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Feminist foreign policy and climate security

– a justice-centred approach

Introduction

The intersection of climate change, security and feminist foreign policy represents a useful basis on which to examine the pressing challenges of climate justice in an increasingly interconnected world. As climate change accelerates, its impacts are becoming more severe and far-reaching, manifesting themselves in rising sea levels, extreme weather events, resource scarcity and forced displacement of persons. These changes not only exacerbate existing social, economic and political vulnerabilities, but also create new security challenges, from migration crises to conflicts over dwindling resources. Addressing these interconnected crises requires a transformative approach that goes beyond traditional state-centric and militarised paradigms.

Climate security, as a concept, highlights the interplay between environmental changes and their implications for human security, state stability and global peace. For decades, however, it remained largely ignored in security discourses, relegated to environmental and development agendas. In recent years, this has shifted, as climate security has become a prominent concern in the strategic frameworks of organisations such as NATO and some national security strategies. But these approaches often prioritise the protection of state interests and infrastructure, sidelining the broader implications for vulnerable populations and the root causes of climate vulnerabilities. They rely predominantly on militarised frameworks, such as securing borders against climate-induced migration or deploying armed forces for disaster relief. While these measures address immediate threats, they fail to tackle the multifaceted dimensions of climate justice, including gender inequalities, intersectional vulnerabilities and the structural injustices that underlie many environmental crises. Militarised approaches can exacerbate insecurities, marginalise already vulnerable communities and perpetuate the power dynamics that contribute to environmental degradation and social injustice.

This paper explores the necessity of adopting a feminist foreign policy–based approach to climate security, one that emphasises justice- and human-centric strategies. By integrating the principles of inclusivity, intersectionality and sustainability, a feminist foreign policy lens shifts the focus from state-centric solutions to community resilience, equitable resource distribution and long-term ecological regeneration. This approach recognises the agency of marginalised voices, particularly women, young people and Indigenous communities, and seeks to address the structural inequalities that amplify the impacts of climate change. In doing so, it aims to foster a more just, sustainable and peaceful global order.

Evolving climate security approaches: from militarisation to justice

Historically, climate change was viewed primarily through an environmental lens, with limited recognition of its security implications. Over the past decade, this perspective has shifted, as climate change has become integrated into the military strategies of many Western nations. For instance, the US Department of Defense has acknowledged climate change as a critical national security issue, incorporating it into defence planning and operations. Similarly, Canada has established and hosts the NATO Centre of Excellence on Climate Change and Security in Montreal, reflecting a commitment to understanding and adapting to climate-related security challenges.[1] Some other examples from NATO Allies' efforts to adapt to climate change are showcased in the latest Compendium of Best Practices.[2]

Despite these advancements, NATO's approach focuses predominantly on how climate change impacts its operational capabilities and strategic environment rather than addressing the root causes of climate-induced vulnerabilities. These efforts include the development of heat-resilient equipment and assessment of future hotspots of operational concern. However, while NATO has introduced a Greenhouse Gas Emissions Mapping and Analytical Methodology,[3] which provides a framework for understanding the environmental impact of its military operations, its implementation remains voluntary and limited, as its environmental footprint remains a significant issue.

This operational focus tends to perpetuate the status quo, emphasising the protection of military infrastructure and state interests over transformative approaches that address the systemic drivers of climate insecurity, such as socioeconomic inequalities or the exploitation of natural resources. By prioritising adaptation for military readiness rather than broader climate justice initiatives, these

frameworks risk entrenching existing power imbalances rather than fostering sustainable and equitable solutions. NATO could adopt a more proactive approach by leveraging its strategy, planning, purchasing, technological development, and operational resources not only to mitigate climate risks but also to enhance operational efficiency.[4]

The intersection of militarisation and climate security highlights significant challenges in addressing the global climate crisis. The military-industrial complex remains one of the largest contributors to environmental degradation and global emissions, but its role is often overlooked in climate policy discourse. The 2.4 trillion US dollars allocated to military spending annually[5] dwarfs the investments made to date in climate finance, reflecting a global misalignment of priorities.

