

Lilybell Evergreen (June 2026)

# Securing everything, connecting nothing?

*The climate–security–democracy nexus in European governance*

**FLEET** (Fresh Look at Eastern European Trends) is a FES-initiated network of young, open-minded security experts from across the OSCE space. The group has met regularly since 2015 to develop joint policy proposals on how to resume cooperation and stabilise European security, including *Islands of Cooperation* and *Responsible Europe*. From the outset it has sought to find common ground and develop a joint approach following intensive, contro-

versial debates. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, members of FLEET continued debating different perspectives, but it became more difficult to develop a unified position or a new joint vision. We thus continue the series of FLEET publications with a collection of essays by various members, which shed light on different components of European security.

## Key messages

- European institutions are pouring resources into hard security while climate and democracy compete for what remains. This is a trap, not a strategy.
- Comprehensive security is well established in theory. In practice, siloed mandates, fragmented strategies and zero-sum budgets mean that it's rarely realised.
- This is not just a policy failure, but a structural one. Institutions cannot close the gap between comprehensive security as concept and as reality without changing how they work, not only what they fund.
- Trust is a strategic asset. Institutions that act with legitimacy, accountability and clarity of purpose are more resilient than those that simply spend more on defence, and far harder to undermine through disinformation and polarisation.
- Breaking the security trap demands institutional imagination: the willingness to find new connections across challenges, bring in new partners and push beyond incremental reform.

## Reinforcing or undermining feedback loops between climate, security and democracy

Traditional security approaches that ignore climate create new vulnerabilities (infrastructure, food systems, migration)

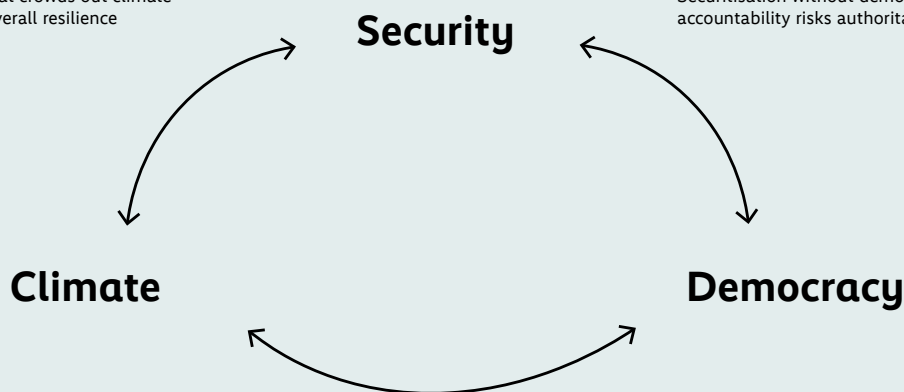
Resource conflicts and climate disasters create security instability

Defence spending that crowds out climate adaptation weakens overall resilience

Democratic erosion (disinformation, polarisation) undermines collective action capacity

Authoritarian drift often accompanies resource nationalism and security militarisation

Securitisation without democratic accountability risks authoritarian responses



Climate breakdown drives migration pressures that strain democratic systems

Weakened democracies struggle to sustain long-term climate commitments

Energy transitions require democratic legitimacy to succeed

The twentieth century's institutional infrastructure was built for a different world. Today's polycrisis – with its intersecting challenges in areas such as security, climate and threats to democracy – calls for institutional transformation or creation.

At the European and global level, we have designed international institutions to better organise and enable efforts towards pursuing common interests – related to areas such as the economy, climate, global health, development and hard security – than would be possible for a single state. They include the United Nations, the European Union, the Council of Europe, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Alongside national governments, many international institutions now face criticism for failing to coordinate effectively or act decisively – whether rapidly, at scale, inclusively or comprehensively – to mobilise towards common goals and disable threats to them.

This is seen across domains. We are spending more on defence but discourse suggests we are feeling less secure: two thirds of Europeans believe that their country is under threat.<sup>1</sup> We are laying out climate programmes but are still on track to surpass the 1.5°C limit laid down in the Paris Climate Accord by 2030.<sup>2</sup> We have rapidly rising inequality and worsening trust in institutions and governments; for

example, 44% report low or even no trust in their national government.<sup>3</sup>

This is not just a policy failure: incapacity is a threat to institutional legitimacy. Why maintain an institution if it does not find and enact means for solving societal problems at a sufficient scale?

