

A wildfire burns near Omiš, Croatia, in August 2026.
● JAKOV PRKIC/CROPIX

Wildfires, extreme heat change equations

Climate change now Europe's biggest security threat



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OPINION

Climate change is now Europe's biggest systemic security risk. As the continent faces its worst ever summer of extreme heat, drought and wildfires, no other threat is simultaneously affecting so many countries, people and critical systems.

The extreme heat contributed to an estimated 10,000 excess deaths during the June heatwave, which also destroyed roughly 9 million tonnes of crops from the European harvest. Drought and wildfires have affected almost the entire continent; so far this year, over 600,000 hectares of land and forests have burned, with hundreds of thousands of people forced to evacuate. The disruption extends far beyond the immediate disaster zones and across national borders. Extreme heat and water shortages are threatening water and food security, restricting river and rail transport and putting strain on health and emergency services.

Homes, businesses and essential infrastructure have been damaged. Falling river levels have forced nuclear reactors to shut down due to a lack of suitable cooling water, threatening to disrupt energy supply chains.

Climate terrorism

Climate change is also making Europe more vulnerable to non-conventional attacks. Prolonged heat and drought can turn countries into a "tinderbox," as UK prime minister Andy Burnham warned last week, before his government sent a national emergency alert over wildfires.

In these conditions, a single act of arson can cause mass evacuations, destroy infrastructure and

overwhelm emergency services. These arson attacks are easy to carry out and difficult for authorities to prevent. This makes wildfire a potentially devastating instrument of terrorism or asymmetric warfare.

This year, France has arrested almost 500 people on suspicion of starting fires; as of 30 July, the interior ministry said around 70 per cent of those detained were accused of deliberate arson. Meanwhile, Russian strikes have repeatedly set forests ablaze in Ukraine. In May 2026, drone attacks caused multiple forest fires in the Chernobyl exclusion zone and Zhytomyr.

Demands on militaries

Climate change also affects European military readiness by damaging bases, airfields and transport networks. For example, prolonged dry conditions contributed to wildfires that began at military training grounds in the Netherlands in April.

Any disruption to wider infrastructure such as electricity or transport networks can also di-

rectly undermine military operations.

Europe's armed forces must now prepare to be called upon more frequently to fight fires, reinforce flood defences, support evacuations, deliver emergency supplies and restore critical infrastructure. This will divert personnel and logistical capacity away from other security threats.

This is already happening. According to the Council on Strategic Risks, militaries were deployed over 30 times in response to wildfires across Europe in June and July alone. In July, Spain deployed more than 1,200 military personnel and 400 vehicles for a single major fire. In the UK, around 200 military personnel were recently fighting wildfires in south Wales.

How to respond

The scale and scope of these risks require action.

The NATO Science and Technology Organization's January 2026 climate security assessment already acknowledges climate change as a "systemic problem" that impacts all other

security risks.

It concludes that NATO's existing Climate Change and Security Action Plan (published in 2021) should be thoroughly updated and translate climate knowledge into practical action. This should be supported by better, more institutionalized coordination between scientists, defence professionals and policymakers.

Beyond NATO's plan, a broader European security-based approach to climate change is needed. It must achieve four goals.

Deal with wildfires

First, it must strengthen preparedness for climate disasters that are already happening. In the case of wildfires, this means acting before they break out. This involves managing dry vegetation and landscapes, enforcing fire-safe building and land-use rules, monitoring high-risk areas and reducing preventable sources of fire. It must account for both deliberate and accidental fires.

It also requires adequately staffed and trained emergency services,



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better specialist equipment such as "water bomb aircraft," stronger early-warning and evacuation systems, and greater capacity to respond to several emergencies at once.

The military has an important supporting role within this system. Armed forces will need to provide aircraft, engineering expertise, communications, logistics and personnel when civilian capacity is overwhelmed, particularly during large-scale evacuations or simultaneous disasters. But they should form part of a planned, multi-agency response rather than become a permanent substitute for underfunded fire and rescue services.

Consider climate spending as security

Second, governments need to consider spending on climate as a core security investment.

European NATO members have committed to spend 5 per cent of GDP on defence by 2035, including up to 1.5 per cent on broader investment related to defence and security, such as critical infrastructure and resilience.

Despite NATO recognizing climate change as a security threat, it has not explicitly designated climate adaptation as defence-related spending. But investing in climate change adaptation can make a critical contribution to long-term resilience.

Likewise, investments in infrastructure, civil protection and preparedness should all be climate-resilient and future proof. These could potentially be categorized under the vaguely defined 1.5 per cent of broader security-related spending.

Considering climate measures as important security investments would therefore help to focus scarce resources and improve resilience, while also potentially helping members to meet their spending commitments.

The military is helping in the fire-fighting operation in South Wales in August 2026.

● UK MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

