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Scotland the brave new world

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Scotland the brave new world

Alyson J.K. Bailes and
Paul Ingram look at
foreign policy options
after independence

Debates on the strategic implications of Scottish independence have centred on the future of nuclear submarine bases, the divvying-up of British armed forces, and Scotland's ability to defend itself. But these are questions about the means rather than ends of a hypothetical Scottish security policy. What would be the broader foreign policy posture and wider security aims of a new, small, independent state in Northern Europe?

For a start, Scotland would have to defend its people against 'new threats' such as terrorism, crime, and illegal immigration and against accidents and natural disasters. It does some of this already under devolution but, as a separate state, it would need to join various related international conventions and specialized groupings. It would answer directly for its performance to the European Union and NATO, which the Scottish National Party (and presumably any prospective Scottish government) would propose to join.

London and Edinburgh would need to work closely to maintain equally high standards of security across the border and all external frontiers.

But what of an independent Scotland's obligations and options regarding international peace and cooperation?

The SNP has stressed its sense of kinship with the Nordic states and with liberal Nordic policy models, both internal and international. They are particularly interested in the way that Norway, Denmark and Iceland (as well as all ex-Communist states joining recently) have been accepted in NATO while neither owning nuclear weapons nor accepting their presence in peacetime. However, the Nordic states express their peaceful, non-aggressive and humanitarian ideals in many other ways: from high levels of official overseas aid, through peace-keeping and mediation, to 'punching above their weight' in arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation work.

Would an independent Scotland want to 'act Nordic' in these ways as well, and would that actually be a big shift from UK practice? Could it mean a collision course with the rest of Britain? We will touch here briefly on the humanitarian points and then in more detail on the peace- and disarmament-related agendas

The SNP has claimed that an independent Scotland could improve on UK performance by immediately reaching the target of 0.7 per cent of GDP spent on development assistance. They propose to ring-fence aid against other spending needs, although plainly the equation would be easier if – as some claim – Scotland's defence spending could be reduced well below 2 per cent of GDP, as against 2.6 per cent for the UK today.

They intend to champion humanitarian causes such as 'climate justice', and would presumably wish to continue military and NGO deployments to help in humanitarian disasters. More novel would be the scope for Scottish 'clean-handed' mediation in national or regional conflicts where the UK might seem less qualified or trusted given its size, alignments and imperial history.

Norwegian peace activism is the obvious model here, although Scots should also ponder the problems a small state faces in having its initial breakthroughs followed up. Who remembers the Oslo Peace Accords, and years of Nordic mediation in

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Sri Lanka?

The SNP has also said that Scotland would continue contributing to peacekeeping, but only for actions with a watertight UN mandate. There are Nordic models for actually writing this caveat into the constitution, though in practice even Sweden and Finland have been willing to join in actions – such as NATO's in Kosovo – with a shaky legal base.

However, for countries of Scotland's size, with 5 million inhabitants or fewer, making forces available of the necessary quality and high-readiness imposes heavy costs. This could be a factor pushing Scottish defence spending back up again; or Scotland could explore typical small-state solutions such as sending more civilian than military personnel (especially for EU missions), or combining its contributions with those of a larger ally – maybe the UK.

A final interesting choice would be whether to focus on UN-led operations or, as all the Nordics have done lately, switch more effort to NATO and EU-led ones, where the political payoff is clearer.

A newly independent Scotland would want to advertise its responsible membership of the international community by joining a number of international instruments aimed at ensuring global security. First, it would seek to join the Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear weapon state.

Joining the NPT as a non-weapon state would not necessarily imply closing the Faslane/Coulport base currently home to Britain's nuclear submarines. Various solutions that London and Edinburgh might negotiate could imply the short or longer-term use of Scottish facilities by Trident, but Scotland need not be barred from the treaty so long as it did not actually (co-)own the systems. US B61 nuclear bombs are deployed on the soil of five states in Europe without challenging their status as non-nuclear weapon states, which creates a strong precedent.

Scotland would also seek to join Euratom to maintain the services it provides for Scottish civil nuclear plants in terms of safety, and security. Scotland would open up its nuclear facilities at Hunterston, Torness, Dounreay and Chapelcross to Euratom and International Atomic Energy Agency joint inspection under a separate Scotland/IAEA Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement, and would doubtless want to sign an Additional Protocol meeting the agency's highest current standards.

Both NATO and the EU are collectively active in different fields of arms control,



A Trident nuclear submarine prepares to put to sea from Faslane naval base

non-proliferation and disarmament. The Nordics and Germany have pushed NATO to explore all options for possible nuclear reductions, thus balancing the alliance's continued reliance on ultimate nuclear deterrence. Scotland could seek legitimacy as a responsible but reformist state, and somewhat distinguish itself from London, by making common cause with its neighbours to the east.

If the new Scottish government preferred to compromise with London over the Faslane base but bolster its anti-nuclear image in other ways, it could rapidly endorse the calls for a convention to eliminate nuclear weapons, an idea with majority support within the UN General Assembly. It might latch on to the recent Norwegian initiative to highlight the humanitarian consequences arising from the use of nuclear weapons, which inspired a meeting of 132 states in March 2013.

Or, if Scotland insisted on removing nuclear forces from Faslane and Coulport and closing all military operations at Dounreay, it could follow the examples of Estonia, Austria and New Zealand by declaring itself a nuclear weapon-free zone.

Alternatively it could seek allies for reheating a Finnish proposal for such a zone in the Nordic region; and either or both

ideas might be offered as a declaration of intent tied to a timetable for future closure of Faslane. As a more North-facing nation than the UK has been, Scotland could champion efforts for a similar zone in the high Arctic, quixotic as this might seem given the importance of Russian and US deployments there. All these ideas, however, could mean facing displeasure from allies in NATO as well as in London.

For a posture of good peace-minded international citizenship, Scotland's aim in several cases should be simply to preserve high UK standards of compliance and activism – though it might struggle to do so with much-reduced resources. If going further to profile itself as a high-minded and clean-handed small state, it could certainly follow Nordic models: but these vary among the Nordics themselves and are fast-evolving, notably under EU and NATO influence. Other partners such as Canada, New Zealand and active developing states – not to mention Ireland – could well be cultivated.

While a new Scotland may pursue 'peace policies' at some variance with London, none will be as sensitive as the handling of Trident. Scottish peacekeeping and mediation might bring added value for causes the UK also believes in.

If Scotland pushed far in an anti-nuclear direction, however, London would feel itself more directly affected and thus find accommodation more difficult than it does with the Nordics. Scotland would have to weigh the temptation to distance itself from the old UK by conspicuous peace activism against the possible cost in other spheres, such as smooth defence and security cooperation across the border, and London's willingness to compromise on other sensitive aspects of separation.

Whatever view one takes on the choices, it is clear that Scotland would have far more issues to face in its 'peace' policy, and more delicate and complex calculations to make over the degree of continuity with the UK, than the mainstream independence debate has yet allowed for. And we should not forget that the whole process of separation could provide something of a model for world opinion, depending on how peacefully and democratically two of the West's oldest nations managed to behave towards each other.

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