and the blockades of the Strait of Hormuz have been tracked, the greenhouse gas emissions from strikes on oil and natural gas facilities are essentially uncounted.

Potential for reducing emissions

When governments accept the logic that climate change is a threat multiplier, they assume that there is little more that can be done to reduce emissions. However, there is actually an enormous source of emissions—from military installations and operations and war itself—that can be reduced.

Some armed forces portray themselves as lean green fighting machines. In 2016, the US Navy publicised the deployment of a “great green fleet.”¹⁵ Before any mention of climate change was essentially banned during the Trump administration, the US Army also highlighted its investments in green technologies.¹⁶

Emissions are reduced when bases move from coal to other forms of energy. But even when armed forces use vehicles that have greater fuel economy and use batteries, solar, and microgrids, militaries remain major emitters.¹⁷ When military spending growth leads to increased training, operations, and procurement, emissions from militaries and arms industries grow.¹⁸ Substantial emissions reductions will occur only when armed forces reduce their overall size and footprint and transition to lower emitting doctrines, including those that do not require long range aircraft missions.

Redirecting resources

The climate change as threat multiplier logic assumes an unproved and not inevitable connection between climate change and conflict.¹⁹ The link between climate change and increased risk of war is not strong or necessary.²⁰

Even as the climate changes, conflict over resources or mass migration is not the inevitable outcome; governments can instead support their populations, and regional governments can negotiate the sharing of resources. These are political choices not unavoidable consequences of climate change. With enough resources, governments and people can reduce emissions and adapt to climate change without armed conflict. The resources are there if they are directed where they are needed.

Militaries that see climate change as a threat multiplier tend to invest more in combating the potential risks associated with warming. For example, for years militaries have been concerned that as the Arctic ice sheet melts, the Arctic Ocean will become more navigable and a location for conflict over mineral resources. This means that the US, NATO, Russia, and even China have increased their Arctic military operations at a time when the climate in the region has become less stable and operations have become more challenging.²¹

Instead of the planned enormous increases in military spending, societies are much better off focusing resources on reducing emissions and adaptation, including cutting military emissions.

Climate change is frightening, and our concerns about it add to the general sense of economic, health, and political instability. Climate change exacerbates these economic, health, and political conditions. Investing more in the military is not a solution to climate change or our other problems. Rather than take money from health, environment, and the energy transition to fund the military, we need to spend more on those things. While some form of defence is required, the focus should shift to how to ensure effective defence at lower emission levels and reduced costs.

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