Redirecting even a fraction of this annual military expenditure could significantly boost global climate finance, supporting vulnerable communities, enhancing renewable energy deployment and advancing resilience projects.

The environmental impact of military activities extends beyond emissions. From deforestation during armed conflicts to contamination of water sources due to chemical weapon use, the ecological consequences of militarisation are potentially immense.[6] Most recent and prominent examples may be observed in Gaza and Ukraine. But accountability mechanisms remain weak.

Emerging frameworks such as the recognition of "ecocide" under the International Criminal Court (ICC) offer a path to address environmental destruction as a crime against humanity. For example, in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the devastating consequences of the war for the environment Ukraine has joined other countries in calling for ecocide to be recognised and taken into account in international law. Such legal frameworks could in the long term deter environmentally destructive military practices and offer justice for communities disproportionately affected by these actions.

A constructive role for armed forces in climate action

On one hand, while militarisation often exacerbates environmental challenges, armed forces can play a constructive role in addressing the climate crisis if their efforts go beyond merely reducing their ecological footprint. Reducing emissions through measures such as sustainable energy use, waste management and conservation practices – implemented by organisations such as UN Peacekeeping Operations – represents an important first step.[7] In order for armed forces to play a genuinely constructive role, however, they must also integrate broader climate adaptation strategies into their mandates, particularly in peacekeeping and disaster response missions. This could include proactive engagement with local communities to build climate resilience, addressing vulnerabilities exacerbated by climate-related shocks, and actively working to prevent resource-driven conflicts. By transitioning from an operational focus on mitigating their own environmental impact to a justice-oriented approach that tackles the root causes of climate insecurity, armed forces could align their activities with global climate goals and support long-term stability in affected regions.

In Nepal, for example, local communities played a crucial role in disaster preparedness and management following the 2015 earthquake. While the military provided essential resources and logistical support, studies show that the response was significantly bolstered by community-led initiatives. Local actors were able to address critical needs and bridge gaps left by centralised or hierarchical approaches.[8] This underscores the need for more inclusive disaster management frameworks in which civil−military

1 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_91048.htm
2 https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/7/pdf/230710-climate-change-best-practices.pdf
3 https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/7/pdf/230710-NATO-GHG-Methodology.pdf
4 https://rusi.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2023.2235152#d1e104
5 https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/global-military-spending-surges-amid-war-rising-tensions-and-insecurity
6 https://www.un.org/en/peace-and-security/how-conflict-impacts-our-environment#:~:text=From%20contaminated%20lands%20and%20polluted,and%20ultimately%2C%20preventing%20future%20conflicts.
7 https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/environmental-management
8 https://dr.ntu.edu.sg/bitstream/10356/143568/2/An%20Assessment%20of%20International%20Emergency%20Disaster%20Response%20to%20the%202015%20Nepal%20Earthquakes%20.pdf

cooperation integrates local knowledge and capacities, ensuring that the strengths of both are leveraged without marginalising community efforts.

These realities call for a shift from a reactive, militarised stance to a justice-oriented framework that prioritises human and ecological well-being. While military frameworks can provide critical logistical support during disaster responses, they often focus on short-term stability and operational efficiency rather than addressing systemic vulnerabilities or empowering local communities. A justice-oriented framework would emphasise collaboration with local actors, leveraging their proximity, knowledge and community networks, while avoiding hierarchical structures that can marginalise or overshadow their contributions.

On the other hand, military operations are sometimes deployed to protect and enable resource extraction activities, often on behalf of state or even private interests. These activities can lead to severe environmental degradation and social injustices. For instance, in the Niger Delta, the Nigerian military has been used to secure oil installations on behalf of the state and multinational corporations involved in resource extraction. This militarisation has resulted in widespread environmental damage, including oil spills and pollution, the destruction of local livelihoods and the displacement of indigenous populations.[9] These actions illustrate how military involvement in resource extraction, rather than protecting communities, can exacerbate ecological harm and social inequality, raising questions about accountability and the prioritisation of corporate and state interests over environmental and human rights.

Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, as both state actors and private companies often play a role in the militarisation of resource extraction. Stricter regulations on resource extraction in conflict zones are essential to ensure accountability and transparency for all stakeholders involved, including governments, private corporations and security forces. Demilitarisation of resource-rich regions could help reduce violence and environmental degradation, but this must be

accompanied by robust governance structures to prevent the externalisation of security to non-state actors.

Additionally, supporting community-led conservation initiatives can empower local populations to manage their natural resources sustainably and equitably, providing an alternative to militarised or corporate-dominated approaches. Advocacy efforts must also focus on exposing and challenging the connections between military operations, state or private interests, and exploitative resource practices, while ensuring that alternative security measures prioritise human rights, local agency and environmental justice.

Climate displacement: moving beyond militarised responses

The climate crisis is driving displacement on an unprecedented scale, with millions forced to leave their homes due to rising sea levels, extreme weather events and resource scarcity. However, it is crucial to differentiate between internally displaced persons (IDPs) and cross-border migration, as fear-inducing narratives about mass climate migration often underpin militarised responses. These narratives, which suggest large-scale migration crises, are not supported by evidence. Studies show that most people displaced by climate change remain within their own countries, as highlighted by the World Bank's finding that over 140 million climate migrants are projected to be internally displaced by 2050.[10] In 2023 alone, a record 76 million people were displaced within their own countries due to conflicts and natural disasters, highlighting the severity of the issue.[11]

Unfortunately, many governments respond to this displacement with militarised approaches, such as deploying troops to manage migration flows or constructing border barriers. For instance, the European Union has increased military operations in the Mediterranean to control migration, leading to severe human rights abuses and loss of life.[12] Such narratives can be harmful and inaccurate, as they over-emphasise external migration and fuel securitised

9 https://theconversation.com/niger-delta-is-rich-in-resources-but-environmental-destruction-is-pushing-people-into-poverty-214598
10 https://cjp.org.in/climate-change-could-cause-more-than-140-million-climate-migrants-world-bank/
11 https://apnews.com/article/migration-internally-displaced-gaza-sudan-77e14077aeb36de2988cf2294744baf0
12 https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/04/24/mexican-ngos-denounce-a-harsh-migration-policy_6669441_4.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

policies, including militarised border enforcement, which fail to address the root causes of displacement.[13] A more nuanced understanding is needed, one that focuses on supporting IDPs through sustainable adaptation strategies and addressing vulnerabilities in affected regions, rather than perpetuating alarmist migration scenarios. This would ensure that policy responses prioritise human dignity and climate resilience over securitisation.

Securitising responses not only fail to address the root causes of displacement but often exacerbate insecurity and human rights violations. Instead, a human-centred approach is needed, one that prioritises climate adaptation in vulnerable regions and ensures that displaced populations are treated with dignity and provided with opportunities to rebuild their lives. This includes integrating displaced populations into national climate change policies and planning, as emphasised by the United Nations Environment Programme,[14] for example. It would also require that underlying vulnerabilities be addressed through investments in resilient infrastructure, community-based disaster management and equitable resource distribution. This would tackle the systemic factors driving displacement rather than treating its symptoms through securitised measures.

Key tenets of feminist foreign policy in climate security

- **People-centric approaches:** feminist foreign policy prioritises human security over traditional state-centric models by addressing structural inequalities and ensuring access to resources and justice. This approach recognises that the impacts of climate change disproportionately affect marginalised populations and seeks to empower these communities through inclusive policies and practices.[15]
- **Intersectional environmentalism:** recognising that climate vulnerabilities intersect with race, gender and socioeconomic status, feminist foreign policy advocates for policies that address these overlapping disparities. By applying an intersectional lens, feminist foreign

policy ensures that climate actions are equitable and responsive to the diverse needs of all communities.[16]

- **Regeneration and adaptation:** beyond mitigation, feminist foreign policy emphasises ecological regeneration and community resilience. This involves restoring natural ecosystems and enhancing the adaptive capacities of communities, aligning with planetary boundaries and preventing ecological tipping points.[17]

By integrating these principles, feminist foreign policy provides a comprehensive approach to climate security that not only addresses immediate environmental challenges but also promotes long-term social justice and sustainability.

