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## GRASPING THE THISTLE: AN EXAMINATION OF HARD AND SOFT POWER IN AN INDEPENDENT SCOTLAND

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**JCSP 46**

**Solo Flight**

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**By Lieutenant-Colonel Alasdair Hempenstall**

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## GRASPING THE THISTLE: AN EXAMINATION OF HARD AND SOFT POWER IN AN INDEPENDENT SCOTLAND

*We fight not for glory nor for wealth nor honours; but only and alone we fight for freedom, which no good man surrenders but with his life.*

– Declaration of Arbroath, 6 April 1320

### INTRODUCTION

In the lead up to the United Kingdom's (UK's) withdrawal from the European Union (EU), known as "Brexit," at the start of 2020, there has been an increased polarisation in British politics between those who voted to remain and those who voted to leave. At the time of the Brexit referendum, on 23 June 2016, Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU.<sup>1</sup> In the subsequent General Election in December 2019, Scottish voters again showed their dissatisfaction with the Conservative-led Westminster Government, by voting in 47 Scottish National Party (SNP) MPs from a total of 59 constituencies.<sup>2</sup> The combination of a resurgence of support for Scottish Nationalism, combined with a displeasure with Westminster and pro-EU sentiment has served to widen the political divisions between England and Scotland. This division could ultimately pave the way to a second Scottish independence referendum in the near future, "the SNP hopes that a combination of Brexit and hostility within Scotland to Mr Johnson will push the dial further in its direction."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's First Minister,

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<sup>1</sup> 62% of Scots voted to remain in the EU. Chris Curtis, "Scottish independence: Yes leads as Remainers increasingly back splitting with UK," YouGov Website, last accessed 30 January 2020: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2020/01/30/scottish-independence-yes-leads-remainers-in>, 1.

<sup>2</sup> In Scotland, only 18% of those polled by YouGov said that they trusted Boris Johnson as Prime Minister, as opposed to over seven in ten (71%) who do not. Chris Curtis, "Scottish independence: Yes leads as Remainers increasingly...", 2.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Sim, "Scottish independence: Could a new referendum still be held?" BBC News, last accessed 31 January 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-50813510>, 2.

has already asked Downing Street for permission to hold one and several polls now place the ‘Yes’ campaign in the lead for the first time in recent years.<sup>4</sup>

This paper will assess and analyse whether an independent Scotland (iScotland) would have sufficient hard and soft power resources to establish itself as a separate, middle-power, state.<sup>5</sup> It will argue that the level of power available to this new state will very much depend on its relationship with the remainder of the UK (rUK) in the aftermath of a vote for independence. Finally, this argument examines the levers iScotland has to influence that relationship to its own advantage.

At the time of the last referendum on Scottish independence in 2014, the British Government refused to conduct any contingency planning for the event of a ‘Yes’ vote. This paper is therefore going to grasp the nettle (or rather, the thistle!) and consider the impact of Scotland voting to become an independent country, ending 300 years of union with the UK. It will adopt a “Red Team” approach and make the argument from a Scottish perspective. Micah Zenko defines “Red Teaming” as “a structured process that seeks to better understand the interests, intentions, and capabilities of an institution.”<sup>6</sup> He subsequently points out that “analysts can be held back by normal cognitive biases, or by the patterns of thinking commonly accepted within their organisations.”<sup>7</sup> Scottish independence would deliver a significant shock to the UK and its military institutions, yet very little thinking that has been done by the military along these

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<sup>4</sup> Chris Curtis, “Scottish independence: Yes leads as Remainers increasingly...,” 1.

<sup>5</sup> Middle or medium powers fall in the middle of the scale measuring a country’s international influence. John W. Holmes, “Middle Power,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, last accessed 15 February 2017, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/middle-power>.

<sup>6</sup> Micah Zenko, *Red Team, How to succeed by thinking like the enemy*, (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2015), 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

lines, and that which has, has been hamstrung precisely by being the type of thinking that is biased and already commonly accepted within the organisation.

The scope of this study will be limited to only the military and diplomatic aspects of power, bracketing out the contested debate on economic power, sometimes considered the Achilles Heel of the Nationalist's argument.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, very little has been written on the Intelligence capability of iScotland, which remains an area requiring further development.

This paper will start with the assumption that Scotland will gain independence from the UK within the next 2 -3 years, and that initially it will have an SNP-led Government. It will consider what sort of defence capability might be required by iScotland and what defence policies it might adopt. It will then consider the possible impact of these defence policies on NATO and the EU and it will conclude with some deductions about the nature of iScotland's relationship with rUK.

### **Military Power in an independent Scotland**

In the event that Scotland gains independence, it would need to create its own military and defence infrastructure, separate from rUK. As Malcolm Chalmers, Deputy Director-General of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), points out "having independent armed forces is at the heart of what it means to be a sovereign country."<sup>9</sup> Those opposed to Scottish independence argue that, as a separate state, Scotland would be significantly weaker than it is in the UK. And, of course, they are right, there is no way that iScotland could access the same hard and soft power that it does as part of the UK. Guardian journalist Claire Phipps agrees that "as a new

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<sup>8</sup> The same surveys that place the 'Yes' vote ahead also show that most Scots still think independence will be bad for the economy. Chris Curtis, "Scottish independence: Yes leads as Remainers...", 1.

