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Defense and an Independent Scotland

Trying to determine what an independent Scotland's defense policies might look like is difficult. However, if we are to believe the pronouncements of the most likely governing party, Scotland would be more interested in territorial security than expeditionary operations, or so argues Francis Tusa.

By Francis Tusa for ISN

There have been few instances of a country dividing and then having to reallocate modern armed forces at the same time. The 1993 'Velvet Divorce' of the Czech Republic and Slovakia is the most recent separation that didn't occur with violence, whereas the Republic of Ireland's secession from the United Kingdom in 1921 provides a template for dividing armed forces from a legal perspective. But the conundrum of what could happen if Scotland were to decide for independence is arguably far more complex - the issue of nuclear weapons is a major complicating factor from the start as one example. Moreover, opaque data from the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and equally vague statements from the (probable) party of government for an independent Scotland - the Scottish National Party (SNP) - leave many more unanswered questions than they do satisfactory conclusions. But with perseverance, and drawing on better and comparable data sources, some reasonable deductions can be made about the future defense capabilities of an independent Scotland.

Follow the Money

The position of Scotland in a European defense construct will largely depend upon how much the country spends on defense in the event of independence. Currently, this is an area where the SNP will not be drawn on facts and figures - probably fairly at this stage. But it is possible by extrapolating known data points to provide a concept of the options for an independent Scotland.

Most independent estimates of Scotland's current Gross Domestic Product (GDP) range from 8% to 12% of the United Kingdom total of £1.45-trillion (€1.8-trillion), giving the newly-independent country national wealth of some £115-175-billion. The UK currently spends 2.1-2.3% of GDP on defense, albeit with uncertainty at the fringes of the budget over the inclusion of pensions and operational costs. If an independent Scotland were to spend a similar sum on defense, then its budget would range from £3-4-billion (€3.7-5-billion).

However, the SNP has tended to draw comparisons between the Nordic countries, Ireland, and the Netherlands as templates for what an independent Scotland might look like in terms of defense spending. These countries spend the following proportions of GDP on defense:

- Norway 1.4-1.6% of GDP £4.5-billion

- Sweden 1.2-1.3% of GDP £3.85-billion
- Denmark 1.4% of GDP £2.58-billion
- Netherlands 1.4-1.5% of GDP £7-billion
- Ireland 0.5-0.6% of GDP £600-million

An upper defense spending range of 1.5% of GDP in the case of an independent Scotland would give it a budget of around £1.75-2.6-billion, at best comparable with Denmark - an entirely honorable state of affairs - and at worst, lower than Belgium, and close to that of Portugal.

The key issue here is that with what would be quite high defense personnel costs (a common feature of volunteer armed forces), the money left for equipment and operations would naturally be lower. Taking current (high) UK procurement ratios of 30-35%, this means that an independent Scotland would have an equipment budget of £525-900-million. Accordingly, if one is looking at comparable European countries that the SNP draws upon, the upper limit looks very high considering the sort of defense policies that the party has talked about over the past few years.

Problematic Policy

Indeed, trying to piece together what exactly constitutes the SNP's defense policies also remains a challenge. Until mid-October, there were two "certainties" about SNP defense policy: that the party was virulently against nuclear weapons/nuclear-powered vessels, and that it was hostile to NATO. However, at the recent annual party conference, the SNP voted to overturn the long-held anti-NATO policy, a decision that prompted several prominent members to resign their party affiliation. Their decision reflects that many SNP members still hold the belief that it is difficult - if not impossible - to be both against nuclear weapons, and then be part of an alliance which has such weapons as the basis of the underlying security guarantee.

Other statements made over the past few years provide other clues as to what an independent Scotland might seek to do in terms of defense. The 2009 SNP manifesto - the most recent where defense gets addressed with any granularity at all - stated:

"Scotland could focus primarily on securing its territory, compared to the United Kingdom approach of also having the capacity to conduct overseas wars. It could support United Nations peace keeping operations and international disaster relief with specialist units, such as medical or engineering corps as well as providing expert civilian and military training support."

