

Transition Security

What are the consequences of militarisation for a warming world? How will Transition Security Project respond to this moment?

16 Oct 2025 • [Khem Rogaly](#), [Patrick Bigger](#), [Lorah Steichen](#)

Politicians across the North Atlantic have announced a historic programme of investment to address what they claim is an epochal threat. Despite the hopes of several generations, this is not a coordinated response to the climate crisis. European and North American governments are not mobilising their financial resources to transform the energetic basis of the economy, but towards the expansion of military and surveillance infrastructure.

As the planet burns, economic transformation is needed to avoid the destabilisation of life on earth. Rather than develop a green economy, European governments are expanding their war machines — a decision forecast to add 12 per cent to the continent's emissions. In the UK, Keir Starmer has declared a “generational investment” in the military and its associated industries, delivered through a “whole of society mobilisation”. This process is best understood as militarisation — a surge in military spending to consolidate geopolitical strength and to make military contracting central to the growth model of Western economies. The choice to pursue militarisation carries economic, environmental and geopolitical costs, each posing grave threats to human security.

1 The Atlantic Garrison

2 Military Largesse, Civilian Austerity

3 Existential Threat

4 Global Insecurity

5 Against Militarisation

The Atlantic Garrison

Leading the way, the US has funded the world's first trillion-dollar war machine and coerced European allies to divert resources towards their militaries. With the UK jockeying to guide the process, almost all European NATO countries have adopted a target of spending 3.5 per cent of GDP on their militaries, plus another 1.5 per cent on undefined security investments, with the aim of developing a European military industrial complex that matches the US in scale.

European politicians justify this spending as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. For Keir Starmer, the front line of this war is at home and an "armour-clad nation" must be built in response. Setting aside this dubious geography, military aid to Ukraine since 2022 has been worth less than five per cent of the UK's military budget.¹ This is just one indication that militarisation has other motivations.

Contrary to claims that the UK must rearm to reverse underinvestment in its military, Starmer's iron kingdom already has strong foundations. Britain has sustained a military budget in the world's top seven since at least 1949; this supports a global network of bases from Oman to the Chagos Islands. The collective military budget of European NATO powers is more than triple Russia's, with central and western European budgets having grown by nearly two thirds over the past decade. Despite invoking the supposedly imminent threat of Russian attacks, European leaders rarely explain what new investments are needed for. This is because the surge in military spending is not a defensive one. The 3.5 per cent NATO target is not based on an assessment of defensive needs, but crudely designed to match the Pentagon budget in size.

The arbitrary nature of the target indicates a strategy defined by geopolitics rather than defence. In March, JD Vance and Pete Hegseth sneered that Europeans were "freeloading" by not paying for a round of US airstrikes on Yemen. This was despite Britain providing refuelling aircraft for the attack and bombing Yemen for nearly a year in partnership with the US and Israel. In Washington, the objective is not to increase the capacity of European states to defend their territory, but for them to pay more to deliver American strategic objectives and to buy more weapons from US firms. Informing President Trump of new spending commitments, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte congratulated him on bombing Iran's nuclear programme, claiming that the attack "makes us all safer". Attacks on Yemen and Iran are not defensive moves for Europe, but assaults on other continents defined by the foreign policies of the US and Israel.

The consequences of Europe's acquiescence to these US demands are severe, with budget cuts to foreign aid, climate investments and social protections already attempted to fund militarisation. The language of security used by Western politicians reflects their ambition to dominate an unstable world, but the maintenance and ongoing expansion of global military infrastructure will not bring everyday security to citizens. This would instead require investment

in health, care, housing, climate adaptation and the energy transition while rebalancing military capacity towards domestic defence. As explored in detail below, the generational decisions being made in North American and European capitals will bring economic, climate and geopolitical turbulence to the lives of their citizens instead of much-needed security.

