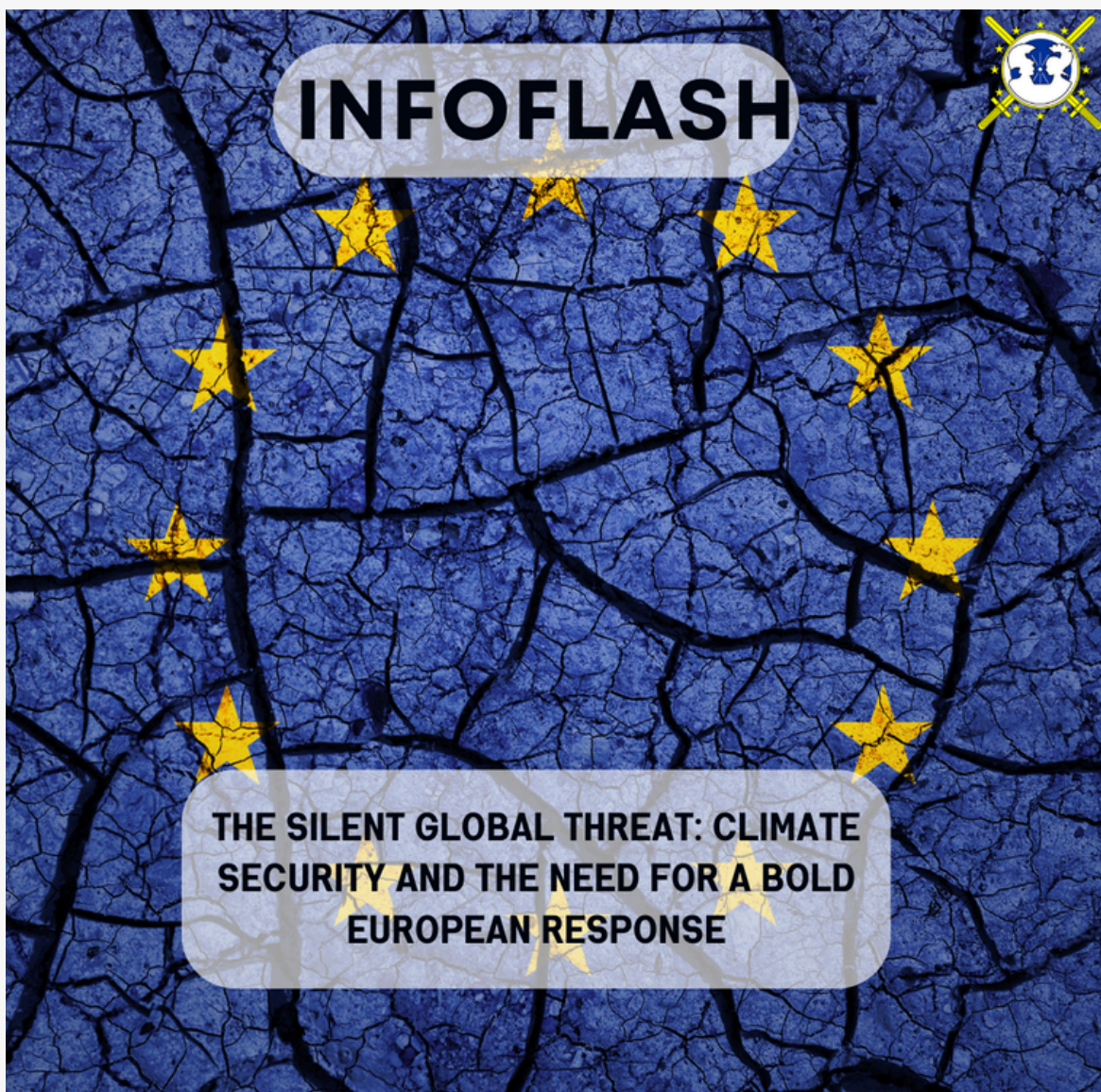


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**THE SILENT GLOBAL THREAT: CLIMATE
SECURITY AND THE NEED FOR A BOLD
EUROPEAN RESPONSE**

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Despite decades of warning from climate scientists, the international community continues to dismiss the reality of the climate emergency and its role in fuelling existing security risks. Indeed, at a time when a bold European response is most needed, the current geopolitical context has brought about reticence to further commit to ‘greening’ the Union’s policies. With an increased spending in defence likely to undermine the Green Deal’s greenhouse gas emissions targets (Parkinson, 2025, p. 16), and with some Member States (MSs) delaying the vote on the Commission’s proposed climate target for 2040 (Weise & Guillot, 2025), it seems that environmental issues currently lack enough political salience for Europe to remain ambitious in further integrating and operationalising policies to mitigate climate change-related security threats.