<sup>9</sup> Malcolm Chalmers, Kingdom's End? *The RUSI Journal*, last accessed 22 Jun 2012, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03071847.2012.695156>, 8.

state, it would lack influence and alliances.”<sup>10</sup> However, whilst the Scottish Government’s 2013 White Paper<sup>11</sup> sets out the country’s aspiration to be “a committed and active participant in the global community of nations,”<sup>12</sup> iScotland would likely have a less ambitious Foreign Policy than the UK, which would significantly reduce its requirement for hard military power. Furthermore, as Scottish Defence consultant Stuart Crawford and economist Richard Marsh point out, “the chances of a credible military threat to an independent Scotland would be close to zero.”<sup>13</sup> Noting that it would share its only land border with a significantly more powerful, yet friendly, neighbor to the south, iScotland would find itself in a very similar strategic position to Canada.

On the IPSOS MORI issues index<sup>14</sup> for the recent General Elections in the UK and Canada, Defence was consistently ranked as a top ten voter issue in the UK,<sup>15</sup> whereas it sits as the 27<sup>th</sup> out of 28 issues for Canadian voters.<sup>16</sup> This variance highlights fundamentally different priorities between British and Canadian voters. It also demonstrates why retaining the UK’s current military status is such a significant political concern for Unionists and why most of the critiques of the SNP’s defence policy (by British commentators) have been so disparaging. The

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<sup>10</sup> Claire Phipps, “Scottish independence: how would Scotland defend itself?” The Guardian, last accessed 4 September 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2014/sep/04/scottish-independence-scotland-defence-trident>, 3.

<sup>11</sup> “Scotland’s Future” (known as the “White Paper”) set out the framework for an independent Scotland, commissioned by the SNP-led Scottish Government. It was launched on 26 November 2013 ahead of the 2014 independence referendum.

<sup>12</sup> Scottish Government, ‘Scotland’s Future,’ *White Paper*, (APS Group Scotland, 2013), 207.

<sup>13</sup> Stuart Crawford and Richard Marsh, “A’ the Blue Bonnets Defending an Independent Scotland,” *RUSI Whitehall Report* 3-12, October 2012, [https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/whr\\_3-12\\_a\\_the\\_blue\\_bonnets.pdf](https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/whr_3-12_a_the_blue_bonnets.pdf), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ipsos MORI is a market research company in the United Kingdom. It conducts surveys for a wide range of major organisations as well as other market research agencies.

<sup>15</sup> Ipsos MORI, “Lack of faith in politics reaches new high,” last accessed 30 October 2019, <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/ipsos-mori-issues-index-september-2019-lack-faith-politics-reaches-new-high>.

<sup>16</sup> Ipsos MORI, “Four Weeks In, Climate Change is Fastest-Moving (29%, +4), but Health Care (35%) Still Top Issue to Make a Difference at the Ballot Box,” last accessed 9 October 2019, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/news-polls/Four-Weeks-In-Climate-Change-Fastest-Moving-Health-Care-Still-Top-Issue>.

reason is that the UK's strong military capability provides a significant degree of 'anchor bias'<sup>17</sup> that skews the argument. However, it is likely that in the event of independence, the Scottish public might be less concerned about defence matters, instead placing more emphasis on issues like health care, climate change and the economy. In this sense it could be said that they might take a more "Canadian approach."

Much like Canada, iScotland would likely plan on being a middle power, with a capable, albeit modest military capability, focused primarily on peacekeeping operations. In advocating this concept Stuart Crawford and Richard Marsh have said that:

An independent Scotland is likely to have a regional, rather than global, focus for its foreign and defence policies. Accordingly, military specialisation and niche capability are needed... For example, Scotland could specialise in medical services, logistics or military police, all of which can contribute to international conflict resolution and humanitarian operations with coalition partners.<sup>18</sup>

In their 2018 paper they argue that full spectrum military capability is not required and instead alliance partners would be used to cover capability gaps, in particular they note the possibility of working alongside European partners, which is something the UK has been reticent to do with its military. Claire Phipps adds that "Scottish defence forces... would not be equipped with expensive and state-of-the-art hardware across the board."<sup>19</sup> However, it's worth noting that some economies of scale don't work, as Alastair Cameron, former British Army officer and founder of Scotland in Union, points out: "if we needed to train one squadron of fighter pilots, we would still need pretty much the same training operation as if we had six squadrons."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Anchor bias is a cognitive bias that results from an individual relying too heavily on information that is immediately available when making decisions.

<sup>18</sup> Stuart Crawford and Richard Marsh, "Defending an Independent Scotland Post Brexit," *Scottish Centre on European Relations*, last accessed 17 September 2018, <https://www.scer.scot/database/ident-8548>, 1-2.

<sup>19</sup> Claire Phipps, "Scottish independence: how would Scotland defend itself...", 4.

<sup>20</sup> Alastair Cameron, "Scottish independence and defence: A look at the numbers," *UK Defence Journal* (July 2018): <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/scottish-independence-and-defence-a-look-at-the-numbers/>, 4.



The Government of iScotland would also place limits on how it would use its military force through a policy that it has called “Triple Lock.” This policy is specifically designed to prevent iScotland from becoming involved in similar campaigns to Iraq and Afghanistan. Triple Lock policy means that any military action would need to be: (1) in accordance with the principles of the UN Charter; (2) properly agreed by the Scottish Government; (3) approved by the Scottish Parliament.<sup>21</sup> Such a tightly controlled policy would place significant restrictions on the deployment of military force in almost all but UN sanctioned humanitarian aid or peace support operations. This is in direct contrast to the British Government’s more expeditionary policy which seeks to protect British values and interests globally.<sup>22</sup> By limiting the role and deployability of the Scottish Defence Forces (SDF) the Scottish Government would hope to make substantial savings but this comes at a price to national security. To Scottish Nationalists this price is worth paying for their right to self-determination, but it is worth examining the figures in more detail.

