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Accounting for the Uncounted: The Global Climate Impact of Militaries

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Gaza 2024, Israeli tanks convoy through Gaza.

1. Key insights

• Militaries are responsible for an estimated 5.5% of annual global GHG emissions; if the world's militaries were a country, it would have the fourth largest carbon footprint.

• No country is obliged to report the emissions from their military activity, which results in the data on military emissions reported to the UNFCCC being patchy, incomplete or missing altogether. This has been labelled the 'military emissions gap' - the gap between what governments report and the true scale of the military's contribution to global emissions.

• There is no agreed framework for measuring the emissions from armed conflicts, which further deepens the 'military emissions gap', while ongoing armed conflicts emit emissions equivalent to industrialised countries.

• As military spending reaches a record high of $2.7 trillion, we must act: governments must report the emissions from militaries, including warfighting, and commit to emissions reductions in line with the Paris Agreement.

• Current military spending increases are incompatible with emissions reduction targets. Efforts to strengthen military defences must be compatible with rapid climate action, diplomacy, and peacebuilding.

2. Why this is important

Tackling the climate crisis requires a comprehensive, whole of society approach in which all sectors contribute to climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. While militaries play an outsized role in contributing to the climate crisis, this is yet to be matched in efforts to reduce their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Based on data from 2019, it was estimated that militaries and their supply chains were responsible for approximately 5.5%[1] of annual global GHG emissions,[2] meaning that if the world's militaries were a country, it would have the fourth largest carbon footprint. That year, global military spending stood at $1.9 trillion; by 2024, it had risen to $2.7 trillion,[3] and is projected to continue growing. If current trends persist, global military spending could reach $6.6 trillion by 2035.[4] Every $100 billion increase in military spending is estimated to generate approximately 32 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (tCO_2e).[5]

Yet militarism has been largely absent from UNFCCC discourse until recent years. This is in part fuelled by a historic reporting exemption that results in the data on military emissions reported to the UNFCCC being patchy, incomplete or missing altogether.[6] This has been labelled the "military emissions gap" - the gap between what governments report and the true scale of the military's contribution to global emissions. This is a dangerous blind spot in climate action, especially as military spending continues to increase year-on-year. The key accountability mechanisms for the Paris Agreement are the Global Stocktake, National Determined Contributions, and National Inventory Reports from state parties, all of which are informed by the annual Global Carbon Budget report. Together, this information enables the adequacy of committed and implemented mitigation commitments to be monitored and evaluated. The credibility of the Paris Agreement therefore relies on governments accurately reporting their GHG emissions. If any sector's emissions are not reported, inaccurately reported or underreported, this poses risks to effective climate action.

3. Background

In the development of the Kyoto Protocol, it was decided that militaries should be exempt from complete emissions reporting requirements.[7] While the Paris Agreement introduced provisions for the voluntary reporting of military emissions, the data reported by governments to the UNFCCC remains wholly inadequate and inconsistent. As a result, militaries are decades behind in their ability to comprehensively report their emissions, and most militaries have done little to map their supply chain emissions. Methodologies for tracking emissions during armed conflicts remain underdeveloped. Collectively, these exemptions and omissions have

slowed progress toward sectoral decarbonisation and introduced uncertainties into global emission inventories, emissions gap analysis and climate modelling as well as policy responses.

In recent years, there has been an effort on a policy level to drive military emissions reporting, transparency and sectoral decarbonisation, at least within the EU and NATO. In 2023, ahead of COP28, the European Parliament urged EU member states to further 'ensure that military GHG emissions are included in domestic net-zero targets in order to accelerate the development of decarbonisation technologies and strategies', and called on decision makers to: '...formulate a proposal for the transparent accounting of military emissions to the UNFCCC'.[8] NATO's 2023 publication of its Greenhouse Gas Emissions Mapping and Analytical Methodology also marked an important milestone. Although the methodology does not yet cover all operational emissions from NATO-led missions, exercises, and logistics, it represents a meaningful step toward consistent and transparent accounting practices. As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg noted at COP28: "There is no way we can get to net zero without also reducing emissions from the military sector." These strategies, policies, and decisions demonstrate the growing recognition within the Global North of the need to integrate defence considerations into broader climate governance. Despite this progress, recent geopolitical developments such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Trump presidency, and an increasing push back against climate policies across the US and Europe,[9] pose challenges for sustaining momentum on military emissions transparency, and moves towards sectoral decarbonisation.