Considering this context, this paper aims to examine how the EU is responding to the triple planetary crisis (climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution) as a security matter, by examining the current state of security aspects within the European climate change legal framework. The analysis shall focus on legislation and policies already in place or currently being discussed. Additionally, the current or future infrastructure and capabilities to improve Europe’s resilience will be considered. The analysis shows that some progress has been achieved at the EU level, due to the introduction of soft law. Nevertheless, the lack of legally binding legislation undermines current efforts toward the consolidation of a common climate, security and defence agenda. Accordingly, recommended lines of action are provided to overcome this challenge.

1. The EU’s legal framework: a Continued Exclusion of Security and Defence from Environmental Policy

Despite the EU’s wide recognition of climate change as a risk to international peace and stability, security and defence considerations are absent in environmental legislation. For instance, any mention of security and defence within the European Green Deal is limited to the promise of working with partners to increase resilience and prevent the ecological transition from generating challenges that may evolve into insecurity or conflicts. The word choice is also telling, as demonstrated by the conviction that climate implications “should”, rather than must, be integral to the Union’s external action, including the CSDP (European Commission, 2019, Section 3).

Indeed, from a legal perspective, there is a systematic misalignment between the scope of climate regulations, and security and defence policies, due to treaty provisions (Bremberg & Bunse, 2023, p. 10). Article 191 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) posits that combating climate change is a goal of the Union’s external action embedded in the EU’s environmental policy, thus entailing the promotion of measures to.

address climate change at a regional and global scale, with the possibility of cooperation with third-party countries and competent international organisations. Nevertheless, the principle of conferral establishes that the EU can only act within the scope of the competences ceded by the MSs, as agreed upon in the treaties.

While Article 4 of the TFEU establishes the environment as a policy area with shared competence, thus allowing the EU to adopt legally binding acts and MSs to legislate as well (so long as the EU does not or chooses not to exercise its competence on a specific subject), Articles 31 and 42 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), alongside Protocols 10 and 11, and Declarations 13 and 14 concerning the common foreign and security policy, forbid the Union from adopting legally binding acts in the field of foreign, security and defence policy. Consequently, due to competences on security and defence not being conferred to the Union, the CFSP and CSDP remain intergovernmental in nature, and function as frameworks through which MSs can develop a joint security and defence culture. Such provisions, enshrined in EU treaty law, pose a major limit to the Union's ability to enforce legally binding legislation on climate security and defence, thus requiring policy and action frameworks beyond legislation.

2. Strategies for Climate Change, Security and Defence Beyond Legislation

Having explored the state of affairs of the EU's legal framework regarding the environmental and security and defence nexus, this section turns to other policy initiatives beyond legislation, namely the 2020 Climate Change and Defence Roadmap, the 2021 Concept for an Integrated Approach to Climate Change and Security, the 2022 Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, and the 2023 Joint Communication on A New Outlook on the Climate and Security Nexus.

2.1 Climate Change and Defence Roadmap (2020)

Jointly drafted by the Commission, the European Defence Agency (EDA), and the European External Action Service (EEAS), the 2020 Climate Change and Defence Roadmap ('the Roadmap') exclusively covers the military and civilian dimensions of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), with focus on the operational dimension, capabilities development and the strengthening of multilateralism and partnerships. The Roadmap calls for the integration of climate policy implications into defence research and development, industry, technology and infrastructure, with the aim to contribute to the European Green Deal's goals of reducing emissions in the defence sector, increasing energy sustainability, prioritising energy efficiency and protecting biodiversity (EEAS, 2020, p.3).