The Scottish Government’s White Paper in 2013 stated that it would require a defence budget of £2.5bn to build a defence force of 15,000 regular personnel,<sup>23</sup> however these figures were subsequently revised in its ‘Growth Commission’ report of 2018 to a budget of 1.6% GDP<sup>24</sup> and around 12,600 personnel.<sup>25</sup> The paper does not state how it comes to the 1.6% figure, making it seem arbitrary, although it is clearly pitched to be close enough to the NATO target of

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<sup>21</sup> Scottish Government, ‘Scotland’s Future...’, 251.

<sup>22</sup> British Government, National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/555607/2015\\_Strategic\\_Defence\\_and\\_Security\\_Review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/555607/2015_Strategic_Defence_and_Security_Review.pdf), 9.

<sup>23</sup> Scottish Government, ‘Scotland’s Future...’, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Scotland's Sustainable Growth Commission Report, ‘The Framework & Strategy for the Sustainable Public Finances of an Independent Scotland,’ May 18, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 37.

2%. Currently Scottish GDP is between £160bn to £165bn.<sup>26</sup> Taking 1.6% of the highest estimated GDP, would result in around £2.6bn, and by applying a purchasing power parity (PPP) conversion,<sup>27</sup> Scotland's defence spending in US dollars would be an estimated \$3.77bn.<sup>28</sup>

Alastair Cameron asks the question: "can the 'Growth Commission' report convince us that we'd be more secure if Scotland were to separate from the UK."<sup>29</sup> He subsequently answers his own question that it cannot. However, this is a classic example of the same anchor bias at work. The UK currently spends around \$50bn on defence.<sup>30</sup> Making it the seventh biggest spender on defence globally. With a projected defence budget of \$3.77bn, iScotland could not hope to replicate this, but then there is no direct correlation between the amount a country spends on defence and how secure it is. For example, Ireland spends significantly less on defence<sup>31</sup> than the UK but it has not suffered any Islamist-related terror attacks, whilst there have been almost 100 Islamic terrorist-related deaths in the UK since 2001.<sup>32</sup> Does this mean that Ireland is more secure than the UK, or because it has a smaller defence force is it less secure? There is no straightforward answer, but it is nevertheless true that, having split from the UK a hundred years

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<sup>26</sup> Office for National Statistics, "Regional economic activity by gross domestic product," Statistical bulletin, 19 December 2019, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/bulletins/regionaleconomicactivitybygrossdomesticproductuk/1998to2018/pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> PPP is a theoretical exchange rate that allows the purchase of the same amount of goods and services in every country. The PPP rate worked out as 0.689107 for the UK in 2019 according to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), <https://data.oecd.org/conversion/purchasing-power-parities-ppp.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> Alastair Cameron, "Scottish independence and defence...", 4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>30</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Data for all countries from 1988–2018 in constant (2017) US," last accessed 30 April 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932018%20in%20constant%20282017%29%20USD%20%28pdf%29.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted as being €885m in 2017, Irish Department of Finance, "Government Budget Report - Expenditure Allocations 2015-17", last accessed 26 February 2018, <http://budget.gov.ie/Budgets/2015/Documents/Part%20II%20Expenditure%20Allocations%202015%20-%202017.pdf>, 23.

<sup>32</sup> Wikipedia, "List of Terrorist incidents in Great Britain," last accessed 27 March 20, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_terrorist\\_incidents\\_in\\_Great\\_Britain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_terrorist_incidents_in_Great_Britain).

ago, Ireland today is a middle power,<sup>33</sup> independent state with its own credible Defence Force, one that the SDF could potentially be modeled on.

Malcolm Chalmers agrees that “an ‘Irish option’, involving a level of defence spending significantly lower than the NATO norm should also not be ruled out.”<sup>34</sup> And fellow RUSI commentator, Mark Lynch, adds that “it is far more likely that Scotland will engage in a security model similar to Ireland whereby it controls its own security apparatus with minimal military engagement outside of UN peacekeeping operations.”<sup>35</sup> In their 2018 report, Scotland's Sustainable Growth Commission, recommended that SDF personnel should have a starting salary of £20,000 a year,<sup>36</sup> (which is comparable to the rate of pay for recruits in the Irish Defence Force.)<sup>37</sup> However, this is significantly lower than current basic pay in the British Army,<sup>38</sup> prompting a skeptical Alastair Cameron to ask “are the SNP really saying that the Scottish armed forces are simply going to pay their people less?”<sup>39</sup> He thinks not, but it's entirely conceivable that Scotland might pay its Armed Forces less than the UK currently does. British military personnel are amongst the best paid in the world (after Canada, apparently)<sup>40</sup> and it is significantly committed to Global operations in a way that Scotland does not aspire to be. A July

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<sup>33</sup> The definition of “middle power” is much debated but Ireland can be found, alongside Canada, on numerous lists of middle powers, such as Mathew Bolton, “The Role of Middle Power,” *Global Policy* Volume 1, Issue 2, May 2010, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1758-5899.2009.00015.x>, 173.

<sup>34</sup> Malcolm Chalmers, “Dissolution and Defence,” *RUSI Journal*, Vol 159 No. 2 (May 2014): <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2014.912798>, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Mark Lynch, “The Security Implications of Scottish independence,” *RUSI Commentary* (June 2011): <https://rusi.org/commentary/security-implications-scottish-independence>, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Scotland's Sustainable Growth Commission Report, “The Framework...,” 41.

