

# WHAT DOES THE GLOBAL ARMS RACE MEAN FOR CLIMATE ACTION?

A Communications Briefing  
for Climate Organisations

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The world is facing a climate emergency. This can be tackled, but only through global collective action that puts the future of people and our planet first.

The international system is fraying. States are moving toward aggressive competition rather than cooperation. Politics remains polarised, and many countries are dramatically increasing military budgets following an already huge surge.

In this escalating arms race, we are losing sight of what keeps us safe and allowing the arms industry to greenwash their destructive role. As the United States and Europe cut lifesaving aid and climate finance, budgets for schools, hospitals, science, and social welfare are also being cut to fund weapons, and governments are turning their backs on diplomacy and global climate cooperation.

A more violent world, with lower wages and poorer-quality public services, that ignores or deprioritises the climate emergency in the short-term interests of the richest and most powerful, is not safer for any of us.

## THE CLIMATE MOVEMENT MUST EMPHASISE SAFETY FOR ALL

With Trump withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, climate policy gains risk being rapidly eroded. Climate campaigners are thinking about how to preserve what remains in this new environment, and some are – rightly – pointing out that climate change threatens our security.

It might be tempting to call climate change a ‘security threat’ as a way of highlighting its political importance. Governments have failed to prioritise real threats to our safety, such as the climate emergency, habitat loss, and species extinction.

But framing climate action in terms of national security is also used by those who want to greenwash militarisation.

The evidence suggests it doesn’t work at broadening support for climate action (and nor does pointing to the supposed threat of ‘mass climate migration’). Research demonstrates that such framing does not win conservative audiences and may even produce backlash.

Meanwhile, arms companies and polluters are keen to greenwash the debate, and convince us that militarism can somehow be green.

The brutal consequences of war can be seen most clearly in the Gaza genocide, where Israeli forces backed by European and US governments and arms firms have killed at least 50,000 people, displaced nearly 2 million, and engaged in an ecocide, destroying the environment to the point where it becomes unliveable.

But day-to-day military spending also has huge impacts on people and the planet. We know increased military spending will increase military greenhouse gas emissions, divert resources from climate finance, reinforce fossil fuel infrastructure, and fuel a lucrative but destabilising arms trade to climate-impacted countries, all of which will deepen the climate emergency.

Global military emissions already account for about 5.5% of total global greenhouse gas emissions, a figure which will only rise in the case of war. Militaries want us to believe they can “green” their activities, but they are major emitters of greenhouse gases, and they will remain dependent on fossil fuels for many decades at least.

Standing up for the planet means advocating for peace.

# DOS/DON'TS TALKING POINTS:

**Real security means  
safety, community,  
dependability, and  
confidence in our  
future together.**

## DON'Ts: Campaigners should avoid

### **Conceding to governments prioritising military spending over climate action**

Avoid language that accepts the need for massive rises in military spending, even more so at the expense of other budgets. Climate actors have limited airtime and should use it to insist that the biggest threat to our safety today is economic insecurity and climate breakdown. This requires urgent investment in a just transition and global cooperation, rather than warmongering in which the only winners will be weapons manufacturers.

### **Implying, even unintentionally, that climate impacts can be addressed through military action**

Suggesting that climate change is “a national security risk/threat” can lead to climate impacts and adaptation being managed and run by militaries and conventional security authorities that are focused on exerting power in a warming world rather than on preventing climate change. The climate change response must be civilian-led and focus on decarbonisation and protecting people from impacts, not on military greenwashing and militarised adaptation.

### **Narrowing the scope of climate ambition**

In conditions of militarised geopolitics and the rollback of climate policy, it may be tempting for campaigners to narrow their focus in an attempt to preserve limited decarbonisation measures. But with climate breakdown, authoritarianism, conflict, and economic inequality feeding off each other, it remains critical to focus on regaining popular support for an ambitious vision of economic and environmental justice.

# DOs: For campaigners on climate and security

## Climate action is critical to human safety

Concerted action to limit global heating and to help communities adjust to climate change is critical to ensure human safety now and in the coming decades. This will require public investment and global cooperation, and will be derailed by military escalation and war.

## If the money exists for the military, it should exist for climate safety

Sudden announcements of massive military spending demonstrate that money was always available for large-scale public investment. Rather than boosting profits for arms companies, we should spend on measures that end fossil fuel dependence, support people losing their livelihoods to extreme weather and other climate impacts, and help solve the cost of living crisis with climate-friendly jobs and infrastructure.

## Energy independence is safety and is good for job creation

Scaling up technologies for renewable energy, energy conservation and energy storage, investing in green infrastructure, and reducing our fossil fuel dependence mean less vulnerability to shocks and conflict that cause sudden price rises, or make us dependent on hostile states. They are also good for job creation, and already are major employers.

## We should invest in projects that prevent conflict

Climate finance saves lives both now and in the future. Climate change and ecological degradation already interact with volatile political landscapes and conflicts, whether it's climate-related water shortages, wildfires in North America, or droughts in North Africa.

Collaborating to restore a thriving planet is preferable to competing over dwindling resources. Denmark's new Climate, Peace and Security (CPS) framework is one example of how to think about these issues together, developing a strategy for ecological renewal, a just transition, and peacebuilding.

## Challenge military greenwashing: military investment is ineffective at creating jobs and increases environmental pollution

Military spending is not a viable strategy for growth or the creation of good jobs, as it is an inefficient form of public investment. Whereas other forms of investment in infrastructure or manufacturing are in continuous use, adding new social or economic value, military equipment is not. Alternatively, arms are exported, fuelling deadly conflicts and displacement in climate-vulnerable countries. Meanwhile, the military and associated industries are energy-intensive and environmentally destructive. Military spending should not be greenwashed or presented as the best route to growth.

The big winners of the global arms race are weapons companies (the big five being Lockheed Martin, Boeing, General Dynamics, RTX, and Northrop Grumman in the US, or BAE Systems, Airbus, Leonardo, Thales, and Rheinmetall in Europe) and their financiers, all of which are closely linked to the fossil fuel industry. Militarisation is a victory for corporate power and fossil fuel capital.

## Green leadership is both moral and strategic

The recent US minerals-for-weapons bid to Ukraine is just one current example of how military power and resource extraction have always been linked. This is set to worsen as climate impacts bite and resource competition becomes more intense. National strategies based on fear and competition can only lead to a race to the bottom for all. With authoritarianism on the march around the world as the climate emergency escalates, we urgently need leadership that puts people and the planet first. With big powers abandoning commitments to human rights and the rule of law, there is a role open for countries that show leadership on social, economic, and environmental justice.

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