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COP27, NATO and the war in Ukraine

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Editor's Note: In a major breakthrough at the COP27 UN Climate Summit, rich countries agreed to establish a loss and damage fund to help the Global South deal with the worst effects of the climate catastrophe, but delegates failed to agree any steps to phase out fossil fuels. In this article, Calum Nelson discusses some of the linkages between the war in Ukraine, COP27 and NATO's own climate commitments. Although NATO aims to cut emissions by at least 45% by 2030 and to move towards Net Zero by 2050, new research on the total global military carbon footprint suggests this will not be easy, esp. as NATO also wants higher military spending and more exercises. Evidence suggests that military spending is accelerating climate breakdown.

The COP27 UN Climate Summit took place in Sharm El Sheik - Egypt from 6-18 November, with Russia's war in Ukraine an obvious major problem, if not part of the official agenda. Delegates and world leaders met hoping to build on the success of COP26 in Glasgow. However, the conflict in Ukraine dominated the lead-up to talks with energy costs having soared since Russia's natural gas supplies to Europe were cut.

The Ukrainian perspective

Addressing the conference via [video](#) on 8 November, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky told world leaders they will not be able to tackle the climate crisis unless Russia's invasion of his country ends. "There can be no effective climate policy without the peace," he said, suggesting that governments could not turn their attention to long-term climate action

whilst having to focus on immediate security concerns posed by Russia. Zelensky stressed the war would continue to have severe consequences, not just in his home country but throughout the world – describing the damaging effect on global food and energy prices:

"This Russian war has brought about an energy crisis that has forced dozens of countries to resume coal-fired power generation in order to lower energy prices for their people at least a little... to lower prices that are shockingly rising due to deliberate Russian actions. [It] brought an acute food crisis to the world, which hit worst those countries suffering from the existing manifestations of climate change – catastrophic droughts, large-scale floods".

Zelensky also stated that 5 million acres of Ukrainian forests had been destroyed in the last 6 months of fighting and expressed fears of radiation leaks due to mismanagement of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant which has been under Russian control since March.

"This is not simply a war, this is state terrorism and it is ecocide," [said](#) Ukraine's assistant environment minister Svitlana Grynchuk (speaking as part of Ukraine's official delegation in Egypt). She highlighted that contamination of previously fertile soil will cost €11.4bn in damages alone. And Ukraine's leading climate scientist Svitlana Krakovska [described](#) how dependence on fossil fuels has helped fund Russia's illegal war and left countries helpless in the face of surging energy and food costs. With economies falling into

recession many governments have sought to shore up energy security by increasing production of oil, gas and even coal, spelling bad news for climate change goals.

The dash for gas

The COP26 Summit in Glasgow was widely celebrated as countries agreed to limit global temperatures to 1.5C above pre-industrial levels but the global dash for gas amid the Ukraine war will accelerate climate breakdown and could send temperatures soaring far beyond the 1.5C limit of safety, according to [analysis](#) by the Climate Action Tracker (an independent research consortium that has been tracking climate action since 2009). If all new gas projects announced in response to the global gas supply crunch are fulfilled, the resulting greenhouse gas emissions would add up to about 10% of the total amount of carbon dioxide that can safely be emitted by 2050. The Climate Action Tracker accuses governments of “doubling down on fossil fuels – the very cause of the climate crisis - knocking climate action down the policy agenda, despite the fact that renewables, efficiency and electrification are by far the cheapest, fastest and most secure options”.

NATO’s response

Taking part in a COP27 [virtual event](#) on 8 November, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg asserted that Russia’s weaponisation of food and energy as part of its illegal war in Ukraine underlined the need to increase resilience, diversify energy supplies and sources, and accelerate the transition to cleaner, greener economies:

“[Russia’s] use of energy as a weapon against NATO Allies and other countries, is a stark reminder of the need to transition from dependence on fossil fuels to renewables because that will make us less dependent on Russian gas and Russian oil”.