<sup>37</sup> Irish Defence Force, “Defence Forces Rates of Pay,” <https://www.military.ie/en/careers/defence-forces-rates-of-pay/>.

<sup>38</sup> When capitation rates are applied the basic pay for a private soldier in the British Army is closer to £35,000. British Army, Military Manpower Capitation Rates, for Financial Year 2015/16, [http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2015-0883/Capitation\\_Rates-Military\\_Manpower\\_2015-16-Redacted.pdf](http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2015-0883/Capitation_Rates-Military_Manpower_2015-16-Redacted.pdf), B1.

<sup>39</sup> Alastair Cameron, “Scottish independence and defence...,” 5.

<sup>40</sup> Toronto Sun, “Canada's military among highest paid in the world,” last accessed 30 October 2014, <https://torontosun.com/2014/10/30/canadas-military-among-highest-paid-in-the-world/wcm/22bc967e-663f-413f-b606-d2040ed0bd2e>.

2013 report by the pro-devolution ‘Scotland Institute’ think-tank concluded that reduced pay and opportunities in a SDF “will lead to difficulties in recruitment and retention.”<sup>41</sup> This is the anchor bias at work again. Whilst this report has been compiled by several respected British academics and politicians, there’s a notable lack of unemployed 17-year-old Scottish youths on the list of contributors (or evidence of polling of said youths). The point being that, with potentially less employment opportunities in Scotland,<sup>42</sup> it is entirely possible that a starting salary of £20,000 and an attractive work-life balance, would be very tempting to this target audience. Malcolm Chalmers agrees,

The concentration of Scotland’s forces in a smaller number of locations – and the stability of family life that this brings – could also be appealing, perhaps especially for more experienced personnel. Some may also relish the challenges involved in creating a new force, albeit a small one, from scratch.<sup>43</sup>

In terms of a comparisons with other countries, Finland has a similar size of population to Scotland, and a regular defence force of 12,000 personnel, for which it pays 1.4% of its GDP, which is about \$3.6bn.<sup>44</sup>

**Table 1 – Comparison of Countries Defence Spending**

Country	Total Pop	Armed Forces	Defence Spending (\$)	% of GDP
Canada	35.8m	71,500	22.5bn	1.3
Denmark	5.8m	18,800	4.8bn	1.4
Finland	5.5m	12,000	3.6bn	1.4
Ireland	5.1m	9,000	.9bn	0.3
Norway	5.4m	24,000	7.2bn	1.6
NZ	4.5m	9,000	4.3bn	1.2
Scotland	5.4m	12,600	3.8bn	1.6

<sup>41</sup> Scottish Institute, ‘Defence and Security in an Independent Scotland’ (June 2013), [http://www.scotlandinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Defence\\_Report\\_-\\_Scot\\_Inst.pdf](http://www.scotlandinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Defence_Report_-_Scot_Inst.pdf), 13.

<sup>42</sup> BBC News, “Scotland sees surge in unemployment”, last accessed 13 August 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-49331101>.

<sup>43</sup> Malcolm Chalmers, “Dissolution and Defence....,” 7.

<sup>44</sup> Finnish Ministry of Defence, Defence Report 2017, [https://www.defmin.fi/en/publications/the\\_governments\\_defence\\_report\\_2017](https://www.defmin.fi/en/publications/the_governments_defence_report_2017).

UK	65.1m	192,600	55.1bn	2.1
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Source: data extracted from Global Firepower 2020, Military Strength Comparison Tool.<sup>45</sup>

However, Finland also relies on conscription to guarantee its national security, because it shares a large border with Russia. Research Fellow at the Scottish Centre on Constitutional Change, Colin Fleming, argues that Norway and Denmark might provide a better comparator.<sup>46</sup> Malcolm Chalmers, again: “the maritime and air components of the proposed force structure resemble those of Denmark. The maritime forces are built around four frigates (Denmark has three) and a command platform (Denmark has two command and support ships).”<sup>47</sup> None of these comparisons are perfect, but the point is clear, whilst it would involve a significant loss of hard power and influence compared to the UK, iScotland could afford to build a credible, “middle” military power, giving it a degree of influence as a global actor. But there’s an ‘elephant in the room’ when it comes to talking about Scottish independence and military power, and it will now be addressed.

A recent RAND study commented that “in the event of any Scottish independence, there are particular uncertainties about the future of the UK nuclear deterrent.”<sup>48</sup> This is because the SNP are politically opposed to nuclear weapons and as such they have made it clear that, if Scotland became an independent country, they would remove all nuclear weapons from Scottish soil. The problem is that the Trident submarines, Britain’s current nuclear deterrence, are entirely based in Scotland. The White Paper states that the Scottish Government would seek to secure “the speediest safe withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Scotland.”<sup>49</sup> However, Oxford

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-comparison.asp>.

<sup>46</sup> Colin Fleming, “After independence? The challenges and benefits of Scottish – UK defence cooperation,” *International Affairs* Vol 90 No. 4 (2014): <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1468-2346.12139>, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Malcolm Chalmers, “Dissolution and Defence...,” 5.

<sup>48</sup> James Black, et al, “Defence and Security after Brexit,” *RAND Europe Overview Report*, (2017): [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1700/RR1786z1/RAND\\_RR1786z1.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1700/RR1786z1/RAND_RR1786z1.pdf), 31.

