



The Elephant in the Room: Militarisation & the Climate Crisis

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acTVism: Thanks for joining us today. Will you start by introducing yourself?

Nick Buxton (NB): My name is Nick Buxton, I'm a researcher at the Transnational Institute, which is an institute based in Amsterdam that works with social movements worldwide.

acTVism: On Twitter, you write that “COP26 has been the first climate talks where this issue (militarisation) has finally attracted some media attention.” Why is this important?

NB: Well, it's significant because the military has been ignored by the UN process and the UN process is meant to be about treating the climate as an emergency and taking all measures possible to reduce emissions. And it's a huge, as we say, in the expression, elephant in the room when there is one sector of the economy that has been exempt from climate talks. It was actually in 1997, backing the Kyoto Protocol, the military was deliberately excluded from having to give account for its emissions. In 2015 it was voluntary. It could be included, but it was voluntary where the countries reported their military emissions or not. And yet just one country, the US, has a military that has a bigger carbon footprint than as many as 140 countries. So this is a huge sector that has to be part of the talks. And yet up to now, it is being ignored completely.

acTVism: Why do you think this discussion is happening now at COP26?

NB: Well, there is a growing movement of people saying you can't ignore this. And of course, as the countries are having to ratchet up their emissions- and there's now a popular movement. So a climate movement has emerged that just has more and more power and force

and is pushing these things onto the agenda. So it's finally been talked about. I would say this COP it doesn't look like we will actually get any commitments. So my point in my tweet was- but for the first time, it's been talked about. It got covered in the media, one of the key officials spoke about it, even the NATO's secretary general went to the COP for the first time to talk about military emissions. So it's become part of the, it's now on the agenda. And what we've got to make sure is that by the next COP27, and this will need a lot of mobilisation by movements, we not only get the military to be no longer exempt, they must actually reduce emissions in line with the science and in line with a commitment to 1.5 degrees. And that will ultimately mean not just reducing their emissions that they use in their use, but also reducing the military because there's no way we can reach 1.5 degrees unless we also shrink the amount of military emissions and the amounts of military spending.

acTVism: We have interviewed you before about militarisation and climate change. But for new viewers, can you briefly sum up this connection?

NB: I'd say there are three things to remember here. Firstly is how much they emit. We've got to remember that the military is a huge fossil fuel user, so an F-16 jet by the US, for example, uses about 14400 gallons an hour. We're talking about a very gas and oil guzzling military. So it's not surprising that it got huge, what we call a carbon blueprint. And they've done some calculations, said the European Union, probably the military emits around 24 million tonnes a year of carbon emissions, in the case of the US, it's astronomical. It's more like 200 million tonnes. So the first thing is they play a key role in producing emissions and contributing to the greenhouse gases and the climate crisis we're in. They also have, you've got to remember why the military exists, it exists to guard and to secure access to strategic resources, which of course, includes oil and gas. There's a reason why we've had so many wars in the Middle East. In fact, one report showed that about a quarter of all wars since the 1970s have had something to do with oil. So the military is very much tied up there. The military economy is tied up with an oil economy. And I think the second thing to point out is that, of course, we're talking about huge amounts of resources, so it's a huge distraction from what we need to be doing right now. Right now at the UN climate talks, there's massive anger from the developing countries that the richest countries have failed to deliver that promise of \$100 billion a year in money towards climate adaptation in the poorest countries. And yet we're spending billions and billions on the military. And one calculation shows that we spent \$21 trillion, the US spent 21 trillion dollars, an astronomical amount of money on the military since 2001. So just imagine what you could do with 21 trillion dollars right now in terms of actually the Green New Deal and the sort of ambitious climate goals that we need right now. So it's a diversion of resources, supposedly for security. But the biggest threat to our security, collective and human security right now, is the climate crisis. And yet money has been diverted towards war. So we need to be diverted back into a green peace economy. And the third thing I would say is also that we need to think about what happens as the climate crisis unfolds. And I guess one of my big concerns now is that the military is not tackling, it's not playing a role in stopping being a cause of the crisis. What it's looking to do is to grow in

order to deal with the consequences of the crisis. So increasingly, you see these national security plans from the richest countries like the countries in Europe, Germany, UK, France, as well as the other NATO members, the US, Canada and so on are talking about climate security. And what you see them talking about is that we're going to need the military to deal with the consequences of climate change, which they say as we get increased instability, we will have failed states, we'll have mass migration, we'll have new theatres of war, such as in the Arctic, and therefore we need the military to deal with the consequences. So at precisely the moment when we need to be tackling the causes of the climate crisis, instead, we're investing more money in dealing with the consequences. And in a way that I think is quite dangerous. And perhaps the biggest example of that is we can see unfolding already is migration, and it's noticeable. There was a question to Nancy Pelosi during the UN climate talks. And she's the head of the Democrats in the Congress. And she was asked, Isn't that a contradiction that you're spending this much in the military and when it's got such a huge carbon print and yet they're exempt from the talks. And she didn't say anything about like how much it was- she didn't address the question of the cost of the military or their emissions. What she said is we need the military there because we're going to have to deal with crises. And she named migration as a crisis.