All of these statements tend to suggest that an independent Scotland would be less interested in deploying expeditionary forces at a distance and undertaking enduring operations. Instead, a more regional/territorial force would seem to fit what policy statements have been made by the SNP to date. This would suggest that an independent Scotland would have a navy with patrol vessels as opposed to higher end frigates, fast jets with limited strike capabilities, and a less capable transport aircraft fleet. Such an armed force would require a budget at the lower range of those put forward in this article.

If one were to take Denmark as the most obvious comparator nation, on this basis an independent Scotland would not have vessels as capable as the *Absalon*-class flexible support ships, or the SF3000 expeditionary frigates. Moreover, if Scotland inherited both Tornado and Typhoon aircraft from the UK, the capabilities of these could well deteriorate compared to the rump RAF fleet, which would require expeditionary/strike capabilities that an independent Scotland would not seem to desire. Whether this means that an independent Scotland would become anything like a key player in the growing North Atlantic/Arctic defense scene is very much open to question.

Ultimately, it will only be after a referendum and an SNP electoral victory that we will be able to determine exactly what an independent Scotland's defense capabilities, size, and orientation will look like. But if anything like the previous statements on defense capabilities is turned into fact, then the resulting armed forces will have a very much more territorial feel than an expeditionary one. On previous and current statements, it seems difficult to imagine an independent Scotland taking an active part in operations comparable to those undertaken by NATO against Colonel Gaddafi's Libya in 2011.

Multiple Division

It also remains to be seen how current armed forces might be apportioned between the United Kingdom and a newly-independent Scotland. As with many issues related to Scottish independence, there remains a great deal of speculation and doubt. The SNP continues to complain, for example, that Scotland pays more into the UK's defense budget than it receives back in terms of defense investment. However, this argument is fiercely contested, with both sides of the "debate" relying upon critically weak "facts". But there would seem to be two bases for working out what equipment an independent Scotland might take with it: share of GDP and share of tax paid into the Exchequer. The exact figure(s) that are chosen to be representative in such calculations are, to this extent, irrelevant, but the process they would inform would be the same.

If Scotland's share of GDP/tax paid is, for the sake of argument, 10% of the total, then Edinburgh would be "entitled" to 10% of the assets of the armed forces. One can then go through the equipment lists, "allocating" equipment on a strict ratio. Where one side ends up with "a quarter of a frigate", then negotiations could be conducted to "swap" a useless fraction of a piece of equipment for something that either the United Kingdom or Scotland side actually wants. For some reason, such a means of calculating the share of equipment seems to have baffled many "experts", who seem to believe that such a division process would be, and in fact needs to be far more complex.

Nervy NATO?

Having said that the SNP would now look to join NATO in the event of independence, doubts have now been raised as to whether this would be as foregone a conclusion as might have been previously thought. Even if it would be strange if a democratic western European country would not be eligible for NATO membership, questions are being raised.

First, the "automatic right" of an independent Scotland to join the European Union has been called into doubt, and would undoubtedly require negotiations which may prove to be far more complicated than might have been assumed. Second, comparisons have been drawn between the accession of the Baltic States into NATO in 2002 and an independent Scotland. These states accepted, without demur, all aspects of the NATO defense construct, including the alliance's position on nuclear weapons. It remains to be seen whether there is a willingness on the part of NATO to relax its conditions and strategy to accommodate an independent Scotland that seems likely to have reservations about nuclear weapons. And if an independent Scotland, led by the SNP, did actually pass an act to outlaw the possession of nuclear weapons on Scottish territory, how might this impact upon naval exercises with US Navy warships which will refuse to confirm or deny carrying such munitions?

Despite extreme political opacity from the SNP, the probable - so far - government of an independent Scotland after 2015, the signs are that such an entity would be of limited military capabilities and hampered by the lack of the political will to use what equipment and units that they did possess. The consequences are most likely to be felt by Denmark, Norway, and Canada, countries that could find themselves with a weak Scotland in the North Atlantic jigsaw.

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