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Scotland: A Touchstone for Security in the High North?

Duncan Depledge and Andreas Østhagen

Scotland's geostrategic significance to the High North is being overlooked in debates about the potential impacts of 'Scexit', as well as wider discussions about the changing Arctic security environment. Duncan Depledge and Andreas Østhagen address this oversight by drawing attention to Scotland's historic role in contributing to the defence of NATO's 'northern flank' and analysing how this is being resurrected in response to new challenges emerging in the High North. They conclude that there are some specific challenges that policymakers should address as the independence debate continues: most importantly, the potential for a 'gap' to be created in the regional security architecture of the High North.

In January 2022, the last of nine Boeing P-8A Poseidons that make up the UK's new fleet of maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) landed at RAF Lossiemouth in Moray, Scotland, ready for service.¹ Before the first arrived in 2020, the UK had been without a fixed-wing MPA for most of the preceding decade. Westminster's 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) had controversially scrapped the UK's Nimrod Maritime Reconnaissance and Attack (MRA) 4 MPA programme, after finding it over-budget, overdue and plagued by unresolved design faults.² However, the subsequent failure to replace the Nimrod programme left the UK reliant on allies for assistance with monitoring submarine activity in the North Atlantic and High North, even as the Royal Navy sounded the alarm that Russian submarine

activity around UK waters was approaching levels not seen since the Cold War era.³

Having cancelled the Nimrod programme and further decided to reduce the size of the RAF's Tornado fleet as part of the SDSR, in 2011 Westminster was reportedly also prepared to close all three of the UK's major airbases in Scotland: RAF Lossiemouth; RAF Kinloss; and RAF Leuchars.

Ultimately, Lossiemouth was reprieved, while Kinloss and Leuchars were handed to the British Army (with the runways kept operational).⁴ That decision appears to have had more to do with political and economic considerations than strategic ones, even though both then Defence Secretary Liam Fox and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) were beginning to take note of new challenges emerging in the High North.⁵

1. George Allison, 'Final P-8 Poseidon Maritime Patrol Aircraft Arrives in Scotland', *UK Defence Journal*, 11 January 2022, <<https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/final-p-8-poseidon-maritime-patrol-aircraft-arrives-in-scotland/>>, accessed 18 January 2022.
2. Lee Willett, 'Mind the Gap: Strategic Risk in the UK's Anti-Submarine Warfare Capability', *RUSI Commentary*, 4 February 2011; Simon McGee, 'MoD Documents Reveal Scrapped Nimrods Had Critical Faults', *Sunday Times*, 30 January 2011.
3. Thomas Harding, 'Russian Subs Stalk Trident in Echo of Cold War', *The Telegraph*, 27 August 2010.
4. Despite cuts to the RAF, the defence secretary, Liam Fox, appeared determined to maintain a military footprint in Scotland. See Lindsay McIntosh, 'Fox Offers Lifeline to Campaign for Saving RAF Base in Moray', *The Times*, 8 June 2011.
5. Defence, already struggling with a £37-billion black hole in its budget, was under significant pressure to cut costs as the Coalition government prioritised the UK's economic recovery and the elimination of the deficit following the 2008 global financial crisis. See Paul Cornish and Andrew M Dorman, 'Dr Fox and the Philosopher's Stone: The Alchemy of National Defence in the Age of Austerity', *International Affairs* (Vol. 87, No. 2, 2011), pp. 335–53. Although the Ministry of Defence



Saxa Vord radar station, in northernmost Scotland, was reactivated in the face of renewed competition, 2018. *Courtesy of Alamy / Mick Durham*

RAF Lossiemouth was subsequently given a new lease of life. In 2011, Westminster announced that ‘Lossie’ would replace Leuchars as the main base for the Typhoon fast jet fleet that makes up Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) North.⁶ Then, in 2016, following Westminster’s decision to restore the UK’s MPA capability, the government selected Lossiemouth to house the new P-8 fleet (the scrapped Nimrod programme had been based at Kinloss).⁷ A total of £75 million was subsequently invested in upgrading the runway at Lossiemouth to accommodate this heavier aircraft.⁸ This was followed by Westminster’s

announcement in 2020 that the UK’s new fleet of E-7 Wedgetail surveillance aircraft would also be stationed at Lossiemouth.⁹ Stressing the significance of these decisions, in March 2021, UK Scotland Secretary Alister Jack described Lossiemouth as ‘one of [the UK’s] most important air bases’ for monitoring threats in the North Atlantic both above and below the surface.¹⁰

Significantly, the minister’s words hinted that the initial decision to save the airbase in 2011 for primarily economic and political reasons has since dovetailed with renewed strategic interest in

(MoD) was becoming more attentive to the High North (especially in the context of future challenges relating to climate and energy security), the region was not mentioned at all in the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review. For a review, see Duncan Depledge, Klaus Dodds and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, ‘The UK’s Defence Arctic Strategy: Negotiating the Slippery Geopolitics of the UK and the Arctic’, *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 164, No. 1, 2019), pp. 28–39. Politically, the Coalition faced huge public outcry in Scotland over the potential loss of jobs and damage to the local economy. See Thomas Harding and Simon Johnson, ‘RAF Lossiemouth to be Saved at Expense of Leuchars’, *The Telegraph*, 14 December 2010.

6. Harding and Johnson, ‘RAF Lossiemouth to be Saved at Expense of Leuchars’.
7. MoD and Michael Fallon, ‘MOD Seals the Deal on Nine New Maritime Patrol Aircraft to Keep UK Safe’, news story, 11 July 2016, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/mod-seals-the-deal-on-nine-new-maritime-patrol-aircraft-to-keep-uk-safe>>, accessed 21 June 2021.
8. David Mackay, ‘RAF Lossiemouth: Runway Works Completed Early Ahead of More Major Upgrade Works Due Next Year’, *Press and Journal*, 22 December 2020, <<https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/news/moray/2758441/raf-lossiemouth-runway-works-completed/>>, accessed 21 June 2021.
9. *BBC News*, ‘New Wedgetail Surveillance Fleet to be Based at RAF Lossiemouth’, 18 December 2020.
10. David Mackay, ‘Defence Review: Overhaul Aims to Make UK “Technology Superpower” with RAF Lossiemouth Performing “Critical” Role’, *Press and Journal*, 24 March 2021, <<https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/news/politics/uk-politics/2996128/raf-lossiemouth-uk-government-defence-review/>>, accessed 21 June 2021.

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Figure 1: Bases in Scotland



Source: The authors.

the High North. Over the past decade, there has certainly been greater recognition in Westminster that the demands of the 9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had led the UK and other NATO allies to neglect the defence of the North Atlantic and High North, precisely as Russian military confidence and underwater capabilities were

returning.¹¹ The pressure to respond in kind has only increased since Moscow's intervention in the Ukraine crisis and annexation of Crimea in 2014.¹² Notably, Westminster appears to have grown less tolerant of Russian military activity close to UK air and sea space.¹³ The Royal Navy and the RAF have responded in kind with deployments to the Barents

11. John Andreas Olsen, 'Introduction: The Quest for Maritime Supremacy', in John Andreas Olsen (ed.), *NATO and the North Atlantic: Revitalising Collective Defence*, RUSI Whitehall Paper 87 (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017), pp. 3–7. However, in 2008, Norway had already launched the 'Core Area Initiative' aimed at refocusing NATO back to the basics of territorial defence and – in the case of Norway – a recognition of the challenges emerging vis-à-vis Russia. See Paal Sigurd Hilde and Helene Forsland Widerberg, 'Norway and NATO: The Art of Balancing', in Robin M Allers, Carlo Masala and Rolf Tamnes (eds), *Common or Divided Security? German and Norwegian Perspectives on Euro-Atlantic Security* (Frankfurt Am Main: Peter Lang, 2014), pp. 125–35.
12. Duncan Depledge, 'Train Where You Expect to Fight: Why Military Exercises Have Increased in the High North', *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* (Vol. 3, No. 1, 2020), pp. 288–301.
13. Andrew Foxall, 'Close Encounters: Russian Military Intrusions into UK Air- and Sea Space Since 2005', Policy Paper No. 7, Russia Studies Centre, Henry Jackson Society, February 2015, <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Foxall-Russia-Military-Incursions_FINAL1.pdf>, accessed 22 July 2021.