This paper argues that the capability of national governments and international institutions should not be judged by their ability to increase security in the traditional sense. Rather, it should centre on the ability to address simultaneous interconnected challenges which comprise security in a broader sense. Within this context, this can be captured most easily in terms of the climate–security–democracy nexus as three critical, interconnected areas essential to both short- and long-term European society.

In the 1970s, the OSCE brought forward the idea of cooperative comprehensive security as the core of its approach via three equally important dimensions: politico-military, economic and environmental, and the human dimension.<sup>4</sup> Some national governments, such as Finland,<sup>5</sup> have developed the approach further and informed<sup>6</sup> the European Union's framework. Although comprehensive security is well established conceptually, in reality, climate, security and democracy are not treated holistically but rather are

forced into competition. In theory this nexus is acknowledged and embodied in the OSCE's design and other governmental frameworks, but in practice policy does not fully connect these fields and often divides them.

This paper argues that there is an urgent need to re-examine what comprehensive security should look like today, as well as to look at the structures, processes and capacities needed for our institutions to effectively protect climate, security and democracy together, rather than forcing them into competition for resources.

## The security trap

The premise of securitising key topics such as climate and democracy is that they will be **elevated politically and fiscally**, gaining the attention and resources typically reserved for traditional hard defence. For example, climate and democratic resilience are increasingly recognised as security issues: energy systems, heatwaves, migration pressures and disinformation all amplify fragility. Climate is acknowledged in national security strategies. Democracy protection initiatives are being launched, such as the European Democracy Shield presented in November 2025.

However, this premise is often problematic: even if it can attract resources, a security lens can undermine other intrinsically valuable aspects of an issue which should, anyway, define its importance. For example, considering migration as only a matter of economic resilience undermines its importance in cultural life and asylum provision. Typically, security is framed as being in competition for attention and resources with other societal needs, such as justice, environmental protection, well-being and more.

If we regard security as a zero-sum game in relation to other areas, we will lose on all fronts. We can characterise this as the security trap: more money and resources for hard security can, paradoxically, cause insecurities to emerge, if other needs are neglected. What if we reject this zero-sum view, and treat climate, security and democracy as mutually reinforcing rather than competing?

## The climate–security–democracy nexus

The nexus between climate, security and democracy is a core example of why our governments need a holistic approach. There are dangerous reinforcing feedback loops between these three areas. Broadly, climate threats can generate pressures or threats for security and democracy, and vice versa. For example:

It is not possible to secure one without the others. Treating them as separate budget lines or policy domains misunderstands how they reinforce or undermine each other. Despite the increasing recognition of this and growth of comprehensive security frameworks, in practice governments and institutions have struggled to manage and act based on these feedback loops. Hence, an interconnected

approach is not only a technical question but also one of changing the way institutions work to reach different outcomes. We currently see signs of this need, for example in the following:

- **Zero-sum funding competition:** climate and democracy are forced into competition for resources with defence. One example is the UK's February 2025 announcement of further cuts in already reduced aid spending to »fund« increased defence investment.<sup>7</sup>
- **A coordination gap:** multiple European strategies launched in 2025, including the European Democracy Shield, the Preparedness Union Strategy and the White Paper on European Defence, each have separate governance and no clear way of ensuring coherence.
- **Outdated accountability mechanisms:** for example, 27 states have called for changes to the European Convention of Human Rights, which they argue is incapable of preventing contemporary weaponisation of migration by hostile actors or regimes, which was not an issue when it was formed.<sup>8</sup> This illustrates how accountability mechanisms struggle to adapt when security challenges intersect in new ways.
- **Ineffective response to economic weaponisation** via dependencies on energy and supply chains which are being leveraged as tools of coercion and fearmongering. For example, Russia has repeatedly weaponised energy supplies by cutting gas flows to European customers at different times over the past two decades.

The proposed *EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028–2034* is an example of the security trap in action. While the framework includes a horizontal 35% spending target for climate and environmental objectives<sup>9</sup> and a new *AgoraEU* programme for democratic values, they are structurally isolated from the surging hard-security priorities. The tension between these silos reveals a zero-sum dynamic that undermines comprehensive resilience.

## Avoiding the security trap

So how can institutions avoid a zero-sum, fragmented approach to security and other critical issues, such as climate, democracy and more? This requires a shift in how institutions and governments work, not just what they do or fund.

In short, there is a need to abandon short-term, siloed approaches and transform the institutional structures, processes, cultures, incentives and practices that cause them. Rather than be paralysed by the unpredictable global order and the complexity of polycrisis, institutional actors and governments must ensure they have the tools to cope with today's challenges, not those of the past.

Aspects of what is required from national and international institutions include:

- **Interconnected governance:** we need better cross-institutional mandates, actions and knowledge to connect different objectives in practice, not only in strategy documents; for example, ensuring climate adaptation planning, industrial strategy and defence infrastructure are informed by one another; and that leadership, skills and culture within government and institutions support ambitious, interconnected action on key societal needs.
- **Rethink budget architecture:** we need a coordinated funding logic that supports comprehensive security in both the short and long terms. This means separating budgeting from silos, whether domains or structural (ministries, DGs) and finding ways to target connected societal needs rather than forcing them to compete.
- **Trustworthiness and accountability as strategic assets:** a government or institution's primary strategic asset is not its raw power, but its ability to provide the predictability and legitimacy that 'might-is-right' actors cannot. This requires two things: trustworthiness (acting with clarity of purpose and boldness in fulfilling their mandate) and accountability (transparent oversight in their actions). Together, these create resilience to disinformation and, as President Macron outlined at Davos 2026, position Europe as a reliable global partner in an unpredictable world.
- **Overcome top-down steering and broaden collaboration:** interconnected action requires reaching beyond typical actors for collaboration and overcoming traditional mindsets such as top-down steering. This includes civil society and also different levels of government. For example, cities are core partners in solving societal challenges, and sources of vision and solution, not only implementers of top-down direction. Cities such as Vienna<sup>10</sup> and Athens<sup>11</sup>, among others, are integrating energy justice, housing and social needs into resilience plans. These can be seen as examples of strategic, interconnected action.

These are some examples of where institutions need to evolve or wholeheartedly transform themselves in order to be able to have a positive effect on interconnected challenges.

## Provocations

As already mentioned, there is a need to find strategic **opportunities at the intersection of issues** such as climate, security and democracy, which can amplify the impact of funding and actions, and create interconnected portfolios of actions. This is not only an analytical task, but primarily a creative one, which requires imagination and the combination of many actions.

Below are some – but certainly not the only – provocations for the imagination which may reveal new directions:

- What if core aspects of **welfare**, such as child care, health care, housing and education were considered strategic necessities rather than social spending competing with defence? What if security reviews assessed these systems' capacity to be as vital as military readiness?
- What if **cities** had stronger roles in security planning, monitoring and providing increased support for comprehensive security initiatives that integrate issues such as climate, migration, social cohesion and health?
- How can we reimagine **media and communications** to counter escalating information manipulation and eroding trust in institutions? For example, what if every broadcast and main publication was independently and transparently fact-checked?
- What would it look like if we prioritised addressing the **mental health crisis** as a pillar of security and societal resilience? In an era of polarisation and disinformation, collective mental health affects democratic resilience, social cohesion and capacity for joint action.
- How could military-owned **land** be used to support climate and ecological aims?

These are not the only questions that could be asked, but examples of the need to exercise our imagination to uncover new connections that may support multiple goals. The question also arises of how our institutions would, themselves, need to evolve or transform in order to be capable of finding and acting upon these kinds of questions.

## Conclusions

Currently, European institutions need to strengthen security, but in doing so they risk creating fragmentation precisely when interconnection is most needed. At a time of copious talk of governmental and institutional efficiency, what is required is **efficacy**: knowing what matters, where the connections lie, and targeting them to provide the best possible result for society. Institutions that are unable to evolve to meet contemporary challenges will risk losing their purpose.

In order to form a more interconnected, strategic approach to security, international institutions and national governments must not only alter **what they do but also how they do it**. Despite the growing uptake of comprehensive security thinking, this has not yet been realised or translated into new institutional practices and mindsets. To break from institutionalised ways of thinking, develop new tools for current challenges, and reimagine connections between challenges requires institutional evolution or transformation.

The climate–security–democracy nexus is a core example of the potential to fall into a security trap in which core issues are seen as being in zero-sum competition. This results in fragmented thinking rather than seeking interconnected, mutually reinforcing ways of tackling them. This represents a choice concerning whether to let polycrisis and interdependency become a **negative spiral** – in which fragmented action increases negative impacts across other domains – or to turn it into a **positive spiral**, in which interconnected actions can benefit multiple societal needs.

## Endnotes

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