Military Largesse, Civilian Austerity

Militarisation at the scale pursued by North Atlantic elites limits the capacity of the state to meet the social needs of citizens. While governments on both sides of the Atlantic face differing constraints, they are united in offering fiscal largesse to their military industrial complexes and austerity to their populations. Devoting such a large share of GDP to military budgets — in the US more than half of the federal government's discretionary spending — structures the economy around a sector that provides little economic value to working class people. The main beneficiaries of large military budgets are the private investors that own military contractors.

In July 2025, the Big Beautiful Bill added \$150 billion to the Pentagon budget while cutting food assistance for 22.3 million families, health insurance for 4.8 million people and funding for clean energy. Meanwhile, the UK's Labour Government has committed to a series of hikes in the military budget, which leave it forecast to double by 2035. The Government launched the first part of its military spending spree through direct cuts to foreign aid. Given the Government's fiscal rules, further cuts to fund growing military spending are likely. On the European continent, only ten of twenty seven EU states are able to meet the new NATO target without making cuts, raising tax or abandoning fiscal rules.

Far from providing wide public benefits, or the “defence dividend” Keir Starmer has promised to voters, investment in military contracts is an economic risk. There is a gulf between the economic benefits of military spending and investment in public services or civilian industries: Transport for London procurement supports nearly three times as many jobs per pound as spending planned by the Ministry of Defence. There is also huge waste in military contracts. Military equipment is often delayed by years and faulty once delivered. In the United States, local policing agencies regularly acquire surplus equipment from the Pentagon free of charge. Devoting public investment to

military contractors concentrates government resources in a sector that provides little to the economy at a national scale.

Most of all, public funding that could otherwise be a source of everyday security — supporting health, housing, care and environment — is granted to private contractors owned by global asset management firms, fuelling executive pay and shareholder payouts. Between 2020 and 2024, more than half of discretionary Pentagon spending went to contractors — \$771 billion to just five companies. In 2021 alone, these five companies paid their top twenty four executives \$287 million. Rewarded above all are their shareholders: according to the Pentagon's analysis, military contractors distribute cash to their shareholders at a much higher rate than the stock index average. Military contracting involves the direct transfer of public money to shareholders at an immense scale.

When military budgets are made central to a country's economic model, shareholders are rewarded while the funding available to provide citizens with cheaper energy and affordable housing or food is constrained.

Existential Threat

Militarisation does not just pose an economic challenge. It is a fundamental risk to climate safety. The diversion of public resources towards warmaking is more than a case of misaligned priorities in the face of the climate crisis, but a climate threat in its own terms. Long ignored as a result of Pentagon lobbying, military emissions pose a barrier to global decarbonisation, while the resource demands of military manufacturing put unnecessary constraint on the supply of materials otherwise needed for green transformation.

Militaries are responsible for around 5.5 per cent of global emissions, a greater share than shipping and aviation combined. NATO countries are responsible for more than half of this even without accounting for the coming boom in military spending, which will have the same impact over the next decade as the annual carbon footprint of Brazil. These emissions are a source of planetary instability, adding to escalating wildfires, floods and storms and contributing to the long-term breakdown of climate patterns that have existed for all of human civilization.

As global forces stationed across the world, the US and UK militaries also pose a localised ecological threat. British and American military bases have left a trail of “forever chemicals” in the drinking water of communities from Afghanistan to Okinawa. While the ecological scars of occupation may not have the same immediacy as the social destruction of war, they risk the long-term future of communities on their land and, as in Gaza, they can form part of attempts at genocide and ethnic cleansing. In Iraq, the US military’s frequent use of open-air burn pits has poisoned soil and water, leading to persistent spikes in cancers, birth defects and respiratory illness among local communities.

Beyond the ecological devastation that results from military operations, military hardware requires many of the same resources and minerals essential to the climate transition. These materials are not only needed for conventional weapons systems, but also increasingly critical to meet the Pentagon’s growing data centre demands. Using these minerals for war worsens existing constraints on essential inputs for green transport and energy while also creating unnecessary demand for mining that damages adjacent lands and the communities, often Indigenous, that live on them.