He went on to argue that by helping countries transition from fossil fuels to renewable sources of energy NATO could play a key role in both improving international security and efforts to mitigate global warming.

Speaking with Ambassador Christoph Heusgen (Chairman of the Munich Security Conference) Stoltenberg noted NATO’s change of thinking on climate change in recent years, highlighting that climate change had not been considered as a NATO issue in the organisation’s [Strategic Concept](#) until it was revised at the Madrid Summit in June. The summit also included a [high-level dialogue on climate and security](#) for the first time, and the release of NATO’s first [Climate Change and Security Impact Assessment](#) – providing an analysis of the impact climate change may have on NATO’s strategic environment, assets and installations, missions and multi-domain operations, and resilience and civil preparedness. NATO also delivered a report on the progress made since the agreement of the Climate Change and Security Action Plan at the Brussels Summit in June 2021, and made [emissions pledges](#) including a 45% reduction in military greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and reaching net zero by 2050.

When questioned by Ambassador Heusgen as to how NATO were successfully implementing their commitment to climate change, the Secretary General summarised three issues that the alliance is currently working to address:

- *Understanding the link between climate change and security*, acknowledging that climate change can create conflict and exacerbate existing conflicts by increasing competition over scarce resources. Stoltenberg recognised that “since climate change matters for security, climate change matters for NATO. So, we are building up our capacity when it comes to analyse, understand, and assess the link between climate change, wars, conflict and security”.
- *Adapting military operations* to more extreme weather caused by climate change by incorporating climate change into military planning, capability targets and equipment and uniform considerations.
- *Reducing emissions produced by NATO forces*. Admitting that emissions from traditional military equipment and vehicles

contribute to global warming Stoltenberg concluded that the first step to becoming greener is to ensure military emissions data is reported accurately. Thus, NATO has launched a project to standardise reported emissions data.

Military spending: the elephant in the climate room

The Secretary General's comments coincide with the release of a new report detailing how military spending has accelerated climate breakdown. The Transnational Institute, Stop Wapenhaldel, Tipping Point North South, and the Global Campaign on Military Spending this week published the report, [Climate Collateral](#), which explores the link between military spending and the climate crisis. The research analyses the impact that military spending and arms sales have on the capacity to address the climate crisis and promote social justice.

Among its many findings, the report shows that the richest countries are spending 30 times as much on their armed forces as they spend on providing climate finance for the world's most vulnerable countries. It demonstrates that one year's military spending by the top 10 military spenders would pay for 15 years' worth of promised international climate finance (at \$100billion per year).

Findings also highlight the environmental impact of Russia's war in Ukraine and the report claims: "climate goals have been quickly thrown out of the window when it comes to military objectives," with a major increase in military spending by both Russia and NATO alliance members. The European Commission predicts an increased military spend of at least €200bn by its member states while Russia has approved a 27% increase in military spending since 2021.

The report contradicts Secretary General Stoltenberg's assertion that NATO can become more environmentally friendly, stating "there is no evidence that military can be green". NATO is specifically criticised for its reluctance to compromise military dominance in favour of combating climate change, with the authors

suggesting many organisations and governments pay 'lip service' to climate change commitments without taking any real action. The research points to vague and undefined targets in national military climate strategies, a lack of viable fuel alternatives for military vehicles (particularly jet fuel – which accounts for 70% of military fuel), and the development of new weapons systems which create even greater levels of pollution:

"F-35A fighters consume about 5,600 litres of oil per hour compared to 3,500 for the F-16 fighters that they are replacing. As military systems have a lifetime span of 30 to 40 years, this means locking-in highly polluting systems for many years to come."

Such findings are underlined by a [study](#) published on 10 November by Scientists for Global Responsibility (SGR) and the Conflict and Environment Observatory (CEOBS) which found that the world's militaries may be responsible for 5.5% of total global emissions. This means that should the world's militaries combined be measured as a country, they would have the fourth largest national carbon footprint.

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