However, militarisation is not simply a US and European issue. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), global military expenditure reached more than $2.7 trillion in 2024, representing a 9.4% increase in real terms over 2023, and the steepest annual rise since the end of the Cold War.[10] Expenditure rose in all five geographical regions: Europe, Asia and Oceania, the Americas, the Middle East, and Africa. Since 2015, the global cumulative rise has been 37%, with Europe seeing an 83% increase, Asia and Oceania 46%, the Americas 19%, the Middle East 19% and Africa 11%. In Asia and Oceania, for example, military spending rose by 6.3% in 2024 to around $629 billion, fuelled by growth in East Asia of 7.8%. In the Middle East the rise was about 15% in 2024, with spending reaching $243 billion. Even in Africa, often overlooked in this context, military expenditure rose by 3.0% in 2024 to $52.1 billion, despite uneven regional patterns. These figures underscore that rising defence budgets and procurement efforts, including outside traditional Western military blocs, are increasingly a global phenomenon. From the Indo-Pacific to the Middle East and parts of Africa, military expansion and rearmament programmes mean that the defence sector's increasing climate footprint is not confined to any one region. As a result, efforts to understand, account for and mitigate military-related emissions must be framed and implemented as truly global challenges, not merely as issues for the Global North.

4. Military emissions reporting in peacetime

The underreporting of military emissions hinders global mitigation efforts; you cannot manage what you do not measure and report on. Within the UNFCCC, Annex I and Non-Annex I countries are subject to different reporting obligations. Annex I parties, largely industrialised economies and historically larger polluters, submit annual National Inventory Reports (NIRs) detailing anthropogenic emissions by source category. Under existing IPCC and UNFCCC reporting guidelines, countries are welcome to explicitly report emissions from their militaries under two categories of fuel consumption, 1A5a 'Other - Non-Specified - Stationary' and 1A5b 'Other - Non-Specified - Mobile', as well as military F-gasses under category 2.G.2a. However, inclusion remains voluntary.

The Military Emissions Gap project rates the accessibility of military emissions data reported to the UNFCCC. Based on analysis of NIRs submitted in 2025,[11] only six countries scored a 'fair' data accessibility score by submitting disaggregated information in both categories in their 2025 NIRs: Germany, Hungary, Norway, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Cyprus. Some major military powers, such as the UK and France, scored 'poor' due to failing to disaggregate data, and countries including Japan, Poland and Türkiye failed to provide any information at all on the emissions from their militaries. The world's largest military power, the US, failed to submit a NIR.

In addition to the voluntary nature of this reporting category, which leads to poor reporting,

there are other major flaws in military emissions reporting. First, both categories - stationary and mobile fuel consumption - can also house other civilian emissions sources, making it impossible to disaggregate the contribution of the military unless specifically stated. Military emissions can alternatively be reported anonymously in other categories. For example, military aviation, shipping and vehicular emissions can be included within totals reported under '1.A.3 Transport', while energy use at national military bases can be included within totals under '1.A.4 Other sectors'. This is directly addressed within the UNFCCC reporting guidelines, which instruct that: "Emissions and removals should be reported at the most disaggregated level of each source/sink category, taking into account that a minimum level of aggregation may be required to protect confidential business and military information".[12] However, the need for military emissions data to remain confidential has been questioned by civil society due to the availability of other, more potentially sensitive military data, such as spending and procurement decisions, as well as real-time tracking of naval vessels and military aircraft.[13]

Second, military emission sources are greater than simply stationary and mobile fuel use, such as the use and disposal of munitions, waste management and disposal, and fugitive emissions from refrigeration, air conditioning, radar and electrical equipment;[14] among other sources.[15] In addition to this, military emissions in international waters or airspace need not be reported at all. This means that even if all Annex I countries were to report in line with current UNFCCC guidelines, the military emissions gap would still exist.