Talk of greening the war machine is dangerous and misleading. Electrifying the Pentagon’s non-tactical vehicles alone would require enough transition minerals to decarbonise all US Postal Service trucks, all National Park Service vehicles and provide battery-powered backup electricity to nearly 8000 federal buildings. The Pentagon is already seizing resources needed for the climate transition, taking equity stakes in the only rare earth mine in the US. This scramble for resources should not be taken as an indication that the Pentagon can be decarbonised. The most significant sources of military emissions such as fighter jets, tanks and warships do not have zero carbon alternatives. Military emissions cannot be meaningfully reduced without a drawdown in military infrastructure.

As North Atlantic states make militaries and military industries central to their economic models, they constrain their ability to adapt effectively to the climate crisis. In the US and UK, public capital expenditure has flowed towards the military, dwarfing capital spending for the net zero and environment budgets. This failure to adapt risks both safety and economic stability: as the climate crisis mounts, so too will its inflationary impacts. Just as military emissions worsen environmental breakdown, a failure to adapt to a world transformed

will worsen the instability of everyday life. Food and energy prices will increase while disasters, and their economic impacts, intensify.

Global Insecurity

Fundamentally, Western militarisation is an attempt to impose dominance by force on a changing world order. The US is escalating its Cold War with China, foreclosing the industrial collaboration that is needed to address the climate crisis while heightening the potential of military confrontation between major powers. Meanwhile, Western powers have removed any performative constraint on the use of armed force, particularly through their support for Israel's genocide in Palestine. The assault on Gaza and Western backing for Israeli attacks on Iran, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, Qatar and Tunisia since 2023 heighten reliance on violence as a political tool and increase global instability.

To wage Cold War, the US is using trade and military policy to force allies into economic blocs. Militarisation, and attempts to coerce European states to buy US-made weapons, are just one process through which Washington is shaping the decisions of allied governments. The second Trump administration has escalated efforts to reduce the trade deficit and reinvigorate US industry, with money and loyalty demanded from allies to support the process.

Following the announcement of a new investment vehicle through which Japan has promised to invest \$550 billion in US industry — with the US pocketing 90 per cent of the profits — the Treasury Secretary suggested creating an American sovereign wealth fund that invests domestically using allies' wealth. The economic coercion of allies and the formation of rival economic blocs is a risk to the climate given that Chinese technology and raw materials are essential to the global process of decarbonisation. As the UK signed a trade deal this year to secure its “special relationship” with Washington, it accepted restrictions on Chinese investments in strategic sectors. This Cold War era makes the future of the climate a vector of interstate competition and potentially conflict.

More urgent than the new Cold War in the immediate term is the removal of any constraint on the use of violence by the US and its military allies. The genocide overseen by the US, supported by Europe, and undertaken by the Israeli military in Palestine is the primary example of this. Even symbolic attachment to the legal architecture previously used to justify military violence has been

abandoned. For instance, while collaborating in the use of starvation as a weapon of war, the US has deployed private mercenaries from a far-right biker gang to kill starving Palestinians through a perverse “humanitarian aid” mechanism, openly committing several war crimes at once.

The joint policy of the US, Israel and European powers to pursue military dominance in the Middle East has forced the West to abandon multilateral institutions that it once dominated. In September 2025, a UN commission finally concluded that Israel has committed genocide in Gaza. Throughout the twenty three months it took the UN to reach this finding, three of its five permanent security council members actively participated in the genocide. Three months earlier, the US and Europe supported strikes by Israel, a nuclear power, on Iran, a non-nuclear power involved in negotiations over its enrichment capacity; a direct attack on the non-proliferation regime overseen by the West. The same military establishments that demand support on the grounds of security are producing instability across the world in a quest for dominance.

