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OPINION

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The Pentagon's Electric Vehicle Push Doesn't Work for Taxpayers — or the Climate

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The Department of Defense is embracing an all-in approach to acquiring a fleet of non-tactical electric vehicles to achieve "carbon neutrality," as directed by the Biden administration. The push is part of a broader Climate Adaptation Plan promulgated in 2021, in accordance with Executive Order 14008, "Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad" — administration policy requiring that climate considerations be an essential element of U.S. foreign policy and national security.

But the Pentagon declines to answer basic questions about the negative effects of EVs, the strategic and tactical risks they present, and what acquiring them actually achieves. To parse its EV strategy, I put questions to the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) in an email exchange.

In conjunction with other Department of Defense (DOD) groups, the OSD is working to ensure that 100 percent of the non-tactical vehicles — commercially offered cars and trucks or support vehicles for base/garrison settings — that the Pentagon acquires annually through the General Services Administration are zero-emission vehicles by 2035.

Here is some of what I learned through my communication with the OSD.

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What Does DOD Hope to Gain?

Defense Department officials, including Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks, have cited tactical benefits of zero-emission vehicles (ZEVs) to include silent watch (the ability to operate/move silently), reduced logistics, decreased fuel consumption and increased range. However, these don't apply to non-tactical vehicles in a meaningful fashion. Silent watch may be useful in some battlefield scenarios, but in base and garrison settings it has little impact.

Likewise, claims of reduced logistics and increased vehicle range are contradicted by the DOD's own documents, including the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) report on ZEV acquisition and implementation.

According to an unnamed senior defense official cited by the OSD, the Pentagon sees benefits in transitioning to ZEVs, including what the official says is the "lower total ownership cost of many light-duty ZEV models," and declining future ZEV procurement costs.

But no forecast of future ZEV prices or future electricity cost, as demand increases, was offered by the OSD nor found in the reports to which it referred me. No assessment of inevitable increases in federal, state and local taxes on each kilowatt-hour of electricity was mentioned, nor were any data provided on total ownership costs versus internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles.

Impacting the Environment

The driving force in the push to acquire EVs is the belief that such acquisition will avert climate change, preventing a range of outcomes reflected in DOD's Climate Risk Analysis. But this analysis leaves out meaningful context, starting with the practical impact that the Pentagon's fleet of 174,000 non-tactical vehicles has on carbon emissions.

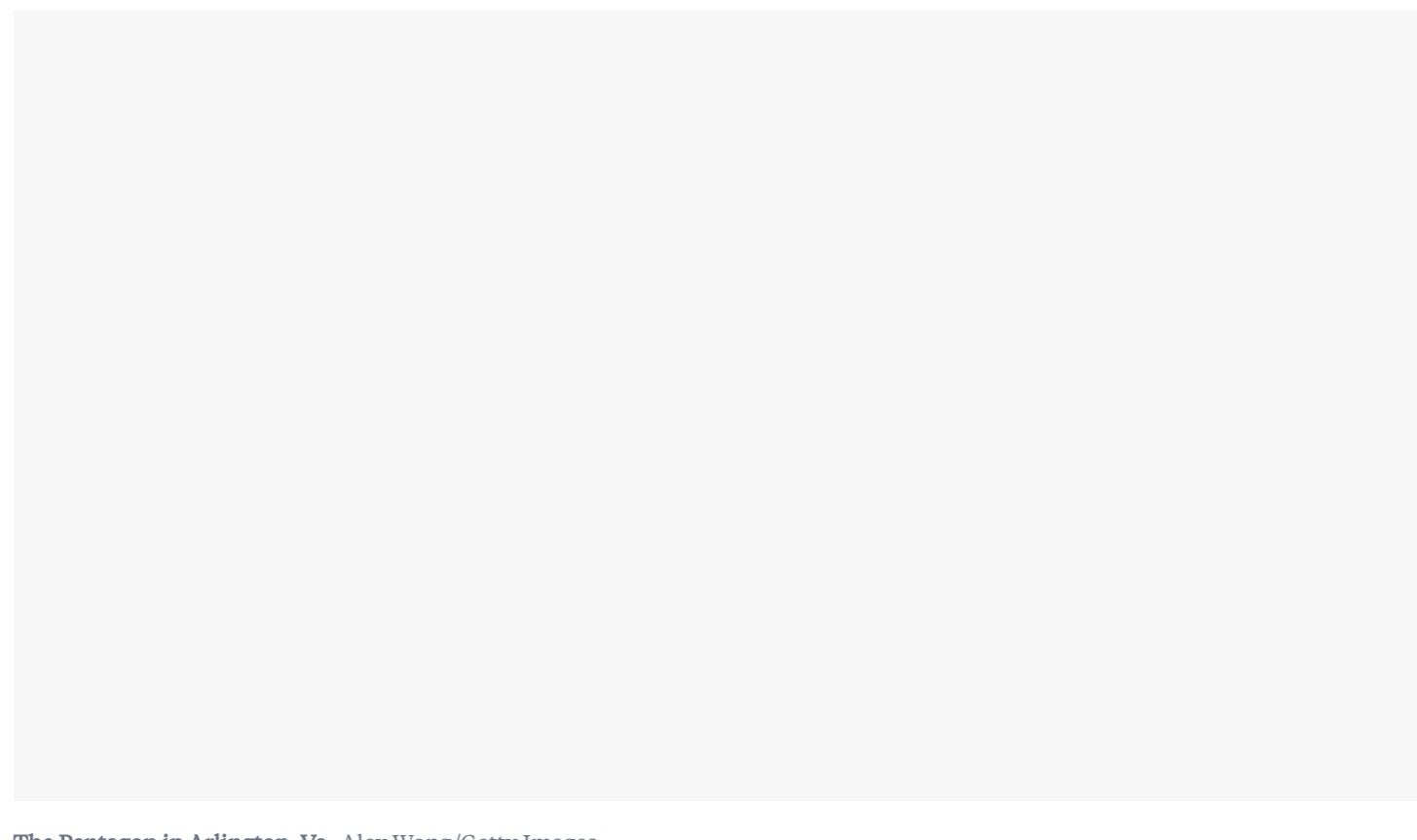
Consider, for example, that according to the International Energy Agency (IEA), transportation accounts for 21% of global carbon dioxide emissions. Road transport (cars, trucks) accounts for approximately 15% of total CO2 emissions. There were about 1.446 billion vehicles globally in 2022, 19% of them in the United States.