13 https://www.cgdev.org/blog/climate-migration-narrative-inaccurate-harmful-and-pervasive-we-need-alternative
14 https://www.unep.org/resources/policy-and-strategy/integrating-displaced-populations-national-climate-change-policy-and?utm_source=chatgpt.com
15 https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/gender-responsive-approaches-to-foreign-policy-and-the-2030-agenda-feminist-foreign-policies-en.pdf
16 https://sustainability.yale.edu/explainers/yale-experts-explain-intersectionality-and-climate-change
17 https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/11/feminist-climate-justice-a-framework-for-action

Policy recommendations

Integrating feminist foreign policy into climate security requires actionable and targeted strategies across multiple governance levels. Expanded recommendations for key actors include the following:

Large-scale governance and policy aspects

EU

Adopt intersectional environmental policies:
- implement comprehensive policies addressing the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status in climate action plans;
- develop EU-wide standards for integrating gender budgeting and gender analysis into environmental and climate adaptation programmes;
- establish mechanisms for the inclusion of marginalised voices in decision-making, particularly women, young people and Indigenous groups.

Advocate for recognition of ecocide under international law:
- lead global efforts to classify ecocide as a crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), holding actors accountable for large-scale environmental destruction;
- collaborate with Member States and international partners to develop legal frameworks that prevent environmental harm during conflicts and ensure reparations for affected communities.

Strengthen climate diplomacy:
- utilise the EU's diplomatic influence to promote sustainable development and climate justice on a global scale, particularly in vulnerable regions;
- integrate feminist foreign policy principles into climate-related trade and development agreements to ensure equitable and sustainable outcomes.

NATO and other security organisations:

Shift from militarised to human-centric climate security:
- refine NATO's strategic focus to include human security by addressing the root causes of climate insecurity, such as resource inequalities and poor governance, through enhanced civil-military collaboration, capacity-building in vulnerable regions, and partnerships with multilateral organisations to prioritise community resilience and climate adaptation;
- establish frameworks for collaboration with civilian organisations to ensure inclusive and non-militarised disaster response mechanisms.

Promote sustainability in defence operations:
- reduce the carbon footprint of military operations by transitioning to renewable energy and adopting sustainable practices in supply chains and logistics;
- establish accountability mechanisms for the environmental impact of military actions, including during conflicts.

Targeted, community-oriented actions

EU

Increase funding for local climate justice initiatives:
- allocate substantial resources to support grassroots organisations, particularly those led by women and Indigenous communities, that work on climate justice and resilience;
- ensure that funding mechanisms are accessible, transparent and tailored to the specific needs of vulnerable communities.

Develop inclusive frameworks for climate refugees:
- create legal protections for climate-displaced individuals, ensuring their rights are recognised under international law;
- develop national programmes for resettlement, integration and livelihood restoration, prioritising dignity and autonomy.

Member States

Reallocate military budgets to climate finance:
- reallocate defence spending currently focused on militarised climate responses – such as border control, securitised disaster management, and protection of critical infrastructure – towards transforming these approaches into holistic, community-centred disaster management systems, while also increasing investments in climate adaptation, mitigation and ecological regeneration projects;
- prioritise investments in nature-based solutions, such as reforestation, sustainable agriculture and wetland restoration, that enhance biodiversity and resilience.

Support women-led and community-based organisations:
- establish dedicated funding streams and technical assistance programmes for women-led initiatives in disaster risk reduction and resilience building;
- foster partnerships with local organisations to ensure that responses are context-specific and empower those most affected by climate change.