For countries maintaining extensive networks of overseas military bases, such as the US and UK, current reporting practices under the UNFCCC create additional challenges. NIRs account only for territorial emissions, meaning emissions generated beyond national borders are typically excluded. This approach creates grey areas in accountability, as emissions from overseas military operations or installations may fall outside the reporting scope of both the operating and host countries. Without coordinated data-sharing or clear guidance on attribution, these emissions remain unaccounted for within global inventories, further widening the military emissions gap.

For non-Annex I Parties, the issue is compounded by differing reporting requirements. These countries, often less industrialised and with lower historical responsibility for emissions, currently face fewer mandatory reporting obligations. Although they are transitioning to the Enhanced Transparency Framework (ETF) established under the Paris Agreement, there remains no explicit requirement to include military activities in national reporting. This omission is significant, as several of the world's largest military spenders, including China, India, and Saudi Arabia, fall within this category. This weakened reporting obligation results in an even more dramatic gap; for example, neither China, India, nor Saudi Arabia declare any of their military emissions despite collectively spending over $480 billion on their militaries in 2024.

5. The climate impact of conflicts

The above outlines the inadequacies of military emissions reporting and the gaps in capturing the impact of everyday military activity, but these gaps are particularly evident during armed conflicts. The world is currently experiencing more armed conflicts than at any point since World War II, and UNFCCC processes are incapable of dealing with either the direct or indirect consequences of conflict on climate action.

Conflicts and geopolitical disputes generate reporting inaccuracies in a number of ways. Warfighting and the excess emissions caused by conflicts have been estimated to equal that of entire industrialised countries, yet there is no framework to report these emissions within the UNFCCC. Additionally, situations of occupation lead to both under- and overreporting; Russia has reported the emissions of annexed Crimea since 2016, and more recently has included other occupied Ukrainian territories in its NIRs. Ukraine continues to report on all of its regions, which leads to double counting. On the contrary, China chooses not to report Taiwan's emissions, even though it insists on its UN listing as a Province of China, and claims sovereignty over the island. As Taiwan is not a recognised state within the UN, it cannot report its own emissions and therefore, they go unreported despite being one of the world's top 20 economies in terms of GDP.

Where official accounting mechanisms fail, civil society and academia have attempted to plug the gap with innovative new methodologies to measure the climate impact of conflicts, as illustrated here in two case studies.

Ukraine 2025, a Russian army soldier walks along a ruined street of Malaya Loknya settlement.

Case study: Ukraine

This is the largest armed conflict on the European continent since World War II. The war is defined by highly mechanised combat along a sprawling 1,250km front line, compounded by relentless long-range missile and drone strikes deep into opposing territory.

After three years of full-scale war, the conflict is already on course to generate 237 million tonnes of CO_2 equivalent (tCO_2e), a volume comparable to the combined annual emissions of Belgium, Ireland, and Austria.[16] The largest share of these emissions, one-third, stems directly from warfare itself, with future reconstruction efforts contributing another 27%. Strikingly, fires in forests and natural landscapes account for 22% of the war's carbon footprint. These blazes are fuelled by a deadly mix of climate change-induced droughts and relentless shelling, igniting thousands of uncontrollable fires that rage unchecked in active war zones. Additionally, attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure have released SF_6, a GHG 24,000 times more potent than CO_2, from damaged high-voltage switching gear.

The war's climate impact extends far beyond the battlefield. Aircraft rerouted to avoid Russian and Ukrainian airspace - especially flights between Northern Europe and East Asia - face detours adding hours to travel times, significantly increasing fuel consumption and emissions. Even routes farther afield, such as those between North America and East Asia or Russia and Cuba, have been disrupted, further amplifying the conflict's global carbon footprint.

