

POLICY BRIEF



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Scotland and the Arctic

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Summary:

This NAADSN *Policy Brief* examines the key Arctic defence and security interests and priorities of the Scottish Government. These are outlined in Scotland's Arctic policy framework, Scotland's independence policy report entitled "Building an Independent Scotland," and the Scottish Affairs committee concerning defence (specifically the North Atlantic and High North). Since Scotland published its first and only Arctic policy in 2019, the Scottish government has used connections between Scotland, the Arctic region, and Arctic allies in order to illustrate branding that connects with Arctianness and to illustrate that Scotland is a near-Arctic state. Scotland's commitment to community-led development as a way to address challenges faced by remote and isolated communities in the Northern Scottish islands corresponds with remote segments of the Canadian Arctic, representing a unique learning opportunity for Canada. Scotland is constructively and pragmatically addressing community issues that are grounded in geographical isolation. Finally, although Scotland's devolved powers do not include foreign affairs, a sovereign and independent Scotland would not recognize Canada's legal claim over the Northwest Passage.

Key Arctic Defence and Security Interests and Priorities

In September of 2019, the Scottish Government released its first Arctic Policy Framework entitled "Arctic Connection."¹ The framework is built on the premise that climate change is posing a devastating threat to the well-being of the Arctic region, at a time when geopolitical attention on the Arctic is mounting.² The document is a prospectus for cooperation, knowledge-exchange, and policy partnerships between Scotland and Arctic allies on environmental security and climate change, energy, fishing, and rural connection.³ Therefore, peace and stability in the maritime European High North is essential to achieving Scottish strategic considerations.⁴

Scotland's Independence policy report, "Building a New Scotland: An independent Scotland's place in the world," underscores that "an independent Scotland would be the world's most northerly non-Arctic nation, with a substantial coastline and sea area and a clear interest in contributing to the stability and defence of the region."⁵ The report also acknowledges that the country is in a strategically vital location, allowing it to contribute to the security and defence of the North Atlantic, High North, and Arctic.⁶ As a result, Scottish defence and security priorities will not only be defined by threats, but also by Scotland's geostrategic location.⁷

In response to mounting geopolitical tension in the Arctic region, the Scottish Affairs Committee published its Seventh Report of Session 2022-23 in July 2023, entitled “Defence in Scotland: the North Atlantic and the High North.”⁸ The document emphasizes that Scotland’s geographic location and previously designated UK military assets already located within Scotland make the country a critical part of meeting the United Kingdom and NATO’s defence and security objectives in the North Atlantic and the High North.⁹ Currently, military assets located in Scotland include RAF Lossiemouth, central to the UK’s maritime patrol missions in the High North. In addition, Royal Naval Armaments Depot Coulport, located on Loch Long in Argyle, Scotland, is home to the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Trident programme, and a major manufacturing hub for complex warships and submarines. This is carried out by BAE Systems in Glasgow and Babcock in Rosyth.

Amalgamating all three policy documents together illustrates that there are five defence priorities for an independent Scotland.

1. Protecting Inner Coastal Defence manufacturing and subsea infrastructure.^{10 11}
2. Asserting Scotland’s geographic role as a Forward Operating Location for the United Kingdom and an Independent Scotland, increasing Arctic Defence interoperability.^{12 13}
3. Regularly projecting armed forces into the High North.¹⁴
4. Strengthening civil security and resilience in northern and isolated communities.¹⁵
5. Shipping, Clean Energy, and Sustainable Economic Development.¹⁶

The Scottish Government’s approach to engaging with Canada on the Arctic region focuses on increasing bilateral relationships and knowledge sharing to create opportunities of value. This correlates with Scotland’s ontological security pursuit for an Arctic identity, as the High North appears to be an emerging area where the Scottish Government continues to distinguish itself from the UK in an attempt to carve out new “para-diplomatic relationships with friends and allies other than London”¹⁷.

Scotland’s Arctic policy engages with Canada on the civil security and resilience of their northernmost remote and isolated populations within their countries by establishing strong, sustainable, diversified, and inclusive economies. The framework highlights the success of its inclusive National Islands Plan, which seeks to improve outcomes for island communities meaningfully.¹⁸ The policy illustrates the government's inclusive exercise has “produced much evidence and know-how” that Scotland is willing to share with Arctic states, particularly Norway and Canada who feature a large number of islands in their northernmost territories¹⁹.