Sea, near Russia's strategic nuclear stronghold on the Kola Peninsula, on several occasions over the past two years.¹⁴ Meanwhile, NATO's return 'home' to core tasks for the defence of the Euro-Atlantic area has emphasised, among other missions, the need to revitalise capabilities for the defence of the North Atlantic and High North.¹⁵

In 2018, the MoD went further still, by announcing that it was developing an Arctic Strategy (not yet published) that would 'put the Arctic and the High North central to the security of the United Kingdom'.¹⁶ The accompanying press release stressed the importance of the new P-8 fleet, the Typhoon fast jet squadrons and Royal Navy submarines to protecting UK interests in the North Atlantic and High North. Significantly, the fact that nearly all these capabilities are based in Scotland for the foreseeable future is a forceful reminder – largely unacknowledged in the debate about Scotland leaving the UK ('Scexit') or the wider academic literature – of the country's geostrategic importance to the UK and NATO for confronting emerging challenges and threats in the North Atlantic and High North.

This article begins to fill this policy and academic lacuna regarding Scotland's importance to the security of the High North by addressing three interrelated questions. First, what is Scotland's current geostrategic role in the High North? Second, to what extent could this role change if Scotland became an independent sovereign state? Third, what are the implications for future defence and security relations between Scotland and the rest of the UK (rUK)?

Drawing on information from academic and policy literature, media articles and informal off-the-record discussions with serving and retired UK military personnel, civil servants, defence experts and politicians, the authors begin by reviewing Scotland's contribution to the defence of the UK

and NATO's 'northern flank' during the Cold War. This is followed by an examination of Scotland's contemporary importance to the High North security environment. Crucially, the authors note that the renewed attention that Scotland is receiving from defence planners has coincided with the very real prospect of Scotland becoming an independent state. Finally, the implications of what this Scexit wildcard might mean for High North security are analysed.¹⁷

The Geostrategic Importance of Scotland to the High North

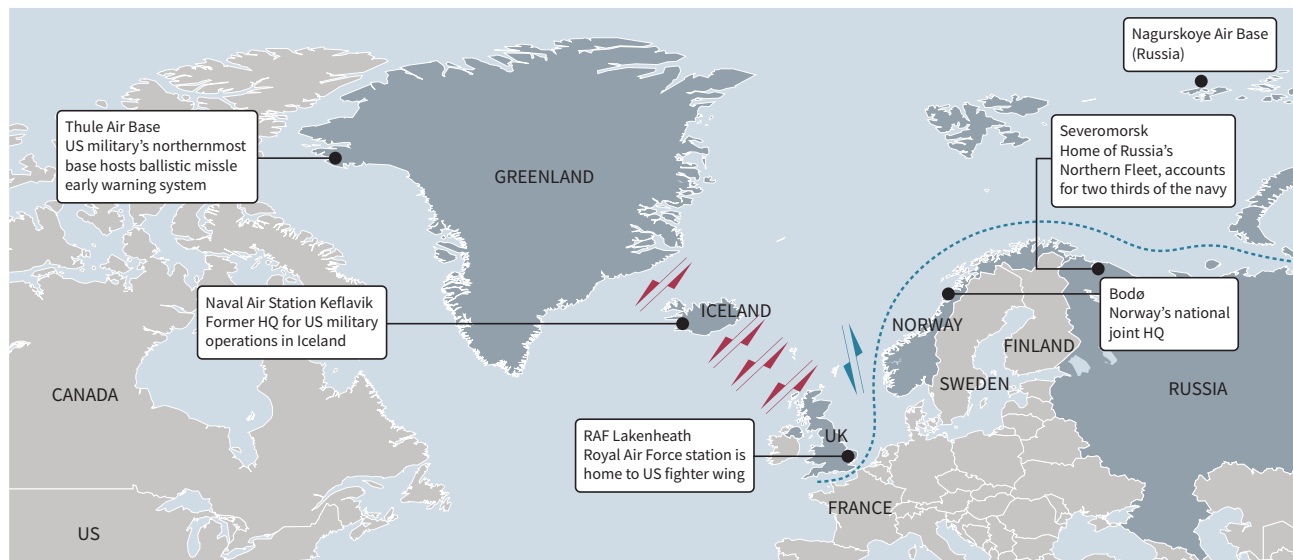
Although Scotland and the rUK lie some 300 nautical miles south of the Arctic Circle, they form an important part of the High North security environment for at least four reasons: their adjoining geographical position; the exposure of the British Isles to threats emanating from the High North; the fact that the UK regularly projects its armed forces into the High North; and the fact that NATO Arctic states are among the UK's closest allies. Indeed, over the past decade, the UK has consistently stressed its proximity to the Arctic, using the refrain 'we are the region's nearest neighbour'.¹⁸

Scotland's contemporary geostrategic importance to the High North traces back to the First World War when the British Admiralty based its Home Fleet at Scapa Flow to defend against German attacks. During the Second World War, Scapa Flow, together with the Royal Navy's Aultbea Station in Loch Ewe, became vital staging posts for the Arctic convoys that were essential for resupplying the Soviet Union via the Arctic ports of Archangel and Murmansk. Elsewhere in Scotland, radar equipment was deployed at Saxa Vord (on Unst, the northernmost of the Shetland Islands) to track German aircraft and warships approaching from the north. Notably,

14. Navy Lookout, 'Into the Bear's Backyard – the Royal Navy in the Barents Sea', 6 May 2020, <<https://www.navylookout.com/into-the-bears-backyard-the-royal-navy-in-the-barents-sea/>>, accessed 10 December 2021; Royal Navy, 'Royal Navy Leads Multi-National Task Group Above Arctic Circle', 10 September 2020, <<https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2020/september/10/200910-royal-navy-task-group-arctic-circle>>, accessed 10 December 2021; Larisa Brown, 'Royal Navy to Defend Arctic Trade as Ice Melts', *The Times*, 10 March 2021.
15. Duncan Depledge, 'NATO and the Arctic: The Need for a New Approach', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 165, No. 5–6, 2020), pp. 80–90.
16. MoD and Gavin Williamson, 'Defence Secretary Announces New Defence Arctic Strategy', news story, 30 September 2018, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-secretary-announces-new-defence-arctic-strategy>>, accessed 21 June 2021.
17. For the purposes of this article, the authors are principally concerned with issues relating to defence and security in the High North, and not the UK's wider defence footprint in Scotland, which also includes land forces, exercise ranges and defence industry.
18. For greater detail on the UK's interests in and connections to the Arctic, see Duncan Depledge, *Britain and the Arctic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

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Figure 2: Map of the UK in Relation to the High North



Source: The authors.

the first German air attack on Britain came from the north in October 1939 without any warning and targeted the naval base in Rosyth on the Firth of Forth. This prompted a hardening of Scotland's defences that would outlast the war.¹⁹

Indeed, as the Iron Curtain descended over Europe in 1946, Scotland remained of importance to the UK. With the formation of NATO in 1949, Scotland also became a locus for multinational cooperation. For the newly formed Alliance, Scotland's North Atlantic geography was critical for upholding the transatlantic bridge between North America and Western Europe. In response to the evolving threat posed by Soviet bombers – and, later, nuclear-armed submarines – critical bases and other installations in Scotland were reactivated or repurposed to create a network of military, intelligence, communications, early warning and staging facilities.²⁰ In the decades that followed, this infrastructure performed the crucial task of helping to defend NATO's northern flank and transatlantic sea lines of communication from air, surface and sub-sea incursions, including those launched from Soviet Arctic bases.

