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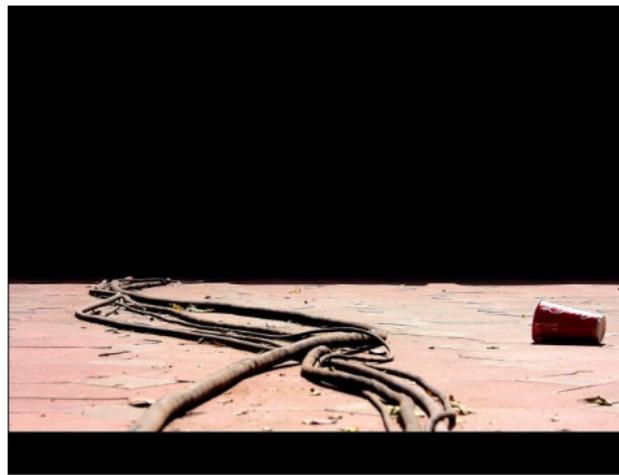
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## Climate change, capitalism and the military

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Ever more people are connecting the dots between our economic system and ecological destruction but rarely make the link to militarism and security. As climate change will dramatically increase instability and insecurity, we examine the role of the military in a climate-changed world.



The Fall of Capitalism / Photo credit Pratheesh Prakash via Flickr (Creative Commons license)

Attributing climate change to capitalism is hardly mainstream thinking, but it is also no longer taboo.

Canadian author and activist Naomi Klein certainly helped [popularise this argument](#), but it is being echoed now in more unusual quarters. In August 2018, a [group of Finnish scientists commissioned by UN Secretary General](#) warned that the current economic system cannot address the multiple unfolding social and ecological crises.

The vice-chair of the world's biggest asset manager, BlackRock, admitted earlier this year that in the face of climate change "We have to change capitalism. This is really what's at stake here."

### **Military spending**

It is clearly a welcome development that ever more people are connecting the dots between our economic system and ecological destruction. There is much less attention, however, to the links between environmental issues and militarism and security.

It's a surprising omission given how much power the military has and the way it has increased its power dramatically over the last decades. When you consider that climate change will dramatically increase instability and insecurity, examining the role of the military in a climate-changed world becomes ever more critical.

While politicians have proved unable to make the decisions necessary to stop worsening climate change, they have not found it difficult to find funding for 'security' needs.

Global military spending amounted to [1.74 trillion US dollars in 2017](#), equivalent to 230 US dollars for every person on earth – and almost double what it was at the end of the Cold War.

The events of 9/11 in particular fuelled an all-encompassing war against 'terror' and an almost limitless military spending spree. As governments spent more, they also reinforced the power and influence of military corporations (such as Lockheed Martin in the US and Elbit in Israel) which now help draft and write worldwide [security policies](#) from which they further profit.

## **Growing market**

Naomi Klein has [drawn attention to the “epic case of historical bad timing”](#) of the global neoliberal revolution gaining pace just when we needed corporate regulation and a planned transition to low-carbon economies.

I would argue that an equally important case of bad timing has been the massive growth of the military-security-industrial complex at the time climate change's impacts have become more and more obvious. It will almost certainly lead to the military playing an ever more significant role in responding to climate change – with consequences for all of us.

To understand the power of the military today, it is important to go beyond constantly growing budgets and never-ending wars - such as the now 17 year war in Afghanistan - and challenge the consensus it has created that supports ever more pervasive 'security'.

The big arms firms today not only sell arms, they sell all varieties of 'security' solutions from CCTV cameras in urban neighbourhoods, to biometric databases for storing fingerprints, to high-tech radar systems at increasingly militarised borders.

This market has grown massively: a modest estimate suggests that the global homeland security industry will be worth [\\$418 billion by 2022](#).

## **Increasing criminalisation**

Some of the new security giants are perversely involved in both creating insecurity and providing the solutions to it.

A [report by Transnational Institute](#) in 2016 showed that three of the top European arms traders to North Africa and the Middle East - Finmeccanica, Thales and Airbus - are also some of the principal winners of contracts to militarise EU borders. In other words, they profit twice – from fuelling the wars that lead to refugees and then providing the technology and infrastructures that stops refugees from finding safety.