Against Militarisation

Amid the economic, environmental and geopolitical instability wrought by militarisation, there is an urgent need for political alternatives. These must address the destabilising role played by Western military dominance and articulate routes towards collective safety and universal flourishing. This means defining where military capabilities and industries are necessary for defensive purposes and otherwise diverting military spending to the everyday security of the working class — from affordable housing, healthcare and food to a safe climate. These political alternatives can be developed at different levels, from plans by workers in military industries to convert production to national economic policy and multilateral security architectures.

For much of the twentieth century, labour leaders, economists and politicians developed alternative economic plans that demonstrated how public investment can direct manufacturing away from superfluous military demands and towards the security of working class people. This was famously the project of the Lucas Aerospace trade unionists in the 1970s, but it had broader and deeper foundations. The Lucas Aerospace stewards built on economic conversion organising in the US that developed out of resistance to the

American war in Vietnam. These efforts, spanning from DC politics and Ivy League offices to the International Association of Machinists inspired a UN report in 1973 that found no technical constraints to using sections of the military industry to develop products needed by civilians. While over the subsequent decades a host of worker and state-led projects demonstrated the conversion potential of military industrial workplaces, companies like Lockheed Martin and BAE Systems also used military sites to develop civilian products when it suited them financially to do so.

The 2020s offers a distinct context. The labour movement is much weaker in the North Atlantic than in the postwar era and projects as ambitious as the Lucas Plan remain distant. Nonetheless, the political organisation of those working in weapons production and its wider infrastructures is still needed to challenge militarisation and to demonstrate that it is not in the interests of the working class. Just as in the 1960s and 70s, this must form part of a wider coalition with politicians and movements that understand the threat posed by militarisation to planetary safety, everyday economic security and geopolitical stability. Finally, new international coalitions must foster climate collaboration instead of Cold War competition, drawing on the principles of non-alignment and reparation which are fundamental to building a more equal world order.

To face this moment, we are launching the Transition Security Project as a research centre which will support efforts to challenge militarisation through trade union organising, national politics and multilateral collaboration. We seek to support climate and labour movements, as well as media and politicians, by analysing the economic, climate and geopolitical risks of militarisation and developing industrial and political alternatives to militarised security.

We will work across three programmes of research, policy development and coalition building:

1 Economy

will analyse the economic harms produced by militarisation in the US and UK. It will also develop alternatives to military production in partnership with workers and trade unions.

2 Climate

will investigate the environmental and ecological damage produced by the US and UK war machines, from emissions to their demand for transition minerals.

3 Geopolitics

will commission new research on the global instability produced by US and UK militarisation. It will also explore alternative models of security and multilateral collaboration.

This autumn, we will launch a set of publications that outline the damage produced by militarisation and start to envision alternatives:

- A visual model of military industrial conversion at a UK naval shipyard, developed through interviews with workers, presented after an interactive timeline of past examples of conversion.
- A series of ten essays by leading scholars on two interconnected transitions — from US hegemony to a multipolar world and the uneven, halting energy transition. The essays examine the closures and openings this moment presents for climate collaboration.
- A briefing on the Pentagon's stockpiling of transition minerals and the threats posed to the climate transition.
- A report on the future of the Harland & Wolff shipyard in Belfast and how offshore renewables production has been challenged by rearmament.

Through collaboration and coordination with movements, politicians and journalists, this new research centre aims to help secure a safe global climate transition by paving the way towards new priorities for security.

The authors would like to thank Amelia Horgan, Mathew Lawrence, Sarah Nankivell and Rithika Ramamurthy for their editorial work and feedback on this essay. They would also like to thank Rectangle — as well as the Common Wealth and Climate and Community Institute teams — for their essential work on the launch of Transition Security Project.

-
1. For the UK's military budget see Bee Boileau and Max Warner, "UK defence spending: composition, commitments and challenges", Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2025. Available [here](#). For military aid to Ukraine, see "UK support to Ukraine: factsheet", UK Government, 2025. Available [here](#).