As such, the DOD's non-tactical vehicle fleet would account for an extremely small proportion of total CO2 emissions. In fact, the math shows that converting the entire fleet to ZEVs would remove just 0.000018% of global CO2 emissions from the atmosphere.

What would that reduction cost American taxpayers?

The answer isn't clear. Pentagon spokesman Jeff Jurgensen referred me to the NREL report noted above. The report devotes just two of its 70 pages to any cost information whatsoever — one listing manufacturer prices for a selection of EVs and another comparing per-mile maintenance costs for EVs and ICE vehicles.

The report does detail the imperative of erecting an "electric vehicle supply equipment" (EVSE) charging infrastructure at the U.S. military's constellation of bases, but provides no information on the cost of an EVSE or on the combined acquisition cost of a ZEV fleet.



The Pentagon in Arlington, Va. Alex Wong/Getty Images

Potential Side Effects?

Among the most notable aspects of the push to electrify mobility is the lack of acknowledgment of the downsides that may come with it. This certainly holds for the DOD's ZEV acquisition.

Asked whether the department has studied the negative environmental externalities — from mining to deforestation — of electrifying mobility, the OSD would state only to me that its efforts "are nested within the DOD Climate Action Plan, which considers a wide range of environmental factors and uses a variety of assessment tools," without further elaboration.

Surely there are a wide range of environmental factors. For example, multiple mining projects are underway in the Amazon rainforest to support EV battery production. These mining efforts — many underwritten by U.S. financial institutions — are resulting in deforestation of the world's largest carbon sink.

I asked if the DOD assessed that mining for battery materials in the rainforest would help the global climate, and whether the Pentagon is at all sensitive about its ZEV fleet being associated with Amazon deforestation.

The Pentagon's spokesman responded: "We are fully committed to executing the department's supply chain efforts in a manner that is consistent with American values and underscores the importance of a free, open and rules-based market."

That supply chain won't include 225,000 acres of federal land in Minnesota that the Biden administration has withdrawn from any mining activity for 20 years.

America-sourced ZEVs?

The land taken off the table by the administration order reportedly contains 95% of the nation's nickel reserves, 88% of the cobalt, 51% of the platinum, 48% of the palladium, and 34% of the nation's copper. The rest of America's battery-related mineral reserves are spread out and often inaccessible for technical, environmental, financial and political reasons.

In light of this withdrawal from the domestic critical minerals supply, it's reasonable to wonder how the DOD will acquire American-sourced ZEVs. When I asked that, the Pentagon spokesman said the department is taking a number of recommended actions, "to include a defense-specific lithium battery strategy" and "using DOD investment authorities to leverage commercial investments across the battery and energy storage industrial base..."

Looming over such action is China, which dominates the global advanced-battery supply chain. The Pentagon says China is "by far the largest challenge for securing the supply of lithium batteries."

Creating further demand for battery-electric vehicles by mandating DOD acquisition of ZEVs exacerbates that challenge and raises further issues, including what may be the ultimate return-on-investment question: Will decarbonization solve climate change?

I asked if the DOD, the federal government's largest agency, has any scientifically gathered evidence that halting all global CO2 emissions will have a positive impact on the climate. The OSD's answer was that "the science is clear that DOD must reduce greenhouse gas emissions."

This is similar to the familiar refrain that there is "scientific consensus" that decarbonization will halt climate change. But consensus is not evidence — a reality that 17th century Italian astronomer, physicist and champion of Copernican heliocentrism, Galileo Galilei, lamentably would acknowledge.

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