Scotland also resumed its wartime role as a crucial transportation link for NATO forces travelling

between North America and mainland Europe. Scottish ports and airbases were readied to support the rapid reinforcement and resupply of Norway in case a major Soviet offensive was launched against Scandinavia.²¹ The UK and the US took full advantage of the Clyde's deep coastal waters as a base from which their own strategic submarines could disappear into the Atlantic Ocean with relative ease and provide continuous at-sea deterrence.²² As the military historian Trevor Royle has summarised:

Perceived by some strategists as a well-equipped (though land-locked) aircraft carrier, Scotland had two roles: to guard the North Atlantic approaches in time of war and to provide the forward base for prosecuting any naval war which might have broken out in the Norwegian Sea as Soviet naval and air forces attempted to win control of the vital Iceland-Greenland gap...

...

More than any other factor ... the need to protect this flank put Scotland firmly on the front line throughout

19. Trevor Royle, *Facing the Bear: Scotland and the Cold War* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2019).

20. Niall Barr, 'The Cold War and Beyond', in Edward M Spiers, Jeremy A Crang and Matthew J Strickland (eds), *A Military History of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 600–24.

21. Royle, *Facing the Bear*.

22. Peter Hennessy and James Jinks, *The Silent Deep: The Royal Navy Submarine Service Since 1945* (London: Penguin Books, 2016).

the growing confrontation with the Soviet Union and her allies. ... [NATO Commanders recognised that] Soviet submarines and aircraft in the Kola Peninsula posed a special threat to the United Kingdom, a vital ally and a key base in any future European war ... the first land mass they would encounter would be Scotland.²³

By the end of the Cold War, the UK and the US had a significant military presence across Scotland. Royle estimates that approximately 10% of the UK's naval and air forces were deployed in Scotland by the early 1990s, including major and minor warships, submarines (strategic and patrol), fast fighter jets on QRA, and MPA. The US also had strategic submarines based at Holy Loch, and a network of command, communications, early warning and surveillance stations, air bases and staging posts.²⁴ This combination of early warning and surveillance systems, fast jets, maritime patrol, strategic submarine and anti-submarine warfare capabilities underscored Scotland's geostrategic significance; this developed in response to air and naval threats emerging from Soviet Arctic bases, and the need to provide cover for the UK's and the US's strategic submarine forces (a key component of NATO's deterrence strategy).

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, the threat to the northern flank was greatly diminished. Already in the late 1980s, the High North and the wider Arctic had become a focal point for some East–West cooperation over mutual environmental and scientific concerns.²⁵ This 'peace dividend' transformed security in Scotland over the course of the 1990s and into the early 2000s. US submarines left Holy Loch in 1992 (a decision also linked to the increasing range of US SLBMs, which meant Washington could keep its submarines closer to home).²⁶ The closure of several US installations followed and, in 1997, the second-largest US presence in Scotland left RAF Edzell.²⁷ The presence of UK armed forces and NATO in Scotland was also

scaled back significantly. NATO allies found a new set of 'out of area' expeditionary missions in the Balkans, the Middle East and Africa. Anti-submarine warfare in the North Atlantic was deprioritised.²⁸ Across the Greenland–Iceland–UK (Scotland) Gap, capabilities were withdrawn.

Indeed, the US decision to leave the Keflavik Air Station in Iceland in 2006 (the same year that the radar station at RAF Saxa Vord was closed after nearly 50 years of continuous operation) was perhaps a portent of what was to come in Scotland. It was only a few years later, in 2010, that Westminster scrapped the Nimrod programme and considered abandoning all three of the remaining major airbases in Scotland. Among the UK and its allies, it seemed Scotland's geostrategic position was not a vital concern in the new world order.

Back to the Future

The situation in 2022 could scarcely look more different. Since the nadir of 2010, there has been a substantial revitalisation of UK interest in the North Atlantic and High North.²⁹ Although there were some concerns about the Arctic in relation to climate change and energy security, NATO interest has also evolved over the past decade, mainly in response to an uptick in Russian air and naval (especially underwater) activity.³⁰ The broader deterioration of relations over Ukraine and Syria, and Moscow's provocative behaviour in Europe have caused concern as well. Indeed, although the hyperbole that emerged in the late 2000s around the potential for resource conflicts in the Arctic has largely subsided, the High North has seen renewed military activity from both NATO allies and Russia.³¹ Security concerns have heightened on both sides.

Moscow's investment in restoring, upgrading and modernising military infrastructure in the Arctic appears to be geared principally towards preventing

23. Royle, *Facing the Bear*, p. 4.

24. Royle, *Facing the Bear*.

25. Carina Keskitalo, 'International Region-Building: Development of the Arctic as an International Region', *Cooperation & Conflict* (Vol. 42, No. 2, 2007), pp. 187–205; Depledge, *Britain and the Arctic*.

26. Brian Lavery, 'The British Government and the American Polaris Base in the Clyde', *Journal for Maritime Research* (Vol. 3, No. 1, 2001), pp. 130–45.

27. Royle, *Facing the Bear*.

28. Depledge, 'Train Where You Expect to Fight'.

29. Depledge, *Britain and the Arctic*.

30. Helga Haftendorn, 'NATO and the Arctic: Is the Atlantic Alliance a Cold War Relic in a Peaceful Region Now Faced with Non-Military Challenges?', *European Security* (Vol. 20, No. 3, 2011), pp. 337–61; Depledge, 'NATO and the Arctic'.

31. Andreas Østhagen, 'The Arctic Security Region: Misconceptions and Contradictions', *Polar Geography* (Vol. 44, No. 1), pp. 55–74.

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Figure 3: Russia's High North 'Bastion'



Source: Adapted from John Andreas Olsen (ed.), *NATO and the North Atlantic: Revitalising Collective Defence*, RUSI Whitehall Paper 87 (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017), p. ix.

potential adversaries from threatening the Northern Fleet's nuclear submarine fleet, encroaching on the Russian Arctic Zone – including the Northern Sea Route – and maintaining naval access to the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans (as well as the wider Arctic Ocean as the sea ice diminishes due to anthropogenic global heating).³² However, this activity has also had an impact on the security concerns of the much smaller Nordic countries in its western neighbourhood – the Kingdom of Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway

and Sweden.³³ Several NATO allies – Norway in particular – have been increasingly alarmed about the apparent revitalisation of Russia's 'Bastion' defence strategy, which extends throughout much of the High North, reaching at least as far south as the Shetland Islands, if not to the Orkney Islands as well.³⁴

In a crisis, this Soviet-era concept entails ensuring Russian control over parts of northern Norway, the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard and the Barents Sea to protect the vital military assets

32. Mathieu Boulègue, *Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a 'Low Tension' Environment* (London: Chatham House, 2019).
33. Paal Sigurd Hilde, 'Armed Forces and Security Challenges in the Arctic', in Rolf Tamnes and Kristine Offerdal (eds), *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic: Regional Dynamics in a Global World* (New York, NY and Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 147–65; Njord Wegge, 'Arctic Security Strategies and the North Atlantic States', *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* (Vol. 11, 2020), pp. 360–82; Clive Archer, 'The Stoltenberg Report and Nordic Security: Big Idea, Small Steps', *Danish Foreign Policy Yearbook* (2010), pp. 43–74.
34. See, for example, Andreas Østhagen, 'Norway's Arctic Policy: Still High North, Low Tension?', *Polar Journal* (Vol. 11, No. 1, 2021), pp. 75–94.