Using the social cost of carbon, which quantifies the economic damage of each additional tonne of GHG emitted, the war's climate impact is estimated at $43 billion. The UN General Assembly has demanded that Russia compensate for all damages resulting from its aggression, which should include climate-related harm.

Gaza 2025, rubble left behind after an Israeli bombing.

Case study: Gaza

More than 67,000 Palestinians have been killed in two years and 92% of all residential buildings have been destroyed, alongside 125 hospitals and clinics being damaged.[17] As well as the devastating humanitarian impacts, the climate impact of this conflict will extend into the future as researchers estimate that the first 15 months of the war have resulted in more than 31 million tCO_2e, more than the combined annual GHG emissions of Costa Rica and Estonia.[18]

Direct conflict emissions account for 1.9 million tCO_2e; the result of artillery and rockets as well as bombing and reconnaissance flights, amongst other sources. In addition, the US supplied military aid to Israel using 507 aircraft and 107 ship journeys up to January 2025, long-distance journeys that also carry a large carbon cost. However, the largest source of emissions will be found in post-conflict reconstruction, in the clearing and rebuilding of decimated infrastructure across Gaza. Researchers estimate that more than 61 million tonnes of debris will need to be collected using trucks, an effort which would generate almost 66,000 tCO_2e.

The destruction of infrastructure across the area has indirect impacts on emissions too. Prior to October 7th, Gaza had one of the world's highest densities of solar-energy generation but as of March 2024, approximately 65% of solar panels across the Gaza strip had been damaged, a figure that is likely higher at this time.[19] As a result, electricity has been largely generated by diesel generators, where diesel can be accessed,[20] which has been estimated to emit just over 130,000 tCO_2e as well as risking additional health impacts through airborne pollutants.

The total estimated climate impact of the first 15 months of the war ranks higher than 102 individual countries' annual emissions. Yet, without accurate reporting of military and wartime emissions, this impact will remain a blind spot within carbon accounting with no route for accountability for their source.

Aside from the direct impact of conflict on emissions, conflicts also have an indirect effect on multilateral processes such as the UNFCCC. In recent years alone, ongoing conflicts have caused protests from both member states and civil society within UNFCCC proceedings. During SB58, member states walked out of the opening plenary in protest at Russia's intervention from the floor;[21] the following year, SB60 was disrupted by civil society protesters holding a Palestine flag onstage alongside a placard reading 'no business as usual during a genocide'.[22] Multiple conflicts delayed the selection of a COP29 host after Russia blocked EU member states,[23] leaving Armenia and Azerbaijan to determine the presidency within their ongoing peace plan.[24] However, it is difficult to concretely measure the impact that ongoing conflicts may be having on climate multilateralism.

7. The climate cost of military spending

The climate impact of militarism extends far beyond conflicts. Everyday military activity is carbon intensive, from training and exercises to the extensive military supply chains. This means that every dollar of military spending comes at a cost to the climate, and as military spending surges across the globe, so does the impact of militaries on global emissions.

While the relationship between military spending and emissions is undoubtedly complex, rising military spending leads to direct increases in military emissions in multiple ways.[25] Increasing military activity, including training and exercises, as well as increasing numbers of military personnel, increasing energy demand at bases, all contribute to rising military emissions. In addition, increases in military procurement, as well as the research and development for future equipment, can also increase emissions. This is particularly concerning in the current context of rising military spending; ramping up military production to increase stockpiles is energy-intensive and, with limited progress towards military decarbonisation, the current procurement push means that militaries will be locked into fossil fuel-intensive equipment for decades. This means that we are committing to equipment today that will hinder tomorrow's mitigation efforts.

This has been noted by research focusing on the climate impacts of Europe's current rearmament. NATO Member States have committed to allocating 5% of GDP to their militaries - 3.5% for militaries and 1.5% for wider security spending - and the ReArm Europe Plan is set to boost EU military spending by more than €800 billion by 2030. Research suggests that the pledged increases would amount to an increase of annual emissions of up to 218 million tCO_2e. When the impact on societies and economies is considered, this equates to up to $298 billion per year in climate damage.[26] These statistics represent just 31 countries totaling 9% of the world's emissions, and with military spending rising across the globe, this highlights just how detrimental the global trend of increasing militarism is to our efforts to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement.