Acknowledging that the Union sees climate change as a risk multiplier both in the short and

long term, the operational dimension of the Roadmap puts forward the need for decision-makers and mission planners to be aware of the climate change-related security and defence implications and priorities. To do so, the EU seeks to increase preparedness by improving coordination between existing instruments that tackle early warning and conflict analysis, weather and climate forecasting, and environmentally related strategic foresight on CSDP missions. Additionally, the EEAS aims to develop operational concepts, operational guidelines, and standard operating procedures, with the aim of mainstreaming climate change and environmental degradation into the planning and implementation of crisis management mandates and CSDP missions. These instruments include the creation of an environmental advisor position for missions and operations, as well as strategies to increase civil and military humanitarian cooperation in situations requiring disaster relief (EEAS, 2020, pp. 5-6).

The capability development section focuses on climate change-related operational challenges regarding defence technology and equipment, to enhance their resilience and energy efficiency. Proposed actions include the integration of climate change adaptation and mitigation in EU trainings and exercises in collaboration with the European Security and Defence College (ESDC), the inclusion of the defence sector in energy-related directives to green public procurement, and research and development on resource and energy efficiency, infrastructure resilience, circular economy, and the reduction of environmental and carbon footprint in the defence sector and its industry (EEAS, 2020, pp. 7-8).

The last dimension focuses on partnerships and multilateralism, echoing the Union's belief that tackling climate change-related security and defence issues requires a unified global approach. Thus, the EEAS, together with the corresponding Commission services, aims to explore several cooperation opportunities in bilateral and multilateral settings to address the impact of climate change and environmental degradation in relation to the defence sector, such as fostering deeper strategic partnerships with the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and the African Union (AU), as well as the inclusion of climate change in bilateral dialogues on security and defence policy (EEAS, 2020, P. 10).

2.2 Concept for an Integrated Approach on Climate Change and Security (2021)

Published in 2021, the Concept for an Integrated Approach on Climate Change and Security ('the Concept') aims to further integrate climate change into the EU's external action on matters of peace and security. It focuses on conflict management and crises, providing a multi-level framework that mainstreams the climate-security nexus into instruments and policy, and brings together MSs, relevant EU actors and other partners, such as civil society. The Concept focuses on conflict prevention, crisis response, conflict resolution, stabilisation and security strategies, external action on development, climate change mitigation and

adaptation, and humanitarian aid. Proposed actions in the realm of conflict prevention include the strengthening of climate change considerations in early warning systems and conflict analysis, as well as sensitivity assessments, by means of investment in training for staff and pilot projects to revise current methodologies and partnerships with the help of information and data gathering platforms. On matters of crisis response, the Concept envisions a harmonisation with the Roadmap's actions, such as the operational guidelines for CSDP missions, the management of missions and operations' environmental footprint, or the deployment of environmental advisors. Specifically for military CSDP missions, the revised version of the EU Concept for Environmental Protection and Energy Optimisation for EU-led Military Operations and Missions is to be implemented with the necessary expertise provided for in the operational guidelines (EEAS, 2021, p. 7).

Further efforts are to be taken to increase environmental peace-keeping support, with plans to improve environmental awareness to mediators' capabilities, such as training modules, or the creation of specific expert pools on topics like land degradation or water conflicts. In the fields of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, as well as disaster risk management, the EU aims to assess and integrate climate and environment-related security risks in the implementation of preparedness, peace processes and risk reduction frameworks. Lastly, the Union aims to mainstream disaster preparedness in all its humanitarian action, integrate conflict and climate sensitivity in all its humanitarian aid funding, and promote the reduction of the environmental footprint, by offering guidelines and training to humanitarian partners to green humanitarian aid (EEAS, 2021, p. 10).

2.3 Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (2022)

The 2022 Strategic Compass for Security and Defence ('the Compass') was published in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with an EU deeply committed to strengthening its own capabilities and autonomy, ensuring resilience and enhancing solidarity and assistance among MSs. In its aim to assess the strategic and security environment and improve the Union's ability to collectively and coherently defend itself, the Compass sets out four priorities with their respective lines of action: the ability to act swiftly and robustly, threat anticipation, secure access guarantees to strategic policy areas and protection of citizens, enhanced capabilities and technology innovation to reduce dependencies, and strengthening strategic partnership cooperation in the areas of security and defence (EEAS, 2022a, pp. 11–13).

