

Ending war and slowing global warming go hand in hand | Column

The wars in Ukraine and Yemen demonstrate the ways in which human rights and environmental sustainability are interlinked.



Steam leaves a cooling tower of the Lichterfelde gas-fired power plant in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, March 30, 2022. Shocking pictures from the Ukrainian town of Bucha and accusations of Russian war crimes are building pressure for more sanctions against Moscow. A key potential target: Russian oil and natural gas, and the \$850 million that European importers pay for those supplies every day. But it's not so easy, given Europe's dependence on Russian energy. (AP Photo/Michael Sohn, File) [MICHAEL SOHN | AP]

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The developed world’s ravenous appetite for fossil fuels has enabled Russia and Saudi Arabia to engage in devastating wars beyond their borders. The economic power and global influence of these petrostates is a product of the world’s heavy reliance on their vast reserves of oil and natural gas. The wars in Ukraine and Yemen can be described as fossil fuel wars.

Farhad Monjoo in *The New York Times* accurately describes Vladimir Putin as a “petromonarch, another in a line of unsavory characters whom liberal democracies keep doing business with because they’ve got something we can’t live without.”

Approximately half of Russia’s federal budget is from oil and gas revenues. Russia is the world’s third-largest oil producer behind the U.S. and Saudi Arabia.



William Felice [UNKNOWN | Photo: Courtesy]

Unfortunately, despite the global denunciations of Putin’s attack on Ukraine, Russia has not yet experienced a significant decline in oil exports. On one side, India, Singapore and Turkey have significantly increased their imports of Russian oil since the invasion. On the other side, the U.S. recently moved to ban all oil imports from Russia, and the European Union vowed to cut Russian gas imports by two-thirds by the end of this year.

Saudi Arabia is another corrupt petrostate engaged in a bloody war in Yemen where more than 17,500 civilians have been killed or injured since 2015. Saudi’s war-making capabilities are also a product of the world’s hunger for its fossil fuels. For example, while the U.S. produces abundant oil, we still import hundreds of thousands of barrels of crude oil per day from Saudi Arabia, representing over 7 percent of U.S. total oil imports. This oil business stabilizes and protects this corrupt Saudi regime.

Svitlana Krakovska is a Ukranian climate scientist and a member of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. As Putin’s bombs and forces were destroying her country, Krakovska recently told *The Guardian*: “I started to think about the parallels between climate change and this war and it’s clear that the roots of both these threats to humanity are found in fossil fuels. Burning oil, gas and coal is causing warming. ... And Russia sells these resources and uses the money to buy weapons. Other countries are dependent upon these fossil fuels; they don’t make themselves free of them. This is a fossil fuel war. It’s clear we cannot continue to live this way; it will destroy our civilization.”

While Russia launched its aggressive war against Ukraine, the IPCC released its most detailed report yet on the threats posed by global warming. The report notes that the dangers have been highly visible since 2019 with treacherous storms, floods and other extreme weather events displacing millions of people. In addition, rising heat and drought has killed crops and trees, causing a global increase in food insecurity and water scarcity. Written by 270 researchers from 67 countries, the report reveals that these adverse impacts are widespread on every continent with very few nations unaffected. The stark message of the IPCC is clear. Millions of people around the world will face unimaginable devastation if we don’t quickly end our reliance on fossil fuels and halt global warming.

Many national leaders, including President Joe Biden, are committed to limit global warming to no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius compared with preindustrial levels. This is the threshold that IPCC scientists forecast the likelihood of catastrophic climate impacts. To achieve this goal, these scientists argue that the nations of the world need to all but eliminate fossil-fuel emissions by 2050. Unfortunately, we are not on track to meet this goal. Experts estimate that the world is currently on pace to warm between 2 to 3 degrees Celsius this century.

The wars in Ukraine and Yemen demonstrate the ways in which human rights and environmental sustainability are interlinked. The solution should seem obvious. Prioritizing a rapid transition away from fossil fuels and toward alternative sustainable energy (such as solar and wind power) is a path toward both ending war and preventing global warming.

The good news is that the transition to solar and wind power is happening on a faster pace than most predicted was possible. In 2021 solar generation rose 23 percent globally, while wind supply gained 14 percent in the same period. According to the independent climate think tank Ember, both renewable sources now account for 10.3 percent of total global electricity generation. Ember’s report noted that The Netherlands, Australia and Vietnam had the fastest growth rates for the renewable sources, switching around 10 percent of their electricity demand from fossil fuels to wind and solar in the last two years. “If these trends can be replicated globally, and sustained, the power sector would be on track for [the] 1.5 degree goal.”

The growing availability and affordability of renewable energy such as wind and solar are moving more nations to consider energy independence. Putin’s war in Ukraine has created a fusion of foreign policy and energy interests pushing for decarbonization. Germany, for example, has now pledged to not only phase out Russian oil imports by the end of this year, but also plans to invest 200 billion euros in renewable energy production between now and 2026. Perhaps out of the horror of Putin’s war in Ukraine, the nations of the world will embrace this new environmental agenda and end our alliances with petrostates in order to both prevent global warming and preclude future bloody wars.

William F. Felice is professor emeritus of political science at Eckerd College He is the author of six books on human rights and international relations. He can be reached via his website at williamfelice.com.