of the Northern Fleet at Severomorsk and maintain its access to the North Atlantic, while at the same time denying NATO access north of the Greenland–Iceland–UK Gap.³⁵

Concurrently, China’s growing stake in the Arctic as a self-proclaimed ‘near-Arctic’ state has also prompted concern in Europe and North America, as evident in NATO’s 2030 Agenda agreed in June 2021.³⁶ As Beijing has sought to expand its global influence, the Arctic has become a focal point for investment in scientific and commercial projects.³⁷ Some analysts worry that Chinese attempts to purchase land in Iceland and Svalbard, along with investments in mining and transportation infrastructure in Greenland, could create a pathway to strategic influence and potentially even a future military presence, with which Beijing could project power across the Arctic, through the Greenland–Iceland–UK Gap and into the North Atlantic.³⁸ Such concerns may have informed Washington’s decision, along with those of many US allies, including the UK, to adopt a far tougher stance towards China in the Arctic, at least in rhetoric.³⁹

In the UK, growing recognition of the challenges posed by Russia (and more recently, China⁴⁰) has revitalised defence and security interest in the High North.⁴¹ As already noted, there has been particular concern over the resurgence of Russian military activity (often operating from Arctic bases) near UK sovereign waters and airspace, especially off the coast of Scotland.⁴² HMNB Clyde (or ‘Faslane’) on

Scotland’s west coast remains home to the Royal Navy’s fleet of nuclear-armed *Vanguard* submarines that form the UK’s continuous at-sea deterrent, while nearby RNAD Coulport houses nuclear warheads and missiles. There has been speculation that Russian activity off Scotland includes attempts to acquire the acoustic signatures of the Vanguard submarines before they can slip away into the deep waters of the North Atlantic, where they become virtually impossible to track.⁴³ This would pose a significant risk to the UK’s seaborne nuclear deterrent, which is also vital for NATO. As well as posing a potential threat to the British Isles, Russian ‘mischief-making’ in the High North and North Atlantic, particularly in the Greenland–Iceland–UK Gap, also creates challenges for the UK’s NATO allies.⁴⁴

The changed threat perception in the North Atlantic and High North led to another post-Cold War reconfiguration of UK defence, which began with the 2015 SDSR and subsequently imbued Scotland with renewed geostrategic importance. Westminster’s decisions to base the UK’s new MPA fleet, Wedgetail surveillance aircraft and all its nuclear-powered attack submarines in Scotland re-establishes a substantial anti-submarine-warfare and intelligence capability for the North Atlantic and High North. This enhances the protection available to the UK’s own continuous at-sea deterrent. Such assets also seek to deter further Russian mischief-making in and around the Greenland–Iceland–UK (Scotland) Gap, and form part of a triad of forces,

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35. For more on this defence concept, the notions of denial versus control, and its relevance today, see Olsen (ed.), *NATO and the North Atlantic*; Ina Holst-Pedersen Kvam, ‘“Strategic Deterrence” in the North: Implications of Russian Maritime Defence Planning and Seapower to Norwegian Maritime Strategy’, Master’s thesis, University of Bergen, 2018, <<http://bora.uib.no/handle/1956/18770>>, accessed 23 December 2021.
 36. NATO, ‘Leaders Agree NATO 2030 Agenda to Strengthen the Alliance’, 14 June 2021, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_184998.htm>, accessed 21 June 2021.
 37. Martin Kossa, ‘China’s Arctic Engagement: Domestic Actors and Foreign Policy’, *Global Change, Peace & Security* (Vol. 32, No. 1, 2020), pp. 19–38.
 38. Anne-Marie Brady, ‘Facing Up to China’s Military Interests in the Arctic’, *China Brief* (Vol. 19, No. 21, 2019).
 39. Heather A Conley et al., *America’s Arctic Moment: Great Power Competition in the Arctic to 2050* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2020); *The Guardian*, ‘US Warns Beijing’s Arctic Activity Risks Creating “New South China Sea”’, 6 May 2019.
 40. Harry Lye, ‘First Sea Lord Warns China Will Exploit Thawing Arctic Sea Routes’, *Naval Technology*, 9 October 2020, <<https://www.naval-technology.com/features/first-sea-lord-warns-china-will-exploit-thawing-arctic-sea-routes/>>, accessed 5 March 2021.
 41. Depledge, *Britain and the Arctic*.
 42. Royal Navy, ‘Royal Navy Submarines Breaks Through Arctic Ice for Major Exercise’, 15 March 2018, <<https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2018/march/15/180315-iceex-2018>>, accessed 5 March 2021; RAF, ‘New Poseidon Maritime Patrol Aircraft Lands in the UK for First Time’, 4 February 2020, <<https://www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/new-poseidon-maritime-patrol-aircraft-lands-in-uk-for-first-time/>>, accessed 5 March 2021; Royal Navy, ‘Royal Navy Leads Multi-National Task Group Above Arctic Circle’.
 43. Foxall, ‘Close Encounters’.
 44. Rebecca Pincus, ‘Towards a New Arctic: Changing Strategic Geography in the GIUK Gap’, *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 165, No. 3, 2020), pp. 50–58.

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including those of the US and Norway. As the 2021 Defence Command Paper, published alongside the UK government's Integrated Review, makes clear, this major investment in Scotland has not just been made to defend UK waters and the transatlantic bridge: it is also about ensuring the UK can project forces into the High North and Arctic.⁴⁵ Moreover, the redevelopment of Lossiemouth has also reinforced Scotland's position as a focal point for NATO activity in the North Atlantic and High North.

Scotland's High North Interests

Strikingly, the revival of Westminster and NATO interest in defence matters relating to the North Atlantic, the High North and the Arctic has brought the geostrategic importance of Scotland squarely back into focus at precisely the moment when the prospect of Scotland voting to leave the Union has never looked greater. Indeed, over the past decade, some within the Scottish National Party (SNP) have keenly brought attention to – and tried to make political capital out of – what they perceive as Westminster's 'neglect' of Scotland's security. For instance, in 2011, the then SNP defence spokesperson, Angus Robertson, expressed his frustration at the cuts the 2010 SDSR made to defence infrastructure and capabilities in Scotland despite the environmental concerns, economic opportunities and geostrategic challenges emerging in the High North and the Arctic.⁴⁶ More recently, as Westminster has talked up the threats posed by Russia and China emanating from the High North, the SNP has questioned why this has not led to even more focus on and capabilities for the UK's northern neighbourhood (highlighting, in particular, the lack of major surface warships based in Scottish waters).⁴⁷

Constitutionally, of course, Westminster is not under any obligation to consult with Holyrood on defence and foreign policy as these are not devolved matters. The UK government is also likely to be wary of taking any action that could be seen

as setting a new precedent for future consultation with Holyrood on defence and foreign affairs. As for the SNP's demands for major surface warships to be permanently based in Scottish waters, it is by no means clear that the cost implications would be outweighed by the perceived strategic advantages.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, accusing Westminster of neglecting Scotland's defence and security remains a potent narrative for Scottish independence supporters, not least because it downplays Scotland's reliance on the rUK in the event of independence.

Since the SNP took power in Holyrood in 2011 it has been waging a spirited campaign to accentuate Scotland's historical and geographical connections to the Arctic

Indeed, the High North appears to be emerging as a key area where attempts to distinguish Scotland from the UK and carve out new para-diplomatic relationships with friends and allies other than London is most apparent.⁴⁹ It is worth noting that as well as recognising the defence and security challenges emerging in the High North, since the SNP took power in Holyrood in 2011 it has been waging a spirited campaign to accentuate Scotland's historical and geographical connections to the Arctic, in contradistinction to those of the rUK.⁵⁰ For instance, Scotland's first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has stressed repeatedly that 'Scotland is geographically the Arctic's nearest neighbour' and has made several appearances alongside other regional political leaders at the Arctic Circle Assembly – an annual Arctic conference hosted by Iceland – even hosting one related meeting in Edinburgh.⁵¹ 'Neglect' was raised as an issue again in 2014 when it was reported that Scottish government ministers had not been consulted by Westminster during the drafting of the

45. MoD, *Defence in a Competitive Age*, CP 411 (London: The Stationery Office, 2021).

46. *The Scotsman*, 'Angus Robertson: High Time to Join Our Friends in the North and Face the Arctic Challenge', 29 November 2011.