The Compass dedicates a section to climate change, disasters and emergencies, stressing the need to enhance resilience through an integrated approach, while working towards a truly climate-neutral presence on the ground. Nonetheless, the Compass limits itself to mentioning the full implementation of the Climate Change and Defence Roadmap by 2023,

the development of national strategies by the armed forces of MSs to prepare against climate change, and the promise that, by 2025, all CSDP missions have an environmental advisor staffed, who is to provide an environmental footprint report. The Compass also pledges to improve the abilities of national armed forces in emergency situations, as well as strengthen the EEAS Crisis Response framework, in cooperation with the Emergency Response Coordination Centre (EEAS, 2022a, pp. 39, 41).

2.4 A New Outlook on the Climate and Security Nexus (2023)

The Joint Communication on A New Outlook on the Climate and Security Nexus ('the Communication'), published in 2023 by the EEAS and the Commission, asserts that the Union must fully and coherently integrate climate, peace and security in its external policy, a feat that cannot be done without the cooperation of MSs. By ensuring that the Communication remains in line with the goals established within the Green Deal and the Strategic Compass on Security and Defence, its chief goal is to establish a framework with a concrete set of actions aimed at strengthening external action, policies, and capabilities, so that the EU is ready to face the triple planetary crisis and its effects on security and defence.

The Communication's first pillar focuses on enhancing climate and environment-informed planning, decision-making and implementation, through evidence gathering and foresight. It sets out the creation of a Climate and Environment Security Data and Analysis Hub, the broadening of the Global Conflict Risk Index to include climate change and environment degradation indicators, and the establishment of a methodology to gather and analyse data on MS defence and energy, within the framework of EDA (EEAS & European Commission, 2023, pp. 5–8). The second pillar is dedicated to the coherent operationalisation of the climate and security nexus in EU external action, from policy formulation to implementation. Lines of action include economic and investment plans, such as the Global Gateway, to include provisions of climate and environment aspects as investments in peace and security, the establishment of crisis situation assessments that incorporate climate and environment considerations, climate-sensitive trainings on peace and security to EU staff, and the integration of climate and environmental considerations in the operationalisation of scenarios conducted by the Rapid Deployment Capacity (EEAS & European Commission, 2023, pp. 8–14).

The third pillar of the Communication deals with enhancing climate adaptation and mitigation measures, and ensuring a sustainable and climate-resilient European security and defence. To do so, actions include the establishment of an EU Climate, Security and Defence Training Platform, a Climate and Defence Support Mechanism, an EU-led Competence Centre on Climate Change, Security and Defence, and a Climate and Defence Network (EEAS & European Commission, 2023, pp. 17–18). Lastly, the fourth pillar focuses on reinforcing

international partnerships, by setting an ambitious global agenda on security and climate in close cooperation with the UN, integrating environmental considerations in dialogues with partners, and identifying potential cooperation opportunities on matters of climate change and defence with NATO (EEAS & European Commission, 2023, p. 22).

3. Progress Reports and Prospective Challenges: Legal Basis, Competence and the Unlikely Formalisation of Soft Law

The aforementioned strategies have been assessed in several progress reports, namely the 2022 Joint Progress Report on Climate Change, Defence and Security, the 2024 Annual Progress Report on the Implementation of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, and the Progress Report on the Implementation of the 2023 Joint Communication. Operational successes for the Roadmap and the Approach include the mainstreaming of climate change issues into the planning and implementation of CSDP mandates and humanitarian projects via operational guidelines and a conceptual framework, as well as the deployment of the first environmental advisors in civilian missions (EEAS, 2022b, pp. 7–8). Due updates have also been made to the Early Warning System with the inclusion of climate-sensitive indicators, and the climate-security dimension is now part of the assessment on risk mitigation in support of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes (EEAS, 2022b, pp. 6, 11). In terms of funding, the Enhanced Response Capacity programme is financing initiatives that reduce the environmental footprint of humanitarian operations, and the European Defence Fund is subsidizing research and development of projects on energy efficiency (EEAS, 2022b, pp. 13, 18).

As for the Compass, the report highlights the establishment of the Climate and Defence Network, the aim of which is to support the national defence sector's strategies that address the impact of climate change, as well as the EEAS Crisis Response Centre, with the ability to aid during the preparation, evaluation and response to emergencies or crises affecting EU citizens and staff abroad. Progress on the Joint Communication includes the integration of environmental indicators into the Global Conflict Risk Index, pilot conflict analysis screenings in Somalia – with plans to extend to the East African region – the publication of peace negotiation guidelines that establish climate change as a threat multiplier with potential to affect international peace and security, with which the EU has been able to support 6 local peace mediation dialogues, and the establishment of an EU Climate Security and Defence Training Platform (European Commission & EEAS, 2025, pp. 4–6, 8).