Enhance educational and capacity-building programmes:
- invest in training programmes for policymakers, local governments, and civil society organisations on intersectional climate justice and feminist foreign policy principles;
- support initiatives that amplify the voices of women and marginalised groups in climate science, policy and advocacy.

Conclusion

Addressing climate security through a feminist foreign policy lens requires more than incremental change – it demands a paradigm shift. Moving from militarisation to justice, from reaction to prevention, and from exploitation to regeneration, a feminist foreign policy approach challenges entrenched power structures and promotes transformative solutions. Traditional security frameworks often perpetuate inequalities and focus on short-term stability at the expense of long-term justice and sustainability. In contrast, feminist foreign policy emphasises inclusivity, equity and resilience, offering a holistic pathway to address the interconnected crises of climate change, insecurity and systemic injustice.

Centring marginalised voices, especially women, young people and Indigenous communities, is not only a matter of justice but also a strategic imperative. These groups often possess unique insights and adaptive capacities critical to building resilience against climate impacts. Intersectional approaches that consider the overlapping vulnerabilities tied to gender, race, socioeconomic status and geography allow for more effective climate security strategies. Additionally, prioritising ecological sustainability ensures that solutions align with planetary boundaries, fostering harmony between human development and environmental preservation.

The integration of feminist foreign policy into climate security provides an opportunity to address the root causes of climate-induced insecurity, from resource inequalities to displacement. By advocating for policies such as demilitarisation, community-led conservation and reparative justice mechanisms, feminist foreign policy offers a vision for global governance that is proactive, inclusive and future-focused. This approach not only addresses immediate threats but also works to dismantle the systemic drivers of vulnerability, promoting a world in which security is defined in terms of the well-being of people and ecosystems rather than the strength of borders and military capabilities.

As global challenges intensify, from the escalating impacts of climate change to rising displacement and resource scarcity, the urgency of innovative and strategic action has never been greater. The feminist foreign policy framework offers a robust and adaptable approach to addressing these interconnected crises, not only promoting equity, sustainability and peace, but also offering significant strategic opportunities. By integrating justice, resilience and inclusivity in the core of climate security efforts, policymakers and institutions can enhance long-term stability, foster more effective governance and strengthen international cooperation, thereby laying the groundwork for a united and collaborative response to global challenges.

FES ROCPE in Vienna

Established in 2016, the FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe (FES ROCPE) addresses today's profound challenges to European security. It also works closely with the OSCE on integrating young voices in European security debates and the interface between security and environment.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was a watershed moment for security in Europe and has rendered obsolete previous visions of European order. A new Cold War or even more unstable relations between Russia and the West are the probable outcome of this war, creating an environment of confrontation and containment in Europe. At the same time, planetary challenges such as climate change or pandemics continue to threaten peace and security and require cooperative approaches.

In these uncertain times, FES ROCPE continues to develop new ideas under the aegis of solution-oriented policymaking, together with experts, politicians and policy planners from Eastern Europe, Russia, the EU and the US. The aim is to tackle interconnected security challenges, contribute to conflict resolution and strengthen the idea of common and indivisible security in Europe in the spirit of the Paris Charter (1990) and the Istanbul Charter (1999). It is our belief that organisations such as the FES have a responsibility to come up with new ideas and to introduce them into the political process in Europe.

Our activities include:

» regional and international workshops aimed at developing new concepts on stabilising the security situation in Europe, dealing with conflicts and achieving lasting peace in Europe;

» maintaining a regional network of young professionals working on de-escalation, cooperation and peace in Europe;

» regular public opinion polling on security matters;

» cooperation with the OSCE in the three dimensions of security: the politico-military, the economic and environmental, and the human.

About the author

Sofiia Shevchuk is founder of an educational and consultancy platform VONA, dedicated to the topics of climate, gender, peace and security; she also serves as an independent researcher, trainer, facilitator and a podcast host (VONA Talks).

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