

The Climate Crisis and the US War Machine

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Warmaking, and the industries that supply and profit from it, fuels the climate crisis. Only a reparative approach can begin to reverse militarization and environmental breakdown. War and militarism are defining features of the extractive economy that causes climate change and broader ecological crises. Militaries are responsible for 5.5 percent of global carbon emissions—double commercial air travel and about the same as agriculture. Beyond emissions, military activities are inherently destructive: military bases, other infrastructure, and the core functions of militaries—to break things and kill people—cause substantial environmental damage and incredible human harm.

The US military and military manufacturing industries are among the most important climate polluters in the world

Military spending by the US is a huge burden on public resources and slows down the pace of decarbonization

Military violence is increasingly used against people contesting new fossil fuel projects or just fleeing from the impacts of the climate crisis

A reparative approach to US military emissions and interventions is needed to achieve climate justice

Making war on the climate

In the post-World War II era, the US military, the world's largest institutional consumer of fossil fuels, has harmed environments around the world through the wars it has perpetrated—from Vietnam to Iraq to the forever, everywhere wars post-9/11—as well as the maintenance of its extensive, globe-spanning, network of military operations. Military manufacturing industries consume huge volumes of materials and rely on heavily polluting industrial processes; meanwhile, weapons testing and hundreds of bases around the world produce lasting environmental damage and pollution to local ecologies and communities. The costs of military pollution and environmental damage are most heavily borne by Global South countries, which are also the places facing the disastrous effects of climate change first and worst. Militarized violence is often deployed against those who are also most vulnerable to the climate crisis.

To begin to reckon with the toxicity of its militarism, the US must take reparative action through environmental remediation and international climate finance while also funding robust just transition programs for workers and communities that currently depend on military economies.

Militarism and the fossil fuel economy

As the world's single largest consumer of oil, the US military produces more greenhouse gas emissions in a year than entire countries like Portugal and Denmark. Despite the sizable carbon footprint of militaries, international climate agreements and global emissions reporting systems largely do not account for military emissions. During negotiations for the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the US government secured an exemption for military emissions reporting in the international treaty process. These emissions are disclosed on a voluntary basis under the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, and many countries with large militaries report nothing at all to the UNFCCC. Beyond direct emissions from military activities and the environmental harms caused by manufacturing weapons—and the systems that deliver them like planes, ships, and missiles—the US military is also a critical architect of the modern fossil fuel economy. Military strategies are intimately tied to nations securing the supply of oil.

Militarized violence against climate movements and movement

Militarized violence is often deployed against those fighting against—and most vulnerable to—the climate crisis.

The militarization of the climate crisis also manifests in the deployment of militarized violence to repress climate movements and environmental defenders, and in how violence is enacted to restrict the movement and migration of people. The racist nature of US militarized violence within and beyond its borders are connected to systems of policing that especially target and brutalize Black, Indigenous, immigrant, and other communities of color. Militarized violence is deployed against anti-fracking, anti-pipeline, and anti-mining movements—especially targeting Indigenous people and movements that foreground racial justice in the US. From the deployment of the national guard against Water Defenders at Standing Rock to the repression of activists trying to prevent the loss of Weelaunee Forest in the construction of Atlanta’s ‘Cop City,’ to the violence of right wing militias and police in the wake of disasters, state-sanctioned violence is a key strategy for suppressing resistance against the fossil fuel economy and the systems of political and economic power on which it relies.

Militarized violence is also enacted on people on the move, who are fleeing from a variety of dangerous situations—including the impacts of climate change that are shifting ecological conditions, making agricultural livelihoods impossible and wreaking havoc as disasters become more frequent and intense. Climate migration is simply one other expression of forced migration caused by US foreign and economic policy, layered onto migration due to political and economic unrest that can often be traced back to US policy. The hardening of borders as the climate crisis intensifies is also an expression of an increasingly eco-fascist and nationalistic response to global crises: a step on the short road to climate apartheid.

Militarized spending and capture resources

Spending on the war machine is a massive drain on public resources that are much better put toward building a safer future for all through investment in climate solutions.

The United States—which spends more on its military than the next nine biggest spending countries combined—allocates roughly half of its annual discretionary budget on the military. Add in other forms of militarized spending, including federal prisons and policing, and that figure grows to about two-thirds of discretionary spending.

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA)—the annual authorization bill which sets the policies under which the military budget is spent—has passed with wide bipartisan support every year for more than 60 years. The prioritization of endless expansion of the military by US elected officials lies in stark contrast to the underallocation of public investment and state capacity towards climate action needed to enable a just transition at home and abroad.

Global military spending hit \$2.4 trillion in 2023, a figure that could fill gaps in much-needed adaptation and mitigation funding. That funding is estimated to be \$1.8 trillion per year above the currently available climate finance for Global South countries that have contributed the least to climate change but are suffering its worst impacts. The US is on track to contribute about \$11 billion in climate finance in 2025—less than it spends on maintaining its network of about 750 overseas military bases. Money spent on the war machine would be much better spent on building true international peace and security through robust climate action. As a nation that is disproportionately responsible for the historic global emissions that have led to the climate crisis, the US has historic responsibility to not only mitigate the climate crisis, but to pay its disproportionate climate debt owed to countries that are most vulnerable and experiencing the most severe impacts of ongoing climate chaos now. The US has a duty to pay climate reparations to countries that are most impacted by the climate crisis.

Internationalist solidarity in the climate crisis

Climate justice movements must be rooted in internationalism and solidarity that takes war and militarism seriously.

Wealthy, heavily polluting countries with powerful national security and military apparatuses increasingly frame climate change as a national security issue. The US has already documented the impacts of climate change on military operations for decades. But these climate security agendas don't acknowledge the role of the military in fueling climate change or the modes through which military bases, activity, and infrastructure produce environmental damage and make people unsafe. Instead, they articulate a threat narrative that describes the ways that climate change might undermine military operations, and then present militarized responses as climate solutions. This approach to climate adaptation—sometimes called the politics of the armed lifeboat—diverts attention away from the root causes of the climate crisis and harms those most vulnerable.

Militarized responses to the climate crisis are not only violent, harmful, and unjust—they're ineffective. Meaningful climate action requires an unprecedented response to the overlapping crises we face, a response rooted in global cooperation, reparation, and care. A reparative approach would instead prioritize compensating Global South nations and impacted communities within the US for emissions and acute environmental harms caused by military operations and infrastructure, would invest in a just transition, and would provide robust support for workers to move out of military-dependent jobs, such as arms manufacturing.

Climate justice movements across the world must center demilitarization and climate reparations as core to the solutions we need to limit global warming and climate chaos. Demilitarization also would support transitioning sectors of the economy that fuel war, towards more regenerative industry, and would promote a politics of peace and repair from global conflicts. Ramped-up militarism is in fundamental opposition to necessary climate action. We can't achieve climate justice without rooting our movements in internationalism and solidarity that dismantles war and militarism.

To account for the present and historical environmental impacts of the US military, the US should:

1. Wind down military operations, including shutting down its global network of military bases and transitioning sites for resilient community uses
2. Make material remediation and reparations payments to communities affected by emissions and toxic waste left behind by military operations and US-backed wars
3. Undertake public investment in strategic arms conversion programs to develop a new industrial policy for more socially useful manufacturing with secure employment for those currently dependent on the military
4. Divest public funds from militarism, including the US military, policing, prisons and border security, and reinvest in community-led climate solutions
5. Contribute substantial global climate funding for mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage in particular to pay climate reparations to the most climate-vulnerable countries and communities, accounting for the historic responsibility of the US for the climate crisis