<sup>49</sup> Scottish Government, ‘Scotland’s Future...,’ 237.

University military expert, Hew Strachan, points out that "Whitehall would be deeply alarmed by that prospect, because there is no immediate place to take the deterrent to."<sup>50</sup> This has led William Walker, Professor of International Relations at the University of St. Andrews, to suggest that in extremis "the disarmament of Scotland would be tantamount to disarmament by the United Kingdom, if Trident could not be relocated."<sup>51</sup> Forcing the UK to abandon its nuclear weapons would have significant implications for NATO. These will be examined in the next section.

### **Diplomatic Power in an independent Scotland**

Having considered the potential military power of iScotland, the focus will now shift to its potential diplomatic power and specifically whether iScotland would seek membership of NATO and the EU, and what it could offer these organisations. It is interesting to note that the SNP (as the most likely Government of iScotland) has had an ambivalent attitude to both NATO and the EU in the past. The non-partisan Atlantic Council blog notes that "for more than thirty years—from the early 1980s to 2012—the SNP was opposed to Alliance membership for an independent Scotland, mainly due to NATO's pro-nuclear stance."<sup>52</sup> Then, prior to the 2014 Independence referendum, the SNP reversed their stance on NATO membership, stating their new aims in the White Paper: "Scotland would take its place as one of the many non-nuclear members of NATO."<sup>53</sup> Yet at the same time, they maintained their policy opposing nuclear arms. This is not unprecedented, Canada, for example, has repudiated the possession of nuclear

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<sup>50</sup> BBC News, "A Scottish Divorce Who gets the Kids," last accessed 6 December 2007, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/7129382.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7129382.stm), 2.

<sup>51</sup> William Walker, quoted in Mark Lynch, "The Security Implications...", 3.

<sup>52</sup> 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/>.

<sup>53</sup> Scottish Government, 'Scotland's Future...', 251.

weapons since 1998 but remains a committed member of NATO and even allows vessels carrying nuclear weapons into its ports. However, iScotland would be in quite a different position from Canada. Whilst currently a member of NATO, as part of the UK, it seems likely that upon independence, iScotland would need to apply for its own separate membership. So the question then becomes, whether the rest of NATO would look favourably at this request and what iScotland could offer NATO as a member.

As already established, iScotland would not meet NATO's spending target of 2% GDP. However, it does occupy a strategically significant location in the Greenland-Iceland-UK Gap and it could potentially extend the same rights of overflight and access to its ports for nuclear vessels as Canada currently does. In Faslane, it has all the infrastructure for a deep water submarine base and world class nuclear weapons storage facilities at Coulport. This would run counter to the policy of removing nuclear weapons from Scottish soil, but as Claire Phipps suggests, this could be circumvented on a "don't ask, don't tell" basis, if the SNP were willing.<sup>54</sup> The issue of Trident's removal remains a tricky one. Even if the Government of iScotland were to extend the period that it would allow nuclear weapons to remain at HMNB Clyde, the costs of moving all the infrastructure to England or Wales would still be significant. In the end, if these costs were too high, it might prohibit rUK's aspiration to maintain its nuclear deterrence altogether. As Hugh and Malcolm Chalmers point out, "there may well be a certain financial threshold above which the benefits of retaining nuclear weapons in the event of Scottish independence are felt to be outweighed by their growing costs."<sup>55</sup> In this circumstance iScotland would be seen to be directly responsible for rUK's nuclear disarmament. The RAND study states

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<sup>54</sup> Claire Phipps, "Scottish independence: how would Scotland defend itself...", 5.

<sup>55</sup> Hugh Chalmers and Malcolm Chalmers, "Relocation, Relocation, Relocation," *RUSI Occasional Paper*, (August 2014): [https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201408\\_op\\_relocation\\_relocation\\_relocation.pdf](https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201408_op_relocation_relocation_relocation.pdf), 14.

that iScotland's accession to NATO "may be contingent on wider negotiations over Trident."<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, rUK would naturally want to relocate its nuclear deterrence south of the border, because no other country has its entire nuclear arsenal based abroad, but having just lost £3 billion in Scottish tax revenue,<sup>57</sup> which would otherwise have been directed to the MOD, it may not be able to afford to.

If iScotland wants rUK's support in its application to join NATO, it may need to make significant concessions. It will need to decide what price it was willing to pay to join NATO. Despite the SNP's decision to apply for membership of the Alliance, it's not entirely clear why this would necessarily be of benefit to iScotland. Certainly the many gaps in its own fledgling military capability could be plugged by the collective security NATO offers, but there are disadvantages too. Aside from having to commit 2% GDP to Defence spending, being in NATO would expose the dichotomy in the SNP's nuclear weapons policy; forcing the removal of Trident on the one hand, whilst providing harbor to the nuclear vessels of NATO members on the other. It is also worth considering that NATO's 'Article 5' is potentially at odds with the SNP's concept of 'Triple Lock' policy for deployment of its Defence Force. What happens if Article 5 is triggered but the lock remains closed? iScotland's Government would not want to become committed to a war in the Baltics if, for example, Russia invaded a small Ethnic-Russian enclave of fellow NATO member Estonia (noting that the UN would not sanction military intervention, because Russia is a permanent member of the Security Council and would veto it). In fact, the only time Article 5 has been triggered was in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when all 18 member states agreed to stand by the United States. This ultimately resulted in their

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<sup>56</sup> James Black, et al, "Defence and Security...", 19.

<sup>57</sup> Colin Fleming, "After independence...", 8.



participation in the war in Afghanistan, which is precisely the type of conflict that the Scottish Government are seeking to avoid.

There are alternatives to joining NATO that could also be considered. Ireland and Finland, two of the countries that have already been used as comparators for the SDF, are not members of NATO. Instead of NATO, Scotland could look to Europe for its defence partnerships, perhaps becoming more involved with a European Defence Force than the UK is currently inclined to do. Alternatively, the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) includes Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Sweden. Scotland is located almost perfectly inside its sphere of influence (see map below).



**Figure 1 – Map showing Scotland’s proximity to NORDEF countries**

Source: S. Solberg, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Location\\_Nordic\\_Council.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Location_Nordic_Council.svg)

Colin Fleming points out that “given Scotland’s strategic geopolitical position and similarities

with its Nordic neighbours, it is likely that Scotland will also cooperate in the Nordic region, possibly as part of NORDEFECO itself.”<sup>58</sup>

If iScotland decided that membership of NATO was not essential, it would strengthen its hand in terms of negotiations with rUK, because it would not have to rely on rUK supporting its application for membership of the organisation. Instead it could look for military alliances in Europe and with its Nordic neighbours. Perhaps forming a “Celtic League” with Ireland. It would also avoid the accusation of hypocrisy, because it would not have to rely on NATO’s nuclear arsenal for its own security, whilst declaring itself to be simultaneously opposed to nuclear weapons.

Similiar to its relationship towards NATO, the SNP has also changed its mind about Europe. In the 1975 referendum they were vehemently opposed to membership, with the leader of the SNP’s parliamentary group, Donald Stewart, declaring that the “EEC represents everything our party has fought against: centralisation, undemocratic procedures, power politics, and a fetish for abolishing cultural differences.”<sup>59</sup> However, the White Paper written before the Brexit vote, is clear that iScotland now wants to be a member of the EU in its own right, “with independence Scotland’s government will be able to represent Scotland’s interests as a full and active participant in the EU.”<sup>60</sup> The situation is now complicated as Scotland, along with the rest of the UK, left the EU on 31 January 2020; iScotland would therefore need to reapply for membership. BBC Scotland political reporter, Philip Sim, points out that “while many of Scotland's laws and regulations already match EU standards, the entry rules throw up a whole

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>59</sup> The Scotsman, “Insight: Crucial lessons from 1975 Europe referendum,” 28 February 2016, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/insight-crucial-lessons-1975-europe-referendum-1481810>.

<sup>60</sup> Scottish Government, ‘Scotland’s Future...,’ 100.

series of questions about things like currency, deficit levels, and borders.”<sup>61</sup> For example, having now left the EU it is unlikely that iScotland would be able to cut a special deal and re-join without accepting the Euro currency, despite current Scottish Government plans to keep Pound Sterling.<sup>62</sup> Also some European policies are unquestionably bad for the Scottish economy. The Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) results in an estimated 13% of the catch being discarded annually with even higher rates off the coasts of Scotland and Ireland.<sup>63</sup> With a quota system that arguably favours big industrial trawlers at the expense of smaller fishing communities, the Scottish Government themselves have said that “the CFP has failed Scotland. It is the EU's most discredited and unpopular policy.”<sup>64</sup>

Unlike its changing view towards NATO, which is an example of the SNP taking a pragmatic decision to shift its position in order to win votes, its view towards the EU is more of a fundamental shift of its ideology. Despite some potential obstacles, membership of the EU is the cornerstone argument in the SNP's bid for independence. A month before the Brexit referendum in 2016, the SNP's Scottish Parliament election manifesto stated that: “we believe that the Scottish Parliament should have the right to hold another [independence] referendum if there is... a material change in the circumstances that prevailed in 2014, such as Scotland being taken out of the EU against our will.”<sup>65</sup> There is no doubt that the subsequent Brexit vote has bolstered

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<sup>61</sup> Philip Sim, Scottish independence: Could a new referendum still be held? BBC News, last accessed 31 January 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-50813510>, 2.

<sup>62</sup> The argument is in fact more nuanced than this, as it seems likely that Scotland would have to first launch its own currency in order to qualify to join the Euro. However, this is straying towards economic arguments that are outside of this paper's scope and so will be avoided.

<sup>63</sup> Debating Europe, “Arguments for and against the Common Fisheries Policy,” <https://www.debatingeurope.eu/focus/arguments-for-and-against-the-common-fisheries-policy/#.Xpx0H6hJFPY>.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Lochhead, Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment, “The Scottish Government's Response to the European Commission's Green Paper on Reform of the Common Fisheries Policy,” December 2009, last accessed 16 January 2019 <https://www2.gov.scot/Publications/2009/12/21104310/1>.