Abby Martin in Video: Abby Martin with the Empire Files. Speaker Pelosi, you just presided over a large increase in the Pentagon budget. This Pentagon budget is already massive. The Pentagon is a larger polluter than 140 countries combined. How can we seriously talk about net zero if there is this bipartisan consensus to constantly expand this large contributor to climate change, which is exempt from these conferences? Military is exempt from climate talks.

Rep. Frank Pallone in Video: Well, I just want to use an example, if I can. You know, the sea level rise is an important part of, you know, what's happening to the climate. And I am not a defence person, but I've had so many talks with the Defence Department with the Navy in particular about how they have to respond to what's going on. So I really do think that there is no reason why we're putting together, you know, we build back better and other things can't respond to the Defence Department and have the same impact in terms of reducing emissions. And I do think that the Defence Department is very much aware of the fact that they have to play a major role, both from a strategic as well as, you know, for the good of the world. So I don't see what we're doing in any way or, you know, increasing the defence budget as being something that's inconsistent with climate action. I really don't.

Nancy Pelosi in Video: And may I just add that our national security advisers all tell us that the climate crisis is a national security matter. It is, of course, a health matter for our children, the water they drink, the air they breathe, et cetera. It is a jobs issue between clean, good, clean technologies being the future of our workforce and the training for all of that. It is a national security issue because of all of the conditions that the climate crisis produces. I won't go into all of them, but they do, are cause for migration, conflict over habitat and resources.

And again, a security challenge globally. And then the fourth, of course, the moral issue that we need to pass on this planet to future generations in a responsible way. Now, recognising what you said, we recognise that as well and a big user of fuel, there have been many initiatives over time more successful, with more technology to convert from fossil fuel to other sources of fuel to run the military, because it would make the biggest difference to transportation defence. These are two of the biggest- can make the biggest difference in all of that. And that is something we're very, very focussed on. As I say, the Defence Department sees this systemically that we have to stop it as a national security issue. And one way to do that is to stop our dependence on fossil fuels, which exacerbate the climate crisis. With that, I thank you all for being here. Unfortunately, they're telling us they have to clean the room. I didn't know about that.

NB: And you've got to think about that when you read these national security strategies, they say migrants are a threat. So, in other words, those who are most affected by climate change, those who had nothing to do with contributing to the crisis are now being called a threat to our national security. And I think that's deeply disturbing because it's turning the victims of the climate crisis into a threat, something that needs to be dealt with with guns, with borders, with armed responses. So I think that's where I am most concerned about where this is going, that we, if we think there are military solutions to the climate crisis, then we're heading to a world which is even more unjust and more inhumane than where we are right now.

acTVism: What do you think are the reasons for this?

NB: I kind of think of it like neoliberalism. We have a paradigm that is very dominant and it's become hegemonic. They say it's kind of so strong that it's unquestioned. And I think there are two paradigms that dominate our society right now. One is the market, that free market is good. If you liberalise and enable corporate profit, then that is good, regardless. And that's become a very dominant thing. So we see it regardless of whether that's damaging or not. In terms of environments, in terms of workers rights, it is a good thing to have a free market that enables powerful corporations that dominate. And we see the costs of that right now. Of course, most of all, in the climate crisis, the crisis is a result of oil companies not being regulated, being supported by the state and becoming very, very powerful. And regardless of the social and environmental costs. And the other, the other paradigm which is really strong right now is one of security. And that is that national security comes above everything. Everything can be named, if it's named a security threat, whether it's terrorism or migrants, then it becomes an excuse for you to behave in any way you want. And we see that right now in the Poland and Belarus border, where people are dying on the border because migrants have been treated as a security threat. And Poland has actually been supported by the European Union in stopping migrants coming in and even though there is an unfathomable suffering and death toll going on the other side. So these are two paradigms that really need to be questioned and challenged, especially as we move into a climate crisis because the

corporations, the freedom of them to act as they wish, unregulated and supported by the state above all else means that we are having an increasingly ecological crisis. We're having an economy that is running up against the very existence of our planet, of all the beings in it. And then the military, if we strengthen that at a time of instability and crisis, will become the default response for dealing with any of the consequences. And it comes from a very nationalistic framework. You know, it's always about national security, and we know that climate change can't be dealt with through a nationalist or military solution. It will evolve collective solidarity and justice, and it has to be embedded in justice and solidarity. If not, we're going to have an unacceptable death toll as a result of the crisis. So we really, the climate crisis compels us to overturn these two paradigms, if we had to move forward and adjust in a humane way.

acTVism: Are you hopeful that militarisation will play a bigger part of COP27?

NB: On one level, I'm not hopeful. Next year's is going to be in Egypt. If you ever wanted to go to a militarised state, then Egypt would be one of them. So it's not a good omen that actually Egypt is hosting this. But my hope, as always, is with the movements. I think what was really outstanding at this COP was the strength of the climate justice movement and particularly the growing strength of the youth movements and the youth movements really get it. I mean, as one, I was talking to one of the climate strikers and she's 17, based in Birmingham, and she says one of their chances: no border, no nation, no coal power station. So they make really explicitly the link between borders, migration and stopping the climate crisis. And they've become more powerful than ever before. And there is, so people are making the connections between climate and militarism in a way that's not happened before. So in that sense, I do feel that it's going to become unavoidable that the military is going to have, at the very least, is going to have to face the consequences that it's not only causing the crisis, it's diverting money attention from addressing it.

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