It is therefore an artificial distinction to define militarism as only concerning wars abroad; it also concerns the increasingly militarised responses at home – those that initially target marginalised communities (Muslims, immigrants), then activists, then humanitarians and ultimately everyone.

This militarisation and accompanying criminalisation unfolds every day worldwide. In the UK for example, in 2015, [4,000 people were reported as potential extremists under a massive surveillance programme](#) - more than a third of whom are children.

Both Black Lives Matter and Standing Rock protesters in the US have found themselves [facing off against Mine-Resistant Armor-Protected vehicles as well as drones](#). In Honduras, more than 120 people were murdered between 2010 and 2016 by paramilitary groups for standing up against logging, mining and dams.

## **Huge emissions**

The influential US media commentator and neoliberal advocate Thomas Friedman [explained the reasons for this militarised response](#) – and rather more honestly than you would expect: “The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist. McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the designer of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies to flourish is called the US Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps.”

In other words, capitalism and militarism (particularly US imperialism) are not just parallel forces, they are inextricably intertwined.

What Friedman failed to draw attention to though is that the hidden fist is not just out there in the ‘world’, it is also at home too.

The close links between capitalism and militarism can be seen in the operations of the US military. Deploying most military assets today requires huge emissions of greenhouse gases, which means the [Pentagon is the single largest organisational user of petroleum](#).

Just one of its jets, the B-52 Stratocruiser, consumes roughly 3,334 gallons per hour, about as much fuel as the average car driver uses in seven years. Despite its huge carbon 'footprint', the [military's contribution is not even properly assessed by industrialised countries and remains exempt from the UN Paris agreement](#).

## **Strategic deployment**

Of course if their emissions were properly accounted for, we would be even further from meeting the goal of keeping global temperature rises under two degrees centigrade.

Their role is even more significant if you consider what most military forces are mobilised for – in particular the US's vast military infrastructure of more than 800 bases and their navy and air fleets across the globe.

It's clear that they are principally deployed in oil-rich and resource-rich regions and near strategic shipping lanes that keep our globalised economy humming.

This focus is not unique to the US. The research group [Oil Change International calculates](#) that up to half of all interstate wars since 1973 have been about oil.

Police violence against populations is also often concerned with protecting fossil fuel projects, industries and infrastructures from resistance. We see it time and time again that [environmental activists are faced with violence](#) when they take on extractive industries.

## **Removing regulations**

The human rights organisation Global Witness [noted in 2015](#) that three people were killed each week defending their land, forests and rivers against extractive industries.

Capitalism's hidden fist is not a new phenomenon – economic power has always used violence to protect itself – but it has also accelerated in recent decades.

One impetus was certainly the aftermath of 9/11 that legitimised a massive rise in military expenditure and state violence. But it is also likely that the broader ecological crisis has fuelled a military response.

The [Stockholm Resilience Center's research](#) shows that there are nine core ecological processes that regulate the stability and resilience of the earth on which we depend. Humanity has already crossed two boundaries related to biodiversity loss and shifts in nutrient cycles (nitrogen and phosphorus) and is in a perilous condition in terms of climate change and land use.

Underpinned by a corporate 'race to the bottom' - in which transnationals constantly seek to remove regulations and costs that limit profit – it has led in particular to extractive industries crashing up against our ecological boundaries and moving into the last remaining territories free from exploitation. The race to the bottom has joined a race for what's left.

## **First Nations**

People are forced to resist, not just to prevent pollution or corruption, but in order to survive. Their fierce resistance has met with harsh repression.

Recent events in Canada bring this reality home. In 2013, energy corporation Kinder Morgan announced it would build a new pipeline from Alberta to British Columbia straight through an environmentally sensitive region and through the territories of more than 100 'First Nations'.

The announcement led to massive resistance, so much so that the company eventually announced it would abandon the project due to the 'legal risks'. Yet rather than back off from a toxic oil project, the state doubled down and ended up effectively nationalising the pipeline.

