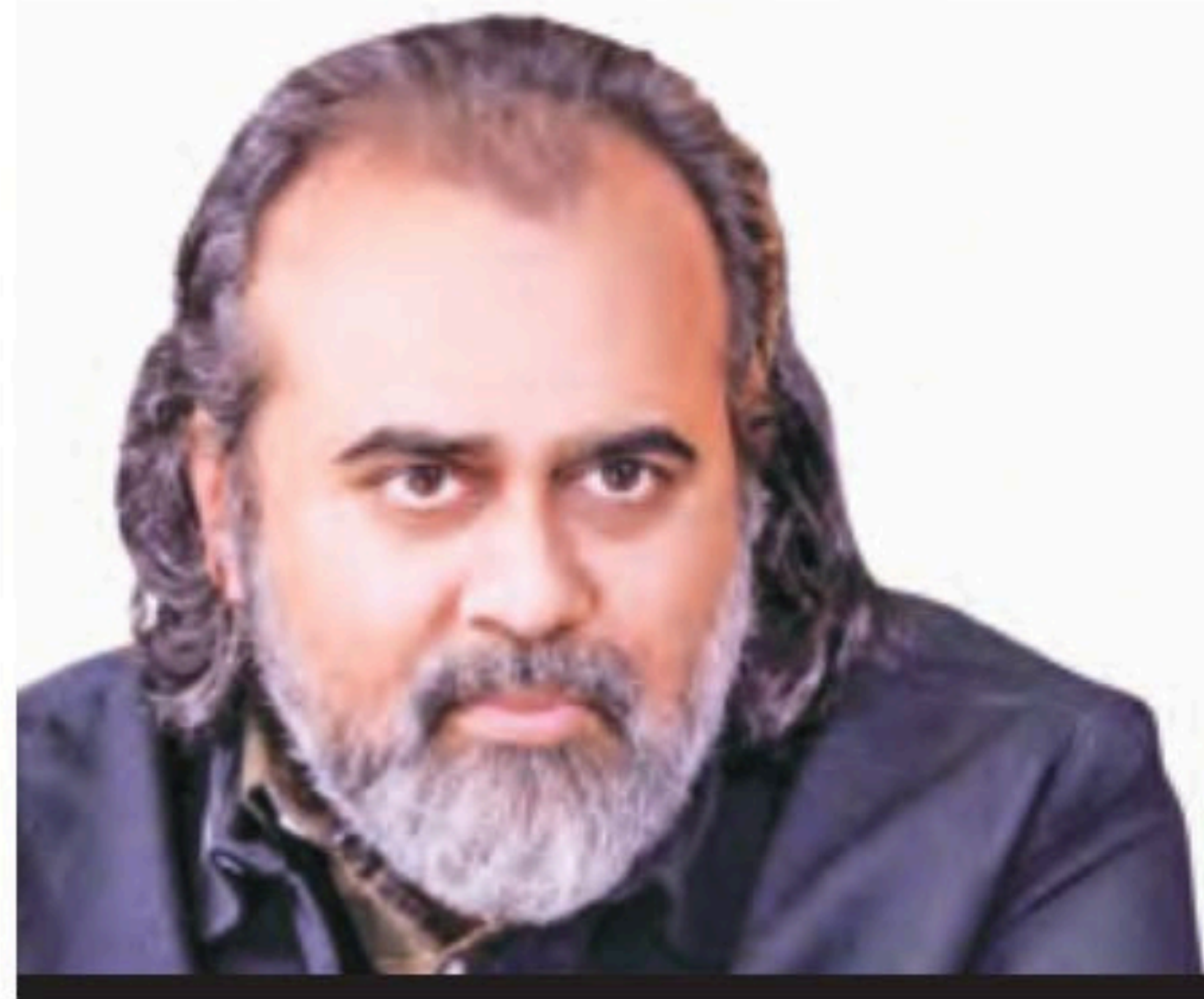




The climate cost of the war machine



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There is a particular dissonance that comes with reading the news in the current age. On one page, a missile strike; on the next, a climate summit. We have learned to hold these two realities at the same time without connecting them, consuming one as geopolitics and the other as science, treating them as simultaneous emergencies that happen to share a world but not a cause.

This separation is not accidental. It is one of the most consequential errors the modern mind makes, and its consequences are measured not in misunderstanding but in carbon and in blood. The refusal to see that these two crises share a root, are fed by the same engine, and cannot be solved while that engine continues to run is not merely an editorial convenience. It is the ego's oldest defence: keep the problems in separate compartments, and neither will ever demand a reckoning with the one who is producing both.

They are not parallel catastrophes but the same catastrophe wearing different faces.

The emissions the treaties forgot

The world's militaries account for an estimated five and a half per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. To appreciate what this means: civil aviation accounts for roughly two per cent. The militaries of the world emit nearly three times as much as all the world's commercial flights combined, and this figure is almost certainly an underestimate because military emissions are the one major category of human activity that is systematically excluded from climate accounting. If all the world's militaries were counted as a single country, they would rank as the fourth-highest emitter on the planet, behind only the United States, China, and India.