47. SNP, 'SNP Submission to the Integrated Review', November 2020, <<https://www.stewartmcdonald.scot/files/snp-submission-to-the-integrated-review-november-2020.pdf>>, accessed 8 March 2021.

48. For a discussion of this issue, which has proven polarising, see Save the Royal Navy, 'Scottish Nationalism Continues to Cast a Shadow Over the Royal Navy', *Military Times*, 23 July 2018.

49. Stephen Gethins, *Nation to Nation: Scotland's Place in the World* (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2021).

50. *Ibid.*

51. Scottish Government, 'Arctic Circle Forum Scotland: Speech', 21 November 2017, <<https://www.gov.scot/publications/arctic-circle-forum-scotland-speech/>>, accessed 5 March 2021.

UK's first-ever Arctic Policy Framework (published in 2013 to set out a national vision of emerging interest and activity in the region).⁵² Not content with Westminster's refreshed Arctic Policy Framework in 2018 (which at least mentioned Scotland by name), in 2019 Holyrood published its own Arctic Policy Framework, billed as a 'prospectus for cooperation, knowledge-exchange and partnerships between Scotland and the Arctic'.⁵³ At the same time, a Nordic and Arctic Unit was established to continue developing Scotland's 'offer' to the Arctic.⁵⁴ This has all happened even though Scotland remains a constituent part of the UK.

That key figures in the SNP are looking at the High North as an arena consisting of multiple challenges and opportunities for defence, environment, economic and foreign policy is indicative of the region's growing importance to Scotland, particularly as it tries to carve out a future distinct from the rUK.⁵⁵ Notably, Scotland's long, jagged coastline and outlying islands would bestow a responsibility (currently Westminster's) for a vast maritime zone in the North Atlantic and North Sea stretching up towards the Faroe Islands and Norway: an area which includes several major fisheries, energy installations and submarine cables, as well as potential for further commercial investment in the so-called 'blue economy'.⁵⁶ Research on the potential mission and structure of any future Scottish Defence Force (SDF) that would likely be established in the event of independence reinforces the notion that if Scotland does achieve independence, then its defence and security policy must be attentive to local and regional security challenges in the North Atlantic and High North.⁵⁷ This includes the implications of independence for defence and security relations with the rUK and other potential regional allies and partners. Ahead of the 2014 independence referendum, the idea was already being mooted by

the SNP that Holyrood could look to Norway and Denmark (which have similar-sized defence budgets and are NATO members) for 'models' to guide Scottish security and defence policy, as well as the size and structure of its forces.⁵⁸

Looking to the Nordics

In the event of independence, Scotland could face serious constraints on public spending. Defence priorities will have to be squared with the demands of health, social welfare, education, infrastructure and more. Like some of its Nordic neighbours, Scotland may therefore be more inclined to – or left with no other choice but to – tailor its forces to meet local and regional security needs related to defending the country's maritime domain, protecting its coastal economy and environment, and investing in Nordic cooperation. This would likely result in the SDF having higher numbers of cheaper and less-sophisticated capabilities, sufficient for supporting the maritime security architecture around Scotland and the High North, but arguably less capable in terms of defence and deterrence. Indeed, paradoxically, such capabilities could lead to a more sustained – albeit far softer – military presence in the area than the UK currently offers.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, cooperation on shared emergency response, environmental protection and even fisheries inspections are softer maritime security avenues where interaction with its Nordic neighbours would have advantages for Scotland. In the longer term, any increase in economic activity in the High North (in which Scottish and Nordic firms are likely to have a sizeable stake) would result in greater maritime traffic in the Norwegian and North Seas, in turn prompting even greater demand for surveillance, policing and emergency response

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52. *The Herald*, 'Holyrood Urged to Act to Protect Arctic After "Snub" by Westminster', 2 February 2014.
53. Scottish Government, 'Arctic Connections: Scotland's Arctic Policy Framework', 23 September 2019, <<https://www.gov.scot/publications/arctic-connections-scotlands-arctic-policy-framework/>>, accessed 5 March 2021.
54. *Ibid.*
55. Gethins, *Nation to Nation*.
56. Economic activity in, or related to, the ocean. See, for example, World Bank, 'What is the Blue Economy?', 6 June 2017, <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/infographic/2017/06/06/blue-economy>>, accessed 27 April 2021.
57. John MacDonald and Andrew Parrott, *Securing the Nation: Defending an Independent Scotland* (Edinburgh: Scottish Global Forum, 2013); Stuart Crawford and Richard Marsh, 'A' The Blue Bonnets: Defending an Independent Scotland', *Whitehall Report*, 3-12 (October 2012).
58. Crawford and Marsh, 'A' The Blue Bonnets'.
59. Andreas Østhagen, 'Arctic Coast Guards: Why Cooperate?', in Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv, Marc Lanteigne and Horatio Godfrey Sam-Aggrey (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Arctic Security* (New York, NY and Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 283–94.

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capabilities.⁶⁰ Assets such as maritime surveillance aircraft, including UAVs, and coast guard/offshore patrol vessels would be essential in such a strand of cooperation, adding – if Scotland felt compelled to increase its contribution as an independent coastal state – to already-existing capacity in these maritime domains and serving multiple security purposes (from emergency response to upholding sovereign rights and domain awareness). In other words, it might be that one high-end form of capability (for example, SSNs) would be replaced by something more akin to a coast guard structure tailored to a slightly different set of tasks, albeit still underpinning sovereignty at sea. This would contrast with Westminster's current approach wherein the contribution of far more capable forces, which are present in and around Scottish waters, to maritime security in the North Atlantic and High North is nonetheless limited by the need to serve the UK's wider defence tasks, which extend globally, except in times of national emergency.

If granted independence, Scotland would also need to form a national position on Russia. There is a broad consensus among the Nordics – shared by the UK – that the most pressing security challenge in the North Atlantic and High North is posed by Russia.⁶¹ Here again, Scotland might look to emulate its Nordic neighbours. Norway, for example, has long pursued a twin-track approach with Moscow, combining dialogue and deterrence through a strong focus on multilateralism and cooperative solutions.⁶² Collectively, Denmark, Iceland and Norway have endeavoured to balance military inferiority to Russia through membership of NATO and a strong bilateral relationship with the US,⁶³ as well as close defence ties with the UK and other allies and partners across Scandinavia and the Baltics. As the regional security

situation in the High North has worsened with bellicose rhetoric and increased military exercises, the Nordic NATO members have sought greater engagement from the US and the UK, as well as NATO more broadly, to help deter Russia.⁶⁴ However, the same actors also recognise the need for renewed engagement with Russia, with the aim of trying to reduce overall tensions in the High North.⁶⁵ To play a full part in the regional defence and security infrastructure, an independent Scotland also would need to recognise the challenges posed by Moscow's recent incursions into the North Atlantic from its bases in the High North. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how Scotland could build closer ties with the Nordics, without being sympathetic to the concerns that its prospective allies have about Russia.

