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Introduction: Global Warming and Militarism

Global warming\(^1\) is a huge and complex issue, and part of a wider environmental crisis, which includes an unprecedented loss of biodiversity. Linked to the carbon dioxide (CO\(_2\)) created by burning fossil fuels – one of the main causes of global warming – is the issue of peak oil, where declining availability of oil will have major impacts on most nations. This chapter will give a brief overview of these issues. Its major focus, however, is on militarism’s enormous but rarely-discussed contribution to these environmental and resource depletion crises. It will examine how militarism is exempt from most environmental scrutiny, and diverts resources away from addressing environmental issues. We also take a look at the military-industrial complex, the interconnected web of industries and governments that profits from and promotes militarism.

Global Environmental Crisis

The consensus of the international scientific community is that the world is warming. Greenhouse gases, a natural constituent of the atmosphere, are essential for maintaining habitable conditions on earth. However, the levels of these gases need to be finely balanced; too little or too much and overall global temperature may be significantly affected.\(^2\) Global warming refers to the effects generated by rising levels of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the Earth’s atmosphere (the ‘greenhouse effect’), trapping heat from solar radiation within the atmosphere and leading to increases in average global surface temperatures.\(^3\) The initiation of numerous feedback loops, difficult to predict, escalates the problem.\(^4\) Global warming is not, as is often stated, just a threat but a current reality; the decade from 2000–2009 was the warmest on record,\(^5\) and average global temperatures are likely to increase by 2–4 degrees over the next 100 years, although significantly greater increases are a possibility.\(^6\)

The evidence for global warming is overwhelming. In fact, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the international body
appointed to investigate the phenomenon, has been overly cautious, probably because of a barrage of pressure from vested interests and political conservatives. It has significantly underestimated, for example, the likely extent of sea level rise in the 21st century. Despite controversy over the rate of glacial melting, the best evidence is that the rate is accelerating. The East Antarctic ice sheet, previously believed to be stable, has now begun to melt on its coastal fringes. The West Antarctic ice sheet continues to melt rapidly. Over the last seven years, sharply rising temperatures in the Arctic have caused a rapid increase in the amount of methane being emitted from melting permafrost, adding further to global warming. In Canada’s James Bay region, the limit of the Arctic permafrost has retreated northwards by 130 kilometres over the last 50 years.

Consequences of Global Warming

Global warming has the potential to significantly impact on life on earth by altering weather patterns and events, environments, sea levels, and the ability of our planet to sustain both plant and animal life. Climate scientists predict severe impacts on humans from even the most conservative of climate change estimates, with the costs of inadequate action growing exponentially. Global warming of only 1°C may have dangerous consequences (this threshold was previously thought to be 2°C). One study concludes that an average warming of 3–4°C (which means 6–12°C on land), previously thought to be associated with CO₂ concentrations of 500–600 parts per million by volume (ppmv), is now possible with concentrations of only 360–420 ppmv, a range that the February 2012 concentration of 393.53 ppmv is already in, and this is rising at 2 ppmv per annum. A 4°C future would lead to a 40 per cent reduction in rice and maize production, the collapse of many ecosystems and is probably incompatible with an organized global community. This is extremely alarming, not ‘alarmist’.

Climate change is recognised by major scientific institutions and world leaders as the ‘single most pressing issue facing society on a global basis’. Although some groups choose not to acknowledge this, even the ones who do, see it as something in the future. However, the World Health Organization has estimated that already some 150,000 people die each year from the effects of climate change. Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s Global Humanitarian Forum estimates 300,000 deaths per year and a cost to the global community of over $125 billion annually. It claims that climate change’s ‘silent crisis’ is seriously affecting hundreds of millions more, and that the effects are growing in such a way that they will have a serious impact on 600 million people, almost 10 per cent of the world’s population, within 20 years. Almost all of these will be in developing countries: ‘Climate change is the greatest emerging humanitarian challenge of our time... [T]he first hit and