Partnerships have also been strengthened worldwide, towards a more structured collaboration on climate change, security and defence, with multilateral organisations such as the AU, the OSCE, the UN and NATO, as well as with countries such as Canada, Norway, and Australia. Steps have been taken towards implementing initiatives in partnership with communities in the West and North Darfur region and the West African Coastal region, to

address climate change-induced conflicts and introduce suitable adaptation and mitigation measures; climate security issues have also been integrated into dialogues with the UK, South Africa, India and Rwanda (EEAS, 2022b, p. 12; European Commission & EEAS, 2025, pp. 5, 14). Nevertheless, and despite positive moves towards a common climate and security agenda, the current political commitment to climate action leaves much to be desired. Given the right conditions, soft law has the potential to shape norms and eventually pave the way towards more formal agreements. In fact, the discussed strategies also provide MSs with recommended lines of action to take. However, these are generally restricted to the encouragement of information, knowledge and best practices-sharing through existing platforms, working groups and frameworks, such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) or the EDA Energy and Environment Working Group, project collaboration, and the promotion of the climate and security and defence nexus in multilateral settings (EEAS, 2020, pp. 9, 11). This situation perfectly illustrates the fundamental contradiction found in the climate and security nexus.

Indeed, the issue lies with the fact that the EU cannot impose legally binding legislation on matters of security and defence, as laid down on Articles 31 and 42 of the TEU, alongside Protocols 10 and 11, and Declarations 13 and 14 annexed to the treaties. Thus, EU soft law regarding the climate-security and defence nexus relies on discourse in favour of bringing these two policy realms together, but the follow-through on initiatives remains exclusively limited to the EU level. Consequently, while the EU puts forward human rights-centred and context-specific strategies, duly engaging with affected communities to identify vulnerable populations and select the most suitable approach to address climate change-related security risks (EEAS, 2021, pp. 10–11), MS action is, at best, encouraged, and, at worst, not even contemplated within the instruments.

Concluding Remarks and Future Lines of Action

This paper has demonstrated that, despite recent progress on bringing the defence and security policy fields closer to the European Green Deal and the goal of climate neutrality, the path towards a true climate and security-defence nexus is paved with considerable challenges. More research must be conducted on climate and security-related policies, especially on green procurement in the defence sector, defence-related critical energy infrastructure and climate adaptation in military installations, and the security and defence sectors' readiness to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030 (Fit-for-55) and, eventually, achieve climate neutrality by 2050. Further concrete actions must be taken, such as the establishment of the Climate and Defence Support Mechanism, to ensure that policies towards a climate-neutral and resilient Europe remain substantive. A coherent mainstreaming of climate security is also key; this will require the systematic engagement of delegations and staff working on the ground, whose experiences are to inform future policy

planning. Deeper collaboration must also be established between the EEAS, the EU Military Staff, the EDA, and potentially NATO, in the sector of climate security and defence training. Doing so will ensure that a common understanding of climate security is consolidated among MSs and, subsequently, mainstreamed into the curriculum and functioning of the respective national armed forces.

Most importantly though, a more proactive approach, with ambitious and decisive operationalised action is needed, for the parties involved to reflect on their commitments to climate adaptation and mitigation, sustainability and resilience-building, with a fully-fledged mainstreaming of climate security in the Union's policies and external action. Thus, security and defence must be integrated into legally binding legislation on climate change and environmental degradation. This can be achieved in two ways. First, differentiated integration through PESCO projects would allow MSs with an interest in climate security to enter into a legally binding commitment without compromising the nature of the treaties. Alternatively, although less likely, a treaty change with a partial or exclusive conferral of power to the EU in the policy areas of security and defence would allow the Union to produce legally binding climate change-related security and defence instruments and targets. It would also be of interest to mark the European Green Deal as conflict and security-sensitive, simultaneously putting climate diplomacy back at the forefront of the agenda, whilst adapting the Deal to the current geopolitical context and the environmental effects of actions taken by third-party actors. Lastly, international cooperation can also generate legally binding commitments. It is the EU's duty to further the global climate security agenda by advocating and participating in the drawing up of international conventions on climate change, security and defence.

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