More broadly, and setting aside the nuclear question for the moment, an independent Scotland's future relationship with NATO is also likely to be defined primarily in relation to what Scotland can contribute to the North Atlantic and High North, consistent with its size as a small state (although Holyrood may hope to also make some SDF capabilities available to support multilateral expeditionary operations).⁶⁶ Indeed, future membership of NATO depends on Scotland presenting itself as an attractive, capable and willing partner. Importantly, the SNP officially reversed its decade-long opposition to NATO membership in 2012 and, in the event of independence, there would likely be majority support for Scotland to join the Alliance. Along these lines, the SDF, for example, could continue to offer a base in Lossiemouth for visiting Norwegian and US P-8s, as well as other assets from potential NATO allies and partners. It has even been mooted that the entire airbase should be handed over to the Alliance with a view to having

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60. See, for example, Andreas Østhagen, *Coast Guards and Ocean Politics in the Arctic* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
 61. Duncan Depledge and Whitney P Lackenbauer (eds.), *On Thin Ice: Perspectives on Arctic Security* (Peterborough: North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, 2021); Østhagen, 'The Arctic Security Region'.
 62. The notions of 'deterrence' and 'reassurance' are prominent in Norwegian defence strategy vis-à-vis Russia. See, for example, Karsten Friis, 'Norway: NATO in the North?', in Nora Vanaga and Toms Rostoks (eds), *Deterring Russia in Europe: Defence Strategies for Neighbouring States*, 1st edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 128–45.
 63. Ine Eriksen Søreide, 'NATO and the North Atlantic: Revitalizing Collective Defense and the Maritime Domain', 2016, <<https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/prism/id2508886/>>, accessed 23 December 2021; Paal S Hilde, 'Forsvar Vår Dyd, Men Kom Oss Ikke for Nær. Norge Og Det Militære Samarbeidet i NATO' ['Defend Our Virtue, but Do Not Get Too Close. Norway and the Military Cooperation in NATO'], *Internasjonal Politikk* (Vol. 77, No. 1, 2019), pp. 60–70.
 64. Håkon Lunde Saxi, 'The Rise, Fall and Resurgence of Nordic Defence Cooperation', *International Affairs* (Vol. 95, No. 3, 2019), pp. 659–80; Hilde-Gunn Bye, 'Leaving Its Arctic Reluctance Behind: The Re-Emergence of U.S. Security Policy Focus Towards the European High North and Its Implications for Norway', *Polar Journal* (Vol. 10, No. 1, 2020), pp. 82–101.
 65. Andreas Østhagen, 'High North, Low Politics – Maritime Cooperation with Russia in the Arctic', *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* (Vol. 7, No. 1, 2016), pp. 83–100.
 66. Colin Fleming and Carmen Gebhard, 'Scotland, NATO, and Transatlantic Security', *European Security* (Vol. 23, No. 3, 2014), pp. 307–25.

Table 1: Comparing the Nordics and Scotland

	Denmark (Greenland)	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Scotland
Population	5.8 million (57,799)	5.5 million	354,234	5.5 million	10.2 million	5.4 million
Size of territory	43,094 km ² (2.1 million km ²)	338,145 km ²	103,000 km ²	385,207 km ²	450,295 km ²	77,955 km ²
NATO	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	N/A*
EU	Yes [†]	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Arctic population (approx.)[§]	0 (57,799)	180,000	354,234	490,000	520,000	0 [‡]
Arctic coastal state	Yes	No	Partly	Yes	No	No

* The UK's membership of NATO currently covers all of Scotland.

† While Denmark is a member of the EU, Greenland and its territory are not.

‡ Although Scotland has no Arctic population, approximately 470,000 live in the Scottish 'Highlands and Islands' (one of the lowest population densities in Europe).

§ Arctic population estimates are based on Arctic Council, <<https://arctic-council.org/about/states>>, accessed 4 January 2022.

NATO maritime patrol and fast jet assets permanently based in Scotland.⁶⁷ Either approach would help ensure a central role for an independent Scotland in supporting intelligence, situational awareness, maritime patrol, search and rescue, and military exercises across the North Atlantic and High North. As such, a Scottish role in NATO would be similar to Nordic NATO members whose security guarantees are ultimately provided for by the Alliance's stronger allies (with a particular nod to the US and the UK). In return, Scotland would offer specific capacities or capabilities of crucial importance to the Alliance's role in the North Atlantic ultimately based on political willingness to engage with different NATO tasks in and out of area.⁶⁸ Even if Scotland did not become an independent member of NATO, Holyrood could

try for a Finnish/Swedish (or, to a lesser extent, Irish) model of close partnership, albeit formally outside the defence alliance.

EU membership would offer another pathway for Scotland to provide support to its regional allies, with the EU's increasing ambitions within the realm of defence collaboration. The EU's latest Arctic policy document from 2021 highlights its aspirations to be a 'geopolitical' actor in the north, while also enhancing maritime preparedness and response capacities.⁶⁹ Given membership, Scotland would also be able to play a special role in EU Arctic policy development alongside the Nordic EU members (Denmark, Finland and Sweden). Still, questions remain on the form of EU attachment Scotland would acquire. It must also be noted that the EU's

67. Stuart Crawford and Richard Marsh, 'Defending an Independent Scotland Post-Brexit', Scottish Centre on European Relations, 17 September 2018, <<https://www.scer.scot/database/ident-8548>>, accessed 10 December 2021.

68. Here, the three Nordic NATO allies offer divergent models that Scotland could follow: Iceland does not have dedicated armed forces and is totally dependent on the collective security guarantee; Denmark has long focused on participating with specialised contributions to NATO's out-of-area operations, only more recently shifting its focus (partially) to Arctic defence issues concerning Greenland; Norway's security and defence policy is contingent on Russia's actions and investments on the other side of the 196-km border, which in turn has made Norway argue strongly for NATO to return to territorial defence tasks and the security guarantee – very much in vogue since 2014.

69. European Commission and High Representative, 'A Stronger EU Engagement for a Peaceful, Sustainable and Prosperous Arctic', 13 October 2021.

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own Arctic engagement faces questions of where, what and how – especially concerning security and defence tasks.⁷⁰

Despite what Scotland may be able to offer to maritime security in the High North, it would be naive to think that an independent Scotland's integration into the North Atlantic and High North defence and security architecture would be entirely seamless. In both a NATO and an EU context, Holyrood would need to be wary of the reputational damage that could be caused by taking any action that could be perceived as an attempt to 'weaponise' tensions over Faslane and Coulport to try to extract political or economic concessions from Westminster. Such a dispute would be a gift to Russia and other adversaries looking to exacerbate divisions in Europe over defence and security. And while some SNP politicians have been keen to stress Scotland's close friendships with its neighbours in the High North – to the point of describing Scotland as the 'sixth' Nordic nation – potential areas of dispute should also be acknowledged.⁷¹ Here, conflict is more likely to emerge over ocean and marine resource governance. The UK has entered into maritime boundary agreements with all its North Atlantic neighbours: Norway in 1965; Ireland in 1988; and Denmark and the Faroe Islands in 1999. As a result, the Rockall dispute over whether the tiny uninhabited island generates a 12 nautical mile territorial sea is rather insignificant, from a Nordic perspective, as the island lies within the exclusive economic zone of the UK (and thus Scotland's). Potentially more problematic is the issue of fisheries. The division of quotas has been a thorn in the side of post-Brexit negotiations, where the EU (on behalf of Ireland and Denmark) and Norway have been unrelenting in quota negotiations. Given Scottish dependence on this economic activity and the symbolism involved in fisheries disputes, it is likely to become another difficult subject in Scexit negotiations with the rUK, and might also cause disruption with the Nordic neighbours.

Scexit: A Wildcard for High North Security?

Closer to home, the prospect of Scexit raises a crucial question for policymakers in Westminster and Holyrood, as well as among the UK's NATO allies: how can independence (if realised) be prevented from disrupting the rUK's own crucial – and arguably larger – role in the defence and security architecture of the High North?

