

Should an Independent Scotland Aspire to NATO Membership?

With Finland and Sweden seeking to join the Nato alliance, should an independent Scotland follow in their footsteps or seek a different path to promote peace in Europe?

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To consider Scotland’s possible interest in Nato membership in light of the current crisis in Ukraine, we should look at some significant milestones in post-cold war history.

When the cold war was over, Soviet and Russian leaders from Mikhail Gorbachev to Vladimir Putin proposed a new Euro-Atlantic security alliance —“from Dublin to Vladivostok”.

But then Moscow looked on as Nato welcomed as members first Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic in 1999, then the Baltic states and other former Eastern bloc countries.

Three Soviet/Russian presidents—Gorbachev and Putin, along with Boris Yeltsin—then inquired about Russian membership of Nato, and this too was rejected out of hand. It was quite obviously the fulfilment of Nato’s mission laid out by its founding secretary-general, Lord Ismay: “to keep the Soviet Union out, America in, and Germany down.”

The fateful moment—in terms of Russia’s war on Ukraine—came in 2008 at the Nato summit in Bucharest, Romania. The US administration under George W. Bush then proposed—to the consternation of Nato allies, especially France and Germany—a path to alliance membership for Ukraine and Georgia.

This was, for Russia, the ‘red line’. Simply put, and despite American scorn to the contrary, Russia has a relationship with Ukraine—historic, cultural and strategic—that the US cannot understand because it has no equivalent for us Americans.

The sad irony is that over the past three months it has become obvious that Ukraine in Nato is a non-starter—a fact not lost on president Volodymyr Zelensky the day after the Russian invasion began. He [said](#): “Who is ready to give Ukraine a guarantee of NATO membership?”

Everyone is afraid.”

Furthermore, if someone, such as president Emanuel Macron of France, