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TEN ESSENTIAL THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT MILITARISM AND CLIMATE CHANGE

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Summary: A just green transition demands not only phasing out fossil fuels in favour of renewables but also shifting military resources towards human needs and climate mitigation. A vicious circle currently operates. On the one hand, militarism and war devastate the environment and generate massive climate-warming greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. On the other hand, the climate crisis both exacerbates conflict between and within states and provides new rationales for militarism by treating climate change as a national-security threat. In addition, militaries consume resources that might otherwise be used to deal with climate adaptation and mitigation, emergencies and other social problems. We must escape this vicious circle.



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1.The global military is a top green-house gas emitter.

Globally the GHGs emitted by the military are variously estimated to account for between 3.5% and 7% of total emissions. These estimates are conservative – they do not include GHG emissions from the production of military equipment or the impacts of warfighting. For example, Just 60 days of Israel's war in Gaza is equivalent to burning 150,000 tonnes of coal, or greater than the GHG annual emissions of more than 20 of the world's nations most vulnerable to climate change. The United States (US) leads as the biggest military spender, making up more than two-thirds of total NATO spending. NATO, itself, is responsible for 55% of total global military spending. The military alliance plans on buying 2,456 of Lockheed-Martin's F-35 combat planes by 2044. These aircraft consume 5,600 litres of fuel per hour compared to the F-16's 3,500, that they are displacing. Russia and China are the next biggest military spenders. In a telling loophole, governments, despite the huge carbon footprints of their armed forces, are not required to report their military emissions to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its Conference of the Parties (COP).

2.Wars wreak environmental havoc

War destroys urban centres as well as vital infrastructure, such as transport, energy, dams and ports. This is not only bad in itself, but also it leads to major GHG emission in the rebuilding process. Ukraine, for example, has lost more than 10% of it's housing to date. Estimates for rebuilding Gaza are estimated to entail emissions higher than the annual emissions of over 135 countries. The UN Environmental Programme has said that environmental impacts of the war on Gaza are unprecedented and that there are risks of irreversible damage to its natural ecosystem.

In many regions of the world, explosive remnants of war, such as landmines, can restrict access and contaminate agricultural land for decades. In some post-war areas, displaced people can never return home. Even twenty years after the war in Iraq, there are still 1.2 million displaced persons and in addition, more than 2.3 million have fled the country.

3. Bloated defense budgets consume scarce resources that might otherwise be used to address social-ecological priorities.

The worldwide arms race is causing a substantial increase to military budgets. Canada's military budget is ballooning, with a commitment to approach 2% of GDP expenditures annually on defence as is required by its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership, while the need for spending to mitigate or repair the damage of climate emergencies is growing. The Department of National Defense is not only the largest emitter of GHG among federal government departments, but Canada's expansion in military spending is dwarfing the amount spent on the climate emergency. In the 2024-25 fiscal year budget, military spending was \$31.2 billion -- compared to \$2.4 billion spent on environment and climate change. The richest countries are spending thirty times as much on their armed forces as they spend on providing climate finance for the world's most vulnerable countries.

4. Climate change exacerbates inter-state and within-state conflicts, which leads to increased expenditures on weapons and the heightened possibility of war and ecological destruction.

In low-income countries climate change tends to aggravate existing tensions and destabilize states. Severe and extended droughts and extreme temperatures threaten livelihoods and shrink available resources, especially of arable land and fresh water. These conditions can set pastoralists against farmers where ethnicity and/or religion divide the two groups. This dynamic is playing out in such countries as Sudan, Mali and Niger.

Tensions between countries, together with augmented spending on armed forces, can result from the same dynamic. Where countries share a common water source, such as the Nile running through Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt, the access to water is an issue charged with tension as droughts and high evaporation rates reduce the water flows. Egypt has threatened that any reduction in the flow of the Nile resulting from upstream dams would be met with military force. A similar dynamic sets India against Pakistan as both rely on the waters of the Indus River to irrigate the fields of the Punjab.

5. Climate change has opened a new theatre of geopolitical conflict in the Arctic, which is warming at nearly four times the rate of global warming.

Russia, Canada and the United States, are competing to control this area as the ice melts. China has also staked a claim in determining the future of this region. Militarization of the Arctic occurs as navigation becomes easier and as exploitation of natural resources, such as oil, gas and strategic minerals needed for a green transition becomes more economically feasible. Cooperation to resolve the basic environmental issues dissolves as climate change is interpreted as a national security issue. A sharp increase in “military games” in the Arctic has alarming environmental effects.

The original people of the Arctic are the Inuit. Resources and shipping routes are on their land, ice and waterways. Historically, their perspective has been that the Arctic must remain a zone of peace. Indigenous voices must be included in Arctic decision-making.

6. In fragile states (low income post colonial states of the global south), extreme weather, when combined with festering conflicts and a loss of livelihoods, can lead to state collapse, widespread criminality, and the rise of warlordism.