Should Scotland vote to leave the Union, it is of course by no means inevitable that the impact on the High North defence and security architecture would be deleterious. As outlined above, Scotland's northward-facing geography would assume even greater importance to its future economy as an independent state, demanding the attention of whichever government takes shape in Holyrood. This could mean greater investment in the infrastructural potential of Scottish coasts and outlying islands to help further develop the country's blue economy. To enhance maritime security in these areas and protect emerging commercial interests, Holyrood would need to prioritise building up more capable coast guard and ocean-going patrol capabilities. However, if rUK forces are either partly or fully withdrawn from Scotland, the new SDF would also have to consider acquiring far more expensive and capable forces such as frigates, diesel submarines, fast jets and MPAs for air and maritime defence.⁷² If acquired – and affordability remains a significant constraint – these assets might then also be made available to contribute to multilateral deterrence efforts in the North Atlantic and High North, as well as cooperation on domain awareness and maritime security with the Nordics.

However, the reality is that wider considerations would also come into play. The first complication is economic. While some are optimistic that Scotland's economy will be strengthened by independence, others are less certain.⁷³ A 2018 report by Sturgeon's Sustainable Growth Commission estimated that Scotland's defence spending would be limited to 1.6% of GDP, which falls short of NATO's 2% spending target (and is lower than the UK's spending of 2.29%

70. Andreas Raspotnik, 'Find Your Niche: The European Union and Arctic Security', in Andreas Østhagen and Andreas Raspotnik (eds), 'Looking North: The European Union and Arctic Security from a Nordic and German Perspective', Fridtjof Nansen Institute and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2021, pp. 130–54.

71. *Helsinki Times*, 'Letter from SNP MP Douglas Chapman, in Response to Column by Anthony Heron', 23 November 2021, <<https://www.helsinkitimes.fi/columns/columns/viewpoint/20422-letter-from-snp-mp-douglas-chapman-in-response-to-column-by-anthony-heron.html>>, accessed 4 January 2022.

72. MacDonald and Parrott, *Securing the Nation*; Crawford and Marsh, 'A' The Blue Bonnets'.

73. Malcolm Chalmers, 'Dissolution and Defence: Scotland's Armed Forces After a Yes Vote', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 159, No. 2, 2014), pp. 30–37.

in 2021). It is worth noting that in that respect, Scotland would be no different from Norway (1.84%), Denmark (1.41%) and Iceland (0%),⁷⁴ all of which continue to rely on shelter from the US and NATO, despite falling short against the 2% target in recent years.⁷⁵ Montenegro, as NATO's newest member, has also not yet reached the 2% target. However, the Nordic countries were all founding members of the Alliance and have found other ways to contribute to Alliance burden-sharing, while Montenegro has committed to reaching 2% spending on defence by 2024. Meanwhile, Scotland would likely be in a far more challenging economic position, may take time to resolve political uncertainties over future defence spending and faces the challenge of negotiating entry into the Alliance. Here, the authors are not seeking to downplay Scotland's own historical contribution to NATO as a constituent part of the UK. Rather, this article simply seeks to point out that when it comes to negotiating entry into NATO, there is no clear model for Scotland to follow.

The reality is that it is virtually impossible to know exactly what the state of the Scottish economy will be if and when independence is achieved or what the future relationship between Scotland and the rUK will be (or indeed Scottish relations with the EU and NATO). This makes it difficult to judge whether Scotland could afford to build, equip, people and maintain sufficiently capable forces for meeting all of its defence and security tasks – as well as any NATO targets – independently of the rUK and other allies. Yet, even with an optimistic outlook on Scotland's future finances, it could take a generation to build up a truly capable and independent SDF. This would leave Scotland needing to shelter under the rUK and/or other allies to meet its security and defence needs. If the Scottish economy struggles, the need to shelter would be far greater, last longer and perhaps

become permanent. Even if the economy does well, it is difficult to see how Scotland could escape the need to shelter under the rUK and NATO entirely.

Herein lies the second complication of Scexit: during any transition of responsibilities for defence and security from the rUK to Scotland, there are several thorny interrelated issues which would need to be addressed. First, Scottish independence is likely to be followed by immediate calls for the rUK to safely remove its nuclear submarine fleet, warheads and missiles from the Clyde on the 'speediest and safest' timetable possible.⁷⁶ The basing of the UK's nuclear deterrent in Scotland has always been deeply unpopular with a vocal section of Scottish society and the SNP has long campaigned for its removal. The SNP has also earmarked Faslane as a future headquarters for the SDF.⁷⁷ However, moving the rUK's nuclear deterrent 'south of the border' would be incredibly costly and is likely to be resisted by Westminster and NATO for as long as possible.⁷⁸

This issue is further complicated by the importance of the UK's nuclear deterrent to NATO, especially at a time of heightened tensions with Russia (and growing concerns about China).⁷⁹ Some within NATO already appear reticent about allowing Scotland to join the Alliance if, following independence, Holyrood were to uphold the SNP's stance of refusing to host nuclear weapons on Scottish soil (as other allies such as Norway and Denmark have negotiated in the past).⁸⁰ Faced with the prospect of having to move its nuclear deterrent out of Scotland, Westminster could seek to capitalise on concerns within the Alliance to frustrate any Scottish ambitions of membership. Given the rUK's wider importance to NATO, it seems improbable that other members of the Alliance (including the Nordics) would bring undue pressure to bear on Westminster to modify its stance, so long as the

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74. NATO, 'Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2021)', 11 June 2021, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_184844.htm>, accessed 23 December 2021.
75. Albeit to varying degrees and in various formats: three out of five countries are NATO members; three out of five are EU members, whereas the other two are part of the European Economic Area. The security guarantee has, in any case, been found external to the Nordics – even as they have increased defence cooperation among themselves. But there, again, the different ties and dependencies, as well as variation in perception of risk and security interests, have led to difficulties.
76. Scottish Government, *Scotland's Future: Your Guide to an Independent Scotland* (Edinburgh, Scottish Government, 2013), p. 479; *The Economist*, 'How Scottish Independence Would Threaten Britain's Defence', 7 November 2020.
77. Scottish Government, *Scotland's Future*, p. 237.
78. John Gower, 'Implications for United Kingdom Nuclear Deterrence Should the Union Fail', European Leadership Network, April 2021, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Implications-for-United-Kingdom-nuclear-deterrence_John-Gower-.pdf>, accessed 21 June 2021.
79. Gower, *Implications for United Kingdom Nuclear Deterrence Should the Union Fail*.
80. John Johnston, 'Why NATO Allies Should Be Worried About the Scottish Elections', Atlantic Council, 6 May 2016, <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/why-nato-allies-should-be-worried-about-the-scottish-elections/>>, accessed 15 April 2021; Gower, *Implications for United Kingdom Nuclear Deterrence Should the Union Fail*.

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regional security architecture remains intact. Adrift from the Alliance, the financial cost to Holyrood of defending Scotland could be far higher and impact the development of strategic relationships with prospective regional allies.⁸¹

A third issue to keep in mind is that Scotland's geostrategic position and past importance to the defence of the northern flank does not mean that NATO will allow the country to become a member at any cost – and especially if it was seen as a threat to Alliance cohesion. It is noteworthy that in the build-up to the 2014 independence referendum, the SNP argued that the Alliance would not be able to ignore Scotland's geostrategic position in relation to the North Atlantic and High North, so membership would be in the interest of both sides.⁸² However, when it comes to the High North, NATO does have other options. Indeed, we only need to look at the recent focus that Washington has put on Greenland, Iceland and Norway to support its naval and air operations in the High North (which the rUK could seek to emulate by pursuing agreements to co-locate assets on Alliance territory further north, for example) to see that the regional security architecture could be upheld without Scotland, if necessary.