A [court case in August 2018 declared in the protesters' favour](#) – noting the lack of constitutional consultations with First Nations and the lack of environmental review of expanded marine tanker traffic in the Salish sea.

It is an important delay, but it is clear that a Canadian state dominated by oil interests is unlikely to back down – and will ultimately use force to impose the project. As they have in countless fossil-fuel and extractive projects around the world.

## **'Declaration of war'**

And those faced with the violence feel no alternative but to resist. As Kanahus Manuel of the Secwepemc Nation in Canada [noted](#): "Everything flows from the land. If the land is destroyed, we are also destroyed."

It's understandable therefore that Manuel, along with a coalition of indigenous organisers, [called the Canadian government's actions a "declaration of war."](#) She

added: “We mean it literally. The military will be called. It is the national pattern to use criminalization, civil action, and other penalties to repress Indigenous resistance to these policies by bringing to bear the weight of the law and police forces against Indigenous individuals and communities.”

As climate change impacts hit home ever harder, this tendency towards a militarised response is likely to grow. Trump may not believe in climate change, but [his military does](#) and they are already making plans to deal with its consequences.

The speed of melting in the Arctic led the US Navy this year to announce it is [revising its strategy for the region](#) with a likely increase in armed ships and troops.

Australia recently joined the European Union and US in [declaring climate change a ‘security’ threat](#) and warning of dangers of “migration, internal instability or intra-state insurgencies ... terrorism or cross-border conflict” that would necessitate a “a wide spectrum of Defence responses”.

## **Militarising borders**

When the military and security forces are the strongest and best-funded institutions in our society, we can’t be surprised when they become the default institutions for dealing with climate change impacts.

The predominant US and EU state responses to refugees is one of the most disturbing portents of what militarised climate adaptation could look like.

The default response by rich industrialised nations to refugees has not been one of solidarity or compassion, but increasingly one of doing everything to keep refugees out – whether that is [militarising borders, supporting dictators, holding refugees in concentration camps or forcing people to make journeys so treacherous that thousands die in the attempt](#).

It’s an abhorrent display of inhumanity, yet it is becoming the depressing norm. When we know that climate change impacts will only add to the pressures to migrate, the future looks very bleak.

The truth is that we have normalised state violence. We no longer see the CCTV cameras on our streets, the barbed wire fences on our borders, the armour on the police, the refugees in camps because they are no longer unusual. This normalisation means that there is a growing danger security solutions to climate change will not just be the default response but largely invisible too.

## **'Shifting baselines'**

Unravelling this consensus in favour of security rather than solidarity will not be easy.

One tool that could help is the concept 'shifting baselines' as it can help us understand this process and can give us clues as to how we might start to forge another path.

The ecologist Daniel Pauly came up with the term to refer to the way fishery scientists would base their 'norm' for healthy fisheries as the depleted state in which they first encountered them rather than the untouched state they were originally. Most scientists could no longer remember seas teeming with large fish so had accepted a depleted sea as normal.

However one response to this in the fishing world has been to establish marine reserves. If done properly and protected from commercial trawlers ([rather than small-scale fisherfolk](#)) they can lead to dramatic recovery in marine wildlife and habitats. Most importantly, they unveil the dangers of over-fished seas and the potential for a different approach.

We need a similar approach to security – creating local and state examples of alternative approaches to militarisation. We need to show that militarising our response to social and ecological issues will merely exacerbate their impact on the most vulnerable.

### **Prioritising solidarity**

We also need to argue and mobilise against this militarisation of a society in whatever form it takes and demonstrate the potential for a different approach.

This can take many forms, from climate adaptation plans that prioritise solidarity rather than security – such as those pushed for by the Transition Towns movement – to the network of cities supporting sanctuary for refugees, to the Black Lives Matter protesters seeking to hold police accountable in the US.

All such efforts can start to slow down the relentless march towards militarising our planet. Climate campaigners have started to slow down the fossil fuel machine, we need now to start throwing grit into the gears of the military-industrial-security complex.

Link: <https://www.tni.org/en/article/climate-change-capitalism-and-the-military>