Fragile states may collapse under the weight of such calamities, with climate change being only one of several exacerbating factors leading to this outcome. The causes of state collapse, spreading criminality and violence, and the rise of warlords in countries such as Haiti, Sudan and Mali, among others, are complex. However, there is no doubt that climate change-induced drought, floods, storms, disease, food and water shortages, and the lack of viable livelihoods play a key role. Such calamities weaken the already strained political and institutional capacity of states. Armed conflicts often ensue. As this catastrophe spreads, there is no doubt that climate change plays a critical role in the complex dynamics.

7. Climate change aggravates the drought, extreme temperatures, and state breakdown that drive migration, and migration, in turn, raises tensions and militarization in recipient regions or countries.

.Climate change worsens extreme weather, physical insecurity, and the loss of livelihoods, helping to drive people to migrate to better endowed regions. Most climate migrants move within their countries, though a minority migrate to neighbouring countries, or northwards to affluent continents. Globally, the European Union, the United States, and Australia are favoured destinations. Localized migrations often lead to tensions with the pre-existing populations of these regions. Northwards migration spurs spending on militarizing borders as Western governments increasingly perceive such in-migration as a security threat.

Canada does not recognize a “climate migrant” category in its immigration policy, but perhaps that policy needs to be rethought. These migrants mainly derive from tropical countries that are hard-hit by climate change, yet these countries contribute little to the problem. Canada, on the other hand, bears a disproportionate responsibility for global warming owing to its relatively high per capita emissions.

8. If a nuclear war occurs, whether accidentally or intentionally, even a modest nuclear exchange will produce a “nuclear winter”, putting most of the world’s population at risk of starvation.

Even a small-scale nuclear war, for example, between India and Pakistan, and involving only 100 Hiroshima-size nuclear weapons, would loft substantial debris into the atmosphere, significantly reducing sunlight for years, and seriously disrupting global agriculture and food supply. The doomsday clock has moved to 90 seconds to midnight. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists explained that 2023 “was characterized by fraught relations among the world’s great powers, who were engaged in vigorous nuclear modernization programs as the nuclear control regime collapse. Nuclear programs in China, Russia, and the United States could trigger a three-way nuclear arms race ... adding to the ever-present danger of nuclear war through mistake or miscalculation.”

9. The Basis for Hope.

Hope in resolving the vicious circle between militarism and climate change lies in two complementary directions. The first is to lessen reliance on militarism, by moving away from using military might to settle conflict and building capacity for diplomacy with a goal of peaceful co-existence. We must remember that during the Cold War countries that considered themselves to be enemies negotiated arms control treaties.

Hope, secondly, lies in working towards an equitable green transition within countries, in which the countries of the global South see their legitimate demands for concessional financing for adaptation and mitigation honoured. Moving to a fair eco-economy would improve living conditions world-wide, decrease poverty and therefore weaken the vicious cycle of climate disruption and militarism.

The challenge of this century is to phase out the reliance of the high-income countries and China on fossil fuels both for energy and profit and escalate a transition to clean energy. The five countries producing the most GHG emissions are also those with the largest militaries and nuclear weapons (China, the United States, India, European Union, Russia). Canada, Norway and the UK too are major fossil fuel producers, which limits their motivation to phase out fossil fuels.

Transitioning to an eco-economy is hampered in capitalist countries like Canada where corporations associated with the carbon economy wield excessive influence on governments. A further political challenge arises from the rise of right-wing populist governments that are climate-denialist in orientation.

Despite these obstacles, we in civil society (trade unions, environmental and peace groups, social-justice organizations, human-rights advocates, church, temple and mosque groups, feminist associations, university and teacher organizations, nurses and doctor's associations, etc) must fight for peaceful co-existence and cooperation with other countries in building towards a clean-energy economy. This process requires support for arms control treaties, peace treaties and just green transition treaties through multilateral diplomacy.

Governments are unlikely to pursue this process vigorously unless pushed by bottom-up mobilization of social movements. We live on a finite and fragile planet, and we (civil society) must do the work. The election of Trump and the probable election of a climate activism-unfriendly and military-friendly Conservative government in Ottawa raise further obstacles to progress at the national level.

10. Canada's Role

The hope for Canada's future lies in peace and climate activists joining with other progressive groups in civil society to pressure the Canadian government to:

- Report GHG emissions produced by the Canadian military and at COP push for a global accounting of military emissions by country
- Adopt the Fossil-Fuel Non-proliferation Treaty
- Commit to a realistic climate program, involving among other things the phasing down of fossil fuels, to achieve a net zero economy by 2050
- Advocate for nuclear and non-nuclear arms control treaties, including Canada's adherence to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons
- Call for public consultations on the value of Canada's role in NATO
- Oppose the NATO commitment to spend 2% of our gross domestic product on the military, thus allowing the government to redirect resources to adapting to, and mitigating, the effects of climate change both in Canada and the global South. However, if Canada feels it must honour this commitment, the government should aim to spend the extra funds on re-building its peace-keeping capabilities, purchasing defensive rather than offensive weapons systems, augmenting our capacity to resist cyber attacks, and engaging in activities, such as Arctic surveillance and ice-breakers that can serve civilian as well as military purposes.