Were it not for the dispute over the nuclear deterrent (and notwithstanding the potential for tensions to erupt between Holyrood and Westminster over other non-defence-related issues), it would perhaps be easier for Scotland and the rUK to negotiate a new defence agreement that would allow the latter to keep operating fast jets, MPA, surveillance aircraft and other military assets from bases north of the border, even if it required a lease arrangement.⁸³ Crucially, in terms of the High North at least, such an agreement would also keep the regional defence and security architecture intact during any transitional period, even as it evolves to accommodate the defence interests of a newly independent Scotland.

Such an agreement between Holyrood and Westminster would also create a clearer pathway for Scotland to join NATO. It could engender a more positive relationship in other ways as well: from amicably disentangling what would become the foundations of the new SDF from the UK's existing armed forces to rUK armed forces continuing to conduct missions defending Scottish interests as Scotland builds up its own capabilities. In the

North Atlantic and High North, the development of a close bilateral defence partnership could lead to a degree of 'burden-sharing', with Holyrood focusing more on maritime security tasks (perhaps in closer cooperation with the Nordics) and the rUK (and NATO) providing defence against the more traditional threats posed by Russia and other potential adversaries. Alternatively, both countries might commit to enhancing interoperability between the SDF and rUK armed forces, sharing bases and undertaking joint air and naval missions (for both maritime security and defence) in the High North and North Atlantic. This could be underpinned by close cooperation on defence research, development and procurement. More broadly, Scotland (should it wish to join) would likely be welcomed into the Northern Group and the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force, and, as a member of NATO, become a full player in the regional security architecture of the North Atlantic and High North.⁸⁴

Conclusion

This article has explained Scotland's geostrategic importance during periods of heightened tensions in the North Atlantic and High North. This was as true during the two world wars as it is today. However, what is different about the latest round of geopolitical tension in this part of the world is that it is taking place at a time of growing interest in the Arctic, and especially the prospect of new commercial and strategic opportunities emerging there. As a result, Scotland now finds itself geographically positioned not so much on NATO's northern flank, but at the end of a new 'Northern Front' facing into the Arctic Ocean. In the UK, these developments have already led to renewed military investment in Scotland, which has also formed part of a broader recommitment to working with allies to uphold the North Atlantic and High North security architecture. However, Holyrood has its own ambitions in the North Atlantic and High North and, if Scotland becomes independent, the authors have investigated how the existing regional defence and security architecture could be affected.

Clearly, there are many 'ifs' and 'buts' that must be resolved before a clear picture can be drawn of future Scotland–rUK relations should Scottish

81. Fleming and Gebhard, 'Scotland, NATO, and Transatlantic Security'.

82. Scottish Government, *Scotland's Future*.

83. See also Chalmers, 'Dissolution and Defence'.

84. One could even consider an independent Scotland wanting to join the Nordic Defence Cooperation.

independence be realised in the years ahead. The authors have not sought to predict what the future relationship between Scotland, the rUK and other NATO allies would look like in the event of Scottish independence. Much is likely to hinge on Scotland and the rUK reaching a satisfactory compromise over the future of the nuclear deterrent. As Malcolm Chalmers observed nearly a decade ago, with agreement over Faslane and Coulport, everything else becomes possible.⁸⁵ Indeed, without compromise on this issue (which itself may need to form part of a package of agreements, not all of which will necessarily be related to defence), the prospect of significant tensions emerging between Holyrood and Westminster should not be discounted. The difficult and protracted negotiations between Westminster and Brussels that have followed Brexit since 2016 should serve as a warning to anyone who believes that Scexit would be a straightforward matter to resolve. However, this article also reveals that once the ‘nuclear’ issue is resolved, there is a wide range of other issues that policymakers in Holyrood, Westminster and elsewhere in NATO capitals will need to consider, all of which have the capacity to impact the wider regional security architecture.

The impact of a post-Scexit deterioration of relations between Westminster and Holyrood would be particularly pronounced in the North Atlantic and High North. As commercial and military activity in the region has grown, Scotland has resumed its Cold War ‘pre-eminence’ for both the UK and NATO’s transatlantic defence posture. With an ever-greater need for a complementary ‘transpolar’ perspective – orientated towards defending and securing maritime access to and activity in the Arctic – Scotland’s geostrategic significance is likely to be elevated further still.⁸⁶ For the UK specifically, the capacity to project force into the High North and the Arctic is once again being rooted in Scotland.⁸⁷ Should the UK lose its Scottish bases, the MoD’s nascent Arctic strategy would undoubtedly need rethinking. Shifting bases to northern England will be costly and time-consuming, while the increased distances involved could reduce time on station for key capabilities such as the P-8As. The impact will be felt across NATO, but especially in the Nordics as they rely on UK surveillance and QRA capacities in the North Atlantic and High North. Meanwhile,

NATO should expect that its adversaries will do everything they can to foster and exploit any emerging gaps and divisions between Scotland and the rUK over air and maritime defence and security. This would especially be the case if Scotland responded to being refused membership by evicting all rUK forces from Scotland. Indeed, sensing the opportunity to widen the emerging security ‘gap’, NATO’s competitors and adversaries may seek to actively exploit and exacerbate any sign of a breakdown in defence relations between Holyrood and Westminster to serve their own foreign policy goals. Russia, for instance, might use the opportunity to test the northern flank with more provocative snap exercises and patrols in the High North and North Atlantic.

Given the time and resources that will be required to build up an SDF, it seems unlikely that an independent Scotland could swiftly replace the rUK’s contribution to the regional security architecture. Indeed, policymakers on both sides need to recognise that the only way to maintain the status quo in the North Atlantic and High North would be for Scotland and the rUK to negotiate a new defence agreement that arranges for at least some sort of transitional period during which the rUK can continue to operate from its bases in Scotland while the SDF is being developed. From there, it will be up to Holyrood and Westminster to determine the extent to which the SDF and the rUK’s armed forces would remain integrated in the future, and how much attention and investment to give to their respective defence and security interests in the North Atlantic and High North. Holyrood would also need to consider what arrangements to put in place for other allies and partners, especially the US and Norway, but also NATO more broadly, to visit bases on Scottish territory. The regional security architecture will then have to evolve accordingly, in consultation with Holyrood’s and Westminster’s regional allies.

The greatest danger will emerge if either Holyrood or Westminster attempts to overplay its hand. Both Scotland and the rUK have leverage over the other. Holyrood will know that the danger of a security gap in the North Atlantic and High North is real: indeed, the SNP appears to believe that this will drive Westminster (and NATO) to a pragmatic position. However, the rUK knows that Scotland cannot immediately provide an alternative to what

85. Chalmers, ‘Dissolution and Defence’.

86. Pincus, ‘Towards a New Arctic’.

87. Indeed, building on this, cooperation on maritime security and surveillance is an area where greater engagement between the UK and the Nordics should be explored, irrespective of any Scottish vote on independence.

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the UK offers NATO and its allies in the High North and that Scotland would remain dependent on the UK for defence and security for some time after Scexit. Nor can Scotland expect NATO membership at any cost, especially if that cost entails the loss of the UK's nuclear deterrent. Ultimately, concessions – and the avoidance of any attempt to impose punitive measures – will be needed from both sides to overcome what is already a polarised debate about whether an independent Scotland could defend itself.

Looking more broadly at the regional security concerns, increased Russian military activity along NATO's northern flank also entails responsibilities for Scotland and the UK. The closest neighbours to the north – Norway, Denmark and Iceland – are increasingly voicing concern about mounting regional tension and the need for NATO countries to engage in its 'core area'. Regardless of the outcome in a protracted Scexit process, these concerns will not disappear, and the UK (including Scotland) will continue to have a significant role to play in the North Atlantic and High North infrastructure – ranging from a strategic nuclear deterrent to maritime safety and response operations. Given the potential impact of Scexit, politicians on both sides would do well to remember the wider

geostrategic context the British Isles are located in as they proceed in years to come. ■

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