This exclusion has deep roots. During the Kyoto Protocol negotiations of 1997, the United States pushed hard for military activity to be carved out of binding emissions targets, and it succeeded. The world is attempting to manage a civilisational crisis with a structural blind spot at the centre of its data, and that blind spot is growing.

The United States military alone is the largest single institutional consumer of hydrocarbons on the planet. Between 2001 and 2018, total Pentagon emissions reached an estimated 1.3 billion metric tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent. Of this, the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Syria accounted for 440 million metric tonnes, with the Iraq invasion alone responsible for 250 million. To hold these numbers in perspective: 180 countries in the world have total annual emissions below 250 million metric tonnes. Crucially, two-thirds of total US military emissions in this

period came not from active war zones but from the peacetime existence of the military machine itself. The climate cost does not wait for the shooting to start.

When a war is actually fought, the accounting becomes staggering. Three years of the Russia-Ukraine conflict generated 230 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent. The largest single source was warfare itself, accounting for 36 per cent of the total; reconstruction came second at 27 per cent. Meanwhile, the first fifteen months of Israel's bombardment of Gaza generated an estimated 32 million metric tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent, roughly equal to Croatia's entire annual emissions.

All of this is happening while military spending is accelerating. Global military expenditure reached \$2.7 trillion in 2024, a 9.4 per cent increase from the previous year and the steepest annual rise since the Cold War.

The same engine, running both

The richest nations of the world spend thirty times more on their militaries than on climate finance for the countries most vulnerable to climate breakdown. The money exists; the political will does not, because the political will is being consumed by the same appetite that is generating the emissions. The ego that launches a war and the ego that cannot stop burning carbon are not two different egos with different problems. They are the same ego with the same problem: the refusal to identify with anything beyond the immediate boundary of the self, whether that self is called a nation, a civilisation, a generation, or simply the quarterly earnings cycle. Both the war-monger and the climate-indifferent consumer are

running the same programme: consume, expand, secure, do not look at the cost. The military-industrial complex and the fossil fuel complex are not separate

systems that happen to cause overlapping damage. They are the same system, the organised institutional expression of what an unexamined ego does when it reaches civilisational scale, embedded in the same governments, funded by the same tax revenues, and defended by the same rhetoric of necessity and security.

When a government argues that it cannot reduce military spending because security is under threat, and simultaneously argues that it cannot fund climate adaptation at the required level because resources are constrained, it is not making two separate arguments. It is making one argument: the present emergency, visible and named and emotionally galvanising, must take priority over the slower, more abstract, more inconvenient emergency whose gravest consequences fall on populations in other countries and on generations not yet born, neither of whom have a vote in its elections. This is not a failure of reason but a structural feature of the ego's operation. The ego will not sustain attention on what does not immediately threaten it. It is not that it cannot; it is that looking honestly at the slow emergency would require it to look at itself.

The accounting that is never done

Wars are said to be fought out of necessity, and the necessity is real enough as the ego experiences it. None of this is being denied. What is being asked is something simpler: whether the same governments that cannot fund climate adaptation at \$387 billion can explain why they can sustain military budgets of \$2.7 trillion, and whether the necessity that justifies the war also justifies the silence about what the war costs the planet. That accounting is not being done, and its absence is not accidental.

Military emissions are exempt from the frameworks that govern every other source of human carbon output. The countries most responsible for global warming are the same countries that dominate global military spending. The carbon released by three years of war in Ukraine, and fifteen months of bombardment in Gaza, appears in no nation's Paris Agreement commitments. None of this appears in the ledger against which the world measures its progress towards the temperature targets it has set itself.

This is not bureaucratic failure but the ego's oldest and most consistent manoeuvre: the refusal to be the object of its own scrutiny. Every accounting system reflects the priorities of the one doing the accounting. A system that accounts for the carbon in a return flight to London but not for the carbon in a sortie over a conflict zone is a system organised around the protection of certain categories of human activity from the consequences of their own costs. It is the same refusal that prevents the individual ego from looking honestly at its own motivations, scaled up to the level of international law.

When you read about military budgets and feel, underneath the numbers, a quiet reassurance - your interests protected - notice what that feeling is made of. It is made of the same material that the ego has always used to make its case: the present threat, vivid and nameable, against the future cost, slow and statistical and happening to someone else first.

The ego that will not conduct an honest accounting of its own costs is not a problem confined to governments and militaries. It is the individual ego, operating at its own scale, consuming what it consumes and sanctioning what it sanctions without looking at the ledger it is helping to fill. The governments that refuse to account for military emissions did not arrive from nowhere. They were elected, tolerated, and applauded by people running the same programme of exemption on a smaller scale.

That question, honestly pursued, is more dangerous to the ego than any weapon. And so it goes unasked, and the carbon accumulates, and the temperature rises, and the next war begins.



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