Second, Canada and Scotland share similar goals in building strong, sustainable, diversified, and inclusive local and regional economies.²⁰ A strong economy contributes to the resilience of Arctic and northern communities and sustainable growth. Specifically, shipping operations within the Arctic are increasing with transport volumes and international attention growing as new sea routes are expected to open. Sitting at the crossroads between the Arctic Ocean and central Europe, ideally located on the European-North America axis, Scotland has strong credentials to serve as a near-Arctic marine and logistics hub.²¹ Shipping and ports are integral to sustainable economic development. Canada and Scotland are both members of the High North Atlantic Business Alliance Network, which has instituted collaboration between Scottish harbours and their Arctic counterparts.²² This

presents an opportunity between Canada and Scotland to increase sustainable trade and investment amongst their northern regions and explore greater opportunities for wider business-to-business cooperation.

Lastly, Canada and Scotland can learn from each other in different spaces within human security, particularly shared emergency response, environmental protection, fisheries inspections, and other forms of softer maritime security. In the medium to long term, fisheries in the North Atlantic and High North are expected to increase maritime traffic in the North Sea and Norwegian Sea. As a result, Scotland could learn from Canadian expertise concerning Arctic Search and Rescue. If maritime traffic in the High North and Northern Atlantic increases, Scotland, specifically an independent Scotland, would greatly benefit from Canadian expertise on Arctic search and rescue, in addition to prompting Scottish demand for surveillance, policing, and emergency response capabilities and knowledge sets²³.

Context: Literature Review and Expert Commentary

Scotland's Arctic policy framework, "Arctic Connections," is the Scottish government's first Arctic policy. It attempts to manage and minimize Scotland's ontological insecurities concerning the Arctic and the United Kingdom's inaction in Arctic affairs, and geopolitical tension arising in the High North and Arctic region.²⁴ Under the Scotland Act of 1998, foreign affairs is not a devolved responsibility of the Scottish government; Scotland can only influence its relations with Arctic states through unofficial means. The government does this through informal diplomacy, such as academic research, to further its Arctic profile.²⁵

Since 2011, constituencies of Scottish society and the Scottish government have instituted Scotland's claim as an Arctic stakeholder, based on geographical, historical, and political factors. At the moment, Scottish national identity is in flux. Two referendums have been held to remain in the Kingdom, and as a result, the Scottish government is dedicated to diversifying multilateral relationships in the post-Brexit era.²⁶ Securing its Arctic identity is an opportunity to do this on a larger scale, proving immeasurably important if and when it becomes independent from the rest of the United Kingdom.

Scotland is building its Arctic brand through a focus on ontological security factors through the idea of state identity construction, outside of traditional channels such as Arctic Council membership.²⁷ Specifically, identity markers, geography, and history are used to characterize key junctures that illustrate the connection between Scotland and the Arctic. Scotland's Arctic policy framework emphasizes that "Scotland's northernmost islands are closer to the Arctic Circle than they are to London."²⁸ In addition, the Scottish government has utilized the term "new North" to include itself in Arctic policy discussions, as well as connecting Scottish priorities like climate change to Arctic states, which are disproportionately affected by climate change²⁹.

In relation to historical association, the Scottish government has identified the historical links between the nation and Arctic state. "Arctic Connections" states that "our northernmost archipelagos were part of the Norwegian-Danish Kingdom until the end of the fifteenth century."³⁰ Correspondingly, the framework also uses Scottish explorers to exemplify their connection to the Arctic, highlighting Scottish explorer "John Rae, [who]

changed the history of the North American Arctic, charting a commercial sea route that many before him failed to uncover.”³¹ History shapes present culture and is therefore an essential component in a state’s pursuit of sustained ontological security. Overall, Scotland’s utilization of geography and history is done so to portray that Scotland is inextricably linked to the Arctic and ultimately possesses Arctic identity. Scotland’s Arctic policy framework is characterized by active relaying through the repetition of language and ideas, continually reiterating the nation’s Arctic Connections.

Scotland plays an important part in the security environment of the High North where the Icelandic and Norwegian seas converge, even at 300 nautical miles south of the Arctic Circle. This is due to Scotland's adjoining geographical position and its exposure to threats emanating from the High North.³² The UK regularly projects its armed forces into the High North from Scotland, and is home to a major defence manufacturing industry for battleships and submarines on the southern Scottish coast.³³ Scotland’s contemporary geostrategic importance to the High North traces back to the First World War, when the British Admiralty was based in Scotland (specifically Scapa Flow) to defend against German U-boats. During the Second World War, Norwegian soldiers of Kompani Linge (Norwegian Independent Company 1) trained in the Scottish Highlands to prepare for the harsh conditions they would face in their homeland's Arctic by mirroring the training environment.^{34 35}