<sup>65</sup> SNP, Scottish Parliament election manifesto, May 2016, [https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/thesnp/pages/5540/attachments/original/1461753756/SNP\\_Manifesto2016-accessible.pdf?1461753756](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/thesnp/pages/5540/attachments/original/1461753756/SNP_Manifesto2016-accessible.pdf?1461753756), 23.

support for Scottish independence. Many Scots feels that they are being forced out of the EU against their will and that this has indeed ‘materially changed the circumstances.’ Actor and comedian, Billy Connolly, formerly strongly anti-independence, summed it up as follows, “Scots voted to stay in Europe and if the only way for us to do that is to become independent from England, that may just be the way to go. And I never thought I would say that.”<sup>66</sup>

Would the EU necessarily welcome iScotland back with open arms? As early as 2002, Malcolm Chalmers and William Walker made the observation that “several EU member states (Belgium, Italy, Spain, and even France and Germany) have reason to fear separatist movement.”<sup>67</sup> They also pointed out at that time, that there was no precedent for a state joining the EU following a declaration of independence, although that situation has now changed with the accession of the Czech Republic and Slovenia in 2004 and Croatia in 2013. Spain and France would be particularly concerned to see whether Scottish independence reignited interest in Catalanian, Basque or Corsican nationalism. If it did, then they might be tempted to use their veto to prevent Scotland joining the EU.<sup>68</sup> Much like NATO, the EU would be keeping a weather eye on iScotland’s relations with its closest neighbour. Which again suggests that the post-independence negotiations (not least concerning Trident) will be crucial, Mark Lynch writing for

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<sup>66</sup> Billy Connolly, quoted in The Scotsman, “Billy Connolly ready to support Scottish independence”, last accessed 21 October 2018, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/billy-connolly-ready-support-scottish-independence-556057>.

<sup>67</sup> Malcolm Chalmers and William Walker, “The United Kingdom, Nuclear Weapons, and the Scottish Question,” The Nonproliferation Review, (Spring 2002), <https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/npr/91walk.pdf>, 10.

<sup>68</sup> “European countries can apply to join the EU but the process is complex and lengthy. Each existing EU Member State has a veto over any new country joining.” UK Government, “Rights and obligations of European Union membership,” April 2016, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/516500/Rights\\_and\\_obligations\\_of\\_European\\_Union\\_membership\\_print\\_version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/516500/Rights_and_obligations_of_European_Union_membership_print_version.pdf), 16.

RUSI points out that “Scotland's interest in removing the nuclear threat is far outweighed by its need for membership to the European Union.”<sup>69</sup>

The other issue that will be of interest to the EU is that of the Border. The BBC reports that “the First Minister also wants to avoid a hard border between Scotland and England.”<sup>70</sup> This is not unproblematic. Even whilst the UK was in the EU it had opted out of the Schengen Agreement<sup>71</sup> with the rest of Europe and refused to abolish border controls with any other counties. Since 1923 the UK and Ireland have had a Common Travel Area (CTA) which allows for passport-free travel and freedom of movement between the two. Significantly, this ensures that there is an open border with Northern Ireland. The RAND study identified that following Brexit “the most significant practical and political challenge will be defining new – or defending old – arrangements for the UK’s border with the Republic of Ireland.”<sup>72</sup> The situation will be exacerbated if iScotland joins the EU, thus giving Europe a second land border with rUK. This would mean that, unless it has a hard border, there is no way for rUK to control immigration, which was one of the strongest arguments for Brexit in the first place. It therefore seems unlikely that rUK politicians would be willing to let this happen.

It also raises questions over the Irish Peace Process, with former President of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams, saying in 2011 that “an independent Scotland would cause 'seismic shifts' for the future of the UK, creating lasting concerns about the stability of the region.”<sup>73</sup> Mark Lynch is more candid, suggesting that “dissident [Irish] republican groups would seek to expand their operations at the UK's moment of weakness.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Mark Lynch, “The Security Implications of Scottish independence...,” 5.

<sup>70</sup> Philip Sim, “Scottish independence: Could a new referendum still be held...,” 2.

<sup>71</sup> A European treaty which led to internal border checks being abolished.

<sup>72</sup> James Black, et al, “Defence and Security after Brexit...,” 22.

<sup>73</sup> Mark Lynch, “The Security Implications of Scottish independence...,” 4.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

Much like iScotland's accession to NATO, its aspiration to join the EU raises a number of issues, none of which are simple. The one thing that they have in common is that they all depend on iScotland's relationship with rUK. And that relationship will now be considered in the final section of this paper.

### **Relations between an independent Scotland and the rest of the UK**

By examining iScotland's potential military and diplomatic power one factor has become abundantly clear, which is that much will depend on its future relationship with rUK. The problem with nationalist political rhetoric is not the celebration and lauding of one's own culture and values, but the denigration and belittling of the other's, "each side sees "the other side" as irrational, agitated, dogmatic, and angry."<sup>75</sup> This leads to the unhelpful political polemic, which is precisely the situation in which we currently find ourselves. Bertrand Russell sums up the arguments for Scottish independence *and* Brexit very neatly in the following passage from *Why Men Fight*:

‘I belong,’ the oppressed nationalist argues, ‘by sympathy and tradition to nation A, but I am subject to a government which is in the hands of nation B. This is an injustice, not only because of the general principle of nationalism, but because nation A is generous, progressive, and civilized, while nation B is oppressive, retrograde, and barbarous. Because this is so, nation A deserves to prosper, while nation B deserves to be abased.’<sup>76</sup>

It is clear from Russell's summary that the topics of nationalism and statehood often involve a lot of emotion and this is certainly true of Scottish independence. It is therefore likely that a 'Yes' vote in favour of independence would be a significant humiliation to rUK. It would elicit strong emotions which could result in rUK taking an overly robust approach to the subsequent

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<sup>75</sup> Miriam Juan-Torres, "The Trouble with Tribalism," *The Atlantic*, 17 October 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/membership/archive/2018/10/trouble-tribalism/573307/>.

<sup>76</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Why Men Fight*, (The Century Co, 1917), 27.

negotiations. It should also be noted that the separation would pose an existential threat to rUK, especially as it is likely that “those challenging Britain's right to a permanent UN Security Council seat might choose the end of the UK as a moment to act.”<sup>77</sup> The negotiations would have high stakes for both sides.

