

## **A Politics of No Regrets? The Risks of Climate Securitisation**

**Article by Andrew Telford**

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Climate adaptation is sometimes presented as a “no regrets” policy response broadly supported by citizens and policymakers. But what are the risks of a militarised climate adaptation policy in the context of weaponised narratives about “climate-induced migration” and “climate conflicts”?

European countries, faced with deep social inequalities and the accelerating impacts of climate breakdown, must mitigate and adapt to climate change in an urgent, transformative manner. Whereas ambitious mitigation responses directly challenge fossil fuel extractivism and are subsequently subject to a “backlash” in Europe and elsewhere, adaptation policies focus on learning to live with the impacts of climate change. As noted in the European Union’s 2021 Climate Adaptation Strategy, adaptation “solutions” present “no regrets” that are “worth pursuing regardless of the ultimate climate path”.

However, the politics of climate adaptation is more complex than this picture suggests, and interwoven with unequal relationships of power, insecurity, and injustice. Which knowledges, including those of indigenous peoples, are prioritised in European adaptation responses? Who bears responsibility for funding adaptation responses, and how do these responsibilities map onto the unequal distribution of historic and current greenhouse gas emissions? And what say do those most affected by climate breakdown have in adaptation policy and decision-making?

Debates on climate adaptation and security are often concerned with the security implications of climate impacts, for example the risks of rising sea levels for territorial integrity or extreme weather events for key infrastructure.

In principle, adaptation policies can provide a means to mitigate for climate security risks such as the impact of flooding on transport infrastructure. However, it is often not clear who or what the “referent” vulnerable to climate change is. Depending on the context, it could be a nation-state or territory, key infrastructure, a population of living (including human) beings, the planet and particular ecosystems, or other potential security referents.

Given the need to adapt to climate change at all geographical scales and respond to locally differentiated climate impacts, state-centric and Eurocentric security responses threaten the possibility of just and transformative adaptation. Indeed, where such climate adaptation responses lead to increased militarisation and border policing, especially in response to weaponised narratives about “climate conflict” and “climate-induced migration”, this will only compound the violence engendered by climate change.

### **Migration as climate adaptation?**

The implications of climate change on human mobility form a key climate security discussion point. Several discourses have emerged in a European context to describe migration linked to climate change. One focuses on the human security risks and vulnerabilities of people displaced by climate-related

factors. The term “climate refugees” is often seen in this context. Another emphasises climate-induced migrants as a security risk to states, highlighting how displaced individuals could be a risk for receiving European countries.

Migration has also been framed as a form of adaptation to climate change. Here, migration is presented as a regular human activity carried out for many reasons, including climate risk response. Individuals adapt to climate change by exercising their agency to move in response to a changing situation.

The migration-as-adaptation discourse has been critiqued for its neoliberal orientation: it can sometimes emphasise “individual choice”, especially when migration is framed as exploiting economic opportunities in an international marketplace. Whilst this discourse includes a different conception of human agency, it does not necessarily question the structures of global capitalism that underpin climate breakdown, let alone the responsibilities of states to provide security for communities impacted by climate change.

*Constructing a narrative that ‘climate refugees’ are displaced by ‘climate conflicts’ in the Global South reproduces colonial tropes.*

## **Militarised response**

These discourses are not mutually exclusive and transpire in multiple forms across the spectrum of political actors in Europe. The European far right has been conventionally sceptical about the existence of climate breakdown, denying the fact that the Earth is warming, negating the link to anthropogenic activities, or refuting the necessity of policies to respond to the problem. Mitigation policies have been derided as too expensive, imposed by “external, global elites”, and unjust and economically detrimental for working-class communities. Climate change, a fundamentally transnational phenomenon demanding international solidarity, threatens nationalisms that prioritise the interests of a strongly bordered nation-state.

A narrative of climate-induced migrants from Global South countries “threatening” the borders of Europe is compatible with a far-right ideological agenda. Exploring documents produced by 22 European far-right parties, Joe Turner and Dan Bailey identify a discursive shift towards what they call “ecobordering”. European far-right parties are casting migrants as both “environmental vandals” who harm the environment in their host countries and “plunderers” who deplete resources in their “home” countries, situating the causes of environmental degradation in overexploitation in the Global South. Their racialised narrative provides justification for strong border controls. It also obscures the responsibility of the polluting, industrial Global North and the capitalist world economy as structural causes of climate breakdown.

The intimate attachment of far-right, neo-fascist actors to fossil capital and extractivism does not contradict the claim that climate-induced migration could be co-opted into a nationalist, racist anti-migration politics. Importantly, such a move does not require that far-right parties accept an anthropogenic cause for climate breakdown; when considered as a type of adaptive response, these political actors only need to accept that the climate is changing and that this has implications for human mobility.

This exclusionary agenda can also be situated as part of “Fortress Europe”, embodied in the EU’s

violent, militarised border apparatus. The EU's border management has "stretched" over the last two decades into Africa, including multiple migration partnership deals with third countries, including Tunisia, Mauritania, and Morocco. Jürgen Scheffran and colleagues have highlighted how development programmes in Africa can be used to promote an "adaptation-to-prevent-migration" pathway. Here, climate adaptation strategies become a form of immigration control, a way to contain migration rather than migration conceived as a type of positive adaptive response.