8. Military spending and climate finance

According to data from 2022, Global North countries spend 30 times more on their militaries than they contribute to climate finance.[27] Since then, governments across the Global North have been cutting international development budgets to fuel increased military spending. In some notable cases, the redirection of funding has been explicit, such as the UK government announcing a reduction in Official Development Assistance funding to facilitate increasing military spending to 3% of GDP.[28] In other cases, shifts have been more discreet, such as recent EU policy opening up climate action funds, alongside housing and social cohesion funds, to be utilised for military procurement.[29] In the US, the current administration has curtailed the work and budget of USAID alongside pushing for a military budget of more than $1 trillion.

With escalating military budgets and a reluctance from Global North governments to commit to mobilising public funds, military spending is increasingly under the spotlight as a funding source for climate finance. Oil Change International has outlined how $5 trillion could be mobilised from wealthy countries through introducing a tax on the arms trade, and the redistribution of 20% of public military spending, among other measures,[30] and a recent report from UN Secretary General noted how reinvesting 15% of global military spending could help plug the adaptation funding gap.[31]

This pushback has not been limited to civil society; at SB60, the Arab Group also called for a tax on Global North arms manufacturers, alongside fashion and the tech sector, to fund the New Collective Quantified Goal on climate finance. In addition, both

the COP29 Azeri presidency and the current COP30 Brazilian presidency have called out Global North governments for prioritising investment in militaries over climate action, although it remains that both Azerbaijan and Brazil have considerable military budgets, but as Non-Annex I countries, neither are obliged to contribute to climate finance.

This presents a troubling picture where an overly militarised future is prioritised at the expense of climate action, directly hindering states' ability to mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis while worsening its impacts.

10. Growing recognition

Despite not featuring on a COP agenda to date, the conflict-climate intersection is no longer a fringe issue within the UNFCCC, with both the COP28 and COP29 presidencies presenting flagship initiatives on the topic in the form of the Declaration On Climate, Relief, Recovery And Peace and the Baku Hub Initiative, respectively. Whilst these have been welcome developments, no initiative has so far begun to tackle the impact of conflict and military activity on the climate, nor measures to track it. However, in the recent International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on states' obligations in relation to climate change, Judge Cleveland's declaration focused on precisely this:

'Thus, the obligations of States under the climate change treaties and customary international law to assess, report on and mitigate harms to the climate system include responsibility to address the impacts resulting from armed conflict and other military activities. Failing to take such harms into account underreports and distorts our understanding of global warming and undermines the ability of the international community to tackle its causes. It is thus directly contrary to the international obligations of States to protect the climate system and other parts of the environment from GHG emissions.'[32]

Alongside the increase in attention on the military's impact on global emissions from both policymakers and civil society, this should point to an urgent need for change. In 2022, the IPCC Working Group II noted that: 'any further delay in concerted global action will miss a brief and rapidly closing window to secure a liveable future for all'.[33] We cannot allow the impact of rising militarism to hamper global climate action for any longer - governments must act.

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Recommendations

1. Include military emissions in global carbon accounting

The UNFCCC should implement, as a matter of urgency, mandatory military emissions reporting within National Inventory Reports, based on updated IPCC guidance for National Inventory Reports, which covers the full scope of military activity, including emissions from warfighting where relevant.

2. Commit to reducing military emissions

Governments should commit to ambitious and comprehensive military emissions reduction strategies in line with the Paris Agreement. These should be included within Nationally Determined Contributions to increase accountability.

3. Make strengthening defence compatible with climate action, diplomacy and peacebuilding

The global trend of diverting climate funds to facilitate rising military budgets should end. Instead, government budgets and international relations should focus on genuine human security, funding climate action, diplomacy, peacebuilding and conflict prevention.

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