The separation of the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1992 offers a good example of two states taking a rational approach to the negotiations, during which “the Czechs and Slovaks haggled over everything from state airline aircraft to works of art to the contents of every Czechoslovak embassy abroad.”<sup>78</sup> Splitting everything according to population share would mean that Scotland was entitled to about 8.5% of all the UK's assets. The most important factor is whether the two states decide to cooperate or if they take a more confrontational approach. Despite separation there could be incentives to cooperate. Colin Fleming points out that policy convergence is not a necessary precondition for cooperation, again using the example of NORDEFECO, which “does not require all states to participate in every project, collaborations can take place between two or more states depending on their strategic interests.”<sup>79</sup> iScotland and rUK could potentially share many strategic interests particularly in the Defence Sector, especially if the SNP was prepared to acknowledge that having a strong and friendly neighbour, who remains a permanent member of the UN Security Council, could be mutually advantageous.

Andrew Chuter, writing in the Defence News, comments that “fracturing of the United Kingdom, its military forces and its budgets could have serious knock-on effects across the entire

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<sup>77</sup> BBC News, “A Scottish Divorce...,” 3.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Colin Fleming, “After independence...,” 5.

defense sector.”<sup>80</sup> BAE Systems and over 60 Defence Industry companies have significant infrastructure in Scotland and employ up to 12,000 people. The U.K. parliamentary defense committee has said, "We believe defense companies in Scotland would be forced to rapidly reassess their business strategies, with the result that relocation of operations to the remainder of the UK would be an unwelcome but necessary decision."<sup>81</sup> However, if the two states can agree to cooperate, then it's not unthinkable that rUK might still build its new Type 26 Frigates in iScotland. Ultimately, as Colin Fleming points, ensuring rUK has a “secure, capable ally to the north would be far preferable to a Scotland struggling to meet its early defence need.”<sup>82</sup>

## Conclusion

The thesis of this paper was that iScotland would have sufficient hard and soft power to establish itself as a middle power state. However, it has been demonstrated that the amount of power available to iScotland would depend on its relationship with the rUK. Commenting on the likely fallout from Brexit, RAND analysts warned that Scottish independence could pose "practical, financial and political challenges in defence and security, with significant implications for the UK, EU and NATO — especially given the UK nuclear force is based in Scotland."<sup>83</sup> This paper has considered the likely impact on these institutions and agrees that the implications could be severe but they do not necessarily need to be. These would be high stakes negotiations and there would need to be concessions on both sides, in particular the SNP would need to decide whether it's anti-nuclear weapons policy really is a red line, or if it is willing to trade time and space on this issue for a stronger hand. As has been observed, the SNP has changed its

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<sup>80</sup> Andrew Chuter, “Scottish independence might hurt defense industry more than Brexit,” Defence News (March 2017): <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2017/03/23/scottish-independence-might-hurt-defense-industry-more-than-brexit/>, 2.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>82</sup> Colin Fleming, “After independence...,” 8.

<sup>83</sup> Andrew Chuter, “Scottish independence might hurt defense industry...,” 1.



position on numerous issues over the years. Writing in the Guardian, David Torrance makes the following observation, “fundamentally, it [the SNP] isn’t driven by ideology but by the pursuit of independence, and over the decades it has adopted whatever philosophical guise is necessary to achieve that goal.”<sup>84</sup> The irony is that the arguments for Brexit are almost identical to the arguments for Scottish independence, because they both concern reclaiming sovereignty and the right to self-government. Pro-Brexit MP, Michael Gove, argued in 2016, it did not seem right that “laws which govern citizens in this country are decided by politicians from other nations.”<sup>85</sup> Meanwhile, former Scottish First Minister, Alex Salmond, adopts a similar approach to Scottish independence, “the people who live in Scotland are best placed to make the decisions that affect Scotland.”<sup>86</sup> It is certainly worthy of comment that those who voted for Brexit, to make Britain “strong and stable,”<sup>87</sup> have probably done more than most to bolster the SNPs attempts to dissolve the Union. Meanwhile if Scotland gets independence it may have to sacrifice some of its hard fought sovereignty in order to join NATO and the EU. As a member of NATO it would have to commit to spending more than it wants to on Defence, renege on its anti-nuclear stance and accept that Article 5 could unpick its Triple Lock. As an applicant to join the EU it would have to wait in line, hoping that Spain or France would not veto its membership, arguably adopt the Euro currency and accept that the impact of some European policies might disadvantage domestic industries, like fishing. This only leaves the question: is all of this worth it? And the

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<sup>84</sup> David Torrance, “English voters, don’t be fooled by the SNP – its rhetoric hides its nationalism,” The Guardian, 14 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/14/english-voters-snp-nicola-sturgeon-rhetoric>.

<sup>85</sup> Michael Gove, “Why I’m backing Brexit,” The Spectator, 19 February 2016, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/michael-gove-why-i-m-backing-brexit>.

<sup>86</sup> Brian Currie, “Scotland’s future will be in Scotland’s hands,” The Herald, 25 May 2012, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13059328.scotlands-future-will-be-in-scotlands-hands/>.

<sup>87</sup> This was a much derided slogan used by the Conservative Party prior to the 2017 United Kingdom General Election.

answer to that is that it depends entirely on where you are from, because as Malcolm Gladwell points out: “Who we are cannot be separated from where we’re from.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, (Brown and Company, 2008).

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