Media headlines such as "The climate refugee crisis is landing on Europe's shores" and "We need to prepare for mass climate migration" construct an image of large numbers of climate-induced migrants arriving in Europe from a Global South plagued by resource scarcities, disasters, and conflict. Many estimates have been provided for these types of claims, from biologist Norman Myers' strongly criticised claim that there would be 200 million climate refugees by 2050, to the 2007 Christian Aid report "Human tide: the real migration crisis", which claimed that 1 billion people could be internally displaced by 2050.

In their analysis of how the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region is represented in NGO reports, media, and web publications on climate change and security, Chris Methmann and Delf Rothe show that the region is conceived as a space of transnational security risks.<sup>10</sup> Individuals represented in images in these documents are largely people of colour and women and children represented in passive and domestic roles. "Climate refugees" are mainly represented as simultaneously risky and at risk: vulnerable and forced to move on the one hand, and, in some cases, capable of causing social destabilisation in receiving countries on the other.

Constructing a narrative that "climate refugees" are displaced by "climate conflicts" in the Global South reproduces neo-Malthusian, racialised, and colonial tropes about "climate terror" reaching the borders of Europe. Such discourses perpetuate an alarmist, inaccurate picture of climate-induced migration when in fact a large academic literature indicates that much environmental displacement is internal and multi-causal and that it is difficult to attribute climate change as a causal influence on human mobility. This depiction is also susceptible to political appropriation by European states hostile to a more humane and just migration policy.

### **"Climate conflict"**

Much academic and policy literature has developed that explores the potential for "climate conflicts" in the context of climate breakdown. Several cases have been put forward for conflicts already linked to anthropogenic climate change, including violent insecurity in the Lake Chad Basin and, most notably, the Syrian conflict.

The Syrian conflict broke out in early 2011 following the Assad government's repression of pro-democracy protests linked to the Arab Spring. Several studies claim that a drought in the north and northeast of Syria from 2006-2010, itself made more likely by climate change, contributed to food and livelihood insecurities in the country, which led to rural-urban migration to cities such as Damascus and Homs in western Syria. This migration is argued to have contributed to the broader social unrest that led to the demonstrations in early 2011.

*There is a risk that securitised climate change discourse prompts European and other countries to act in increasingly militarised ways.*

This narrative has been heavily critiqued, with academic studies also pointing to the impact of other factors such as the liberalisation of fuel prices and mismanagement of groundwater resources on rural Syrian livelihoods. In general, academic literature on climate conflicts remains cautious, with doubts regarding the extent to which climate-related factors influence the causal dynamics behind conflicts.

Notwithstanding this note of caution, there is a risk that securitised climate change discourse prompts European and other countries to act in increasingly militarised ways to adapt to a world of supposed “climate conflicts”. Many militaries have adopted the language of climate security, reflected both in the growth of national defence strategies with discussions of climate risk and climate adaptation plans produced by militaries concerned about the impacts of climate breakdown on their operations and assets.

European governments increasing their military investment, armaments, and defence capabilities in response to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a significant context for this militarisation of climate adaptation. Olaf Scholz’s *Zeitenwende* (“epochal shift”) involves Germany meeting the NATO target of defence spending at 2 per cent of GDP for the first time since 1990. The European Union has also broken with historical precedent by agreeing to the disbursement of 11.1 billion euros for Ukrainian armed forces, including providing weapons under the European Peace Facility.

This militarising trend is also echoed in some of Europe’s leading Green parties, which were often founded as part of pacifist movements and with shared commitments to human rights. Germany’s governing Bündnis 90/Die Grünen has supported sending weapons to Ukraine, Groenlinks-PVDA in the Netherlands supports meeting the 2 per cent of GDP NATO target, and the Green Party in England has also supported the armament of Ukraine’s defence forces.

With Europe facing Russia’s threat and the prospect of a retraction in US support for NATO if Donald Trump wins a second presidential term, this trend towards increased defence expenditure and militarisation shows no signs of abating. Militaries are already amongst the highest greenhouse gas emitters in the world, with an ecological footprint that stretches across the whole domain of military operations and logistics.

Once supplemented by the alarmist discourse of climate-induced violent conflicts, this creates a real risk that militarisation becomes established as a form of climate adaptation. The militarisation of climate adaptation would likely increase not only the ecological devastation of military activities even further, but also the risk of armed violence in response to so-called “climate conflicts”.

## **Resisting a militarised adaptation?**

The effects of militarised violence are very apparent in today’s world, from the Israeli government’s atrocities in Gaza to the horrors of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In their report on the potential of a feminist foreign policy for the EU, Nina Bernarding and Kristina Lunz identify climate change as a “threat multiplier”, which exacerbates security threats to “humans, societies, and states”. If increasingly militarised, there is a risk that climate adaptation policies become a “threat multiplier” in Europe and embolden the “Fortress Europe” border regime.

If European climate adaptation policies are to avoid these risks of militarisation, activists, politicians, and policymakers must reject a securitised narrative of climate-induced migration and “climate conflict” as a threat to Europe’s borders. Instead, adaptation policies should be grounded in principles of intersectional climate justice and the protection of human rights in a climate-changed world.



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