During the Cold War, 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, still active today.³⁶

Contemporarily, there has been a significant revitalization of Scottish interests in the North Atlantic and High North, due to the evolving threats emerging from the High North, with growing recognition of the challenges posed by specifically by Russia.³⁷ Russian military activity has increased near UK territorial waters off the coast of Scotland. UK Armed Forces Minister Luke Pollar has raised concerns about the increased threat posed by Russian activities near Scotland’s coastal waters, specifically targeting critical undersea infrastructure for internet cables and offshore wind farms.³⁸ Scotland’s western coast remains home to the Royal Navy’s fleet of nuclear-armed Vanguard Submarines, forming the UK’s continuous at-sea deterrent. This location is also near Royal Naval Armaments Depot Coulport, on Loch Long in Argyll, serving as a storage and loading facility for the nuclear warheads of the United Kingdom's Trident program.³⁹ In addition, the manufacturing of complex warships and submarines is carried out by BAE Systems in Glasgow and Babcock in Rosyth. The United Kingdom’s 2025 Strategic Defence Review underscored the strategic value of the Scottish shipbuilding industry to Scottish security.⁴⁰

Opportunities and Areas of Common Interests

Scottish Arctic security policy is congruent with Canada’s, particularly in relation to civil security, resilience, and environmental security. A major area of common interest is Scotland’s commitment to sustainable economic

development and rural connectivity, to bolster northern development, and solve human security issues. Rural connection and remoteness are common features of the Arctic region and many parts of Scotland, which is more than 90% rural and contains 96 inhabited islands. Scotland's remote areas share common challenges with those in the Canadian Arctic, including transportation, digital connectivity, and the provision of medical services. The common challenges presented by rurality create opportunities for joint dialogue between Scotland and the Arctic states. Scotland and Canada both take community-led and human-rights-based approaches that recognize the distinct needs of rural areas, such as deep-sea ports.⁴¹ By working together collaboratively, Canada and Scotland can challenge perceptions and develop innovative solutions that help remote areas build empowered, represented, and resilient communities. By increasing knowledge-exchange and policy partnerships with Scotland, Canada can collaborate with a non-Arctic state that shares similar beliefs and approaches to northern development and increasing the security and resiliency of its remote and isolated communities.

Issues of Divergence or Concern

Scottish policy does not address freedom of navigation issues. However, Scotland's position is conspicuously outlined in the Scottish Government's independence policy report entitled. The report highlights that an independent Scotland would be a "leading player in UNCLOS (UN Convention of the Law of the Sea), the key international instrument for protection of the sea, freedom of navigation and States' rights in their maritime zones."⁴² This position conflicts with Canada's legal defence over its historic internal waters of the Northwest Passage. Scottish policy builds on the United Kingdom's historical position of freedom of navigation and the centrality and integrity of UNCLOS. The United Kingdom's Arctic Policy, "Looking North," elaborates that the UK needs "to be prepared to protect and, where appropriate, assert [its] rights against those who wish to challenge the international order and freedom of navigation, or threaten the stability of the region in other ways."⁴³

A future Scottish independence referendum may establish concrete differences on policy matters between Scotland and England. Should Scotland gain independence through a referendum, there is a possibility that Scotland will maintain Westminster's position concerning freedom of navigation, conflicting with Canada's historical legal claim over the Northwest Passage. Canada should be attentive to the application of UNCLOS by a sovereign Scotland, and its possible application to the Northwest Passage in ways that could undermine its legal position over the Northwest Passage.

Scotland's Arctic policy aims to foster, invigorate, and build Arctic connections through informal channels. However, Scotland's ontological pursuit of Arcticness will remain informal until a formal referendum on independence is approved and accepted by other Arctic states. However, if Scottish independence is achieved, Scotland will need the unanimous approval of all Arctic states on the Arctic Council to gain membership, which is extremely unlikely because current Arctic Council members have established that the Arctic Council should only include members that understand the unique nature of the Arctic region and the specific challenges communities face. As a result, unless Scotland can prove its Arcticness to Arctic states, it will likely rely on observer and partnership channels, constraining its direct influence on international Arctic policy and recognition. The future role of Scotland on the Arctic Council, given the primacy of Arctic states in the organization, could be a possible area of future disagreement between Canada and a sovereign Scotland.

However, in line with Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy and pragmatic approach to Arctic diplomacy, Canada could subsequently build on the historical Scottish-Arctic connections both countries have with one another, and foster relations based on climate change, sustainable development, rural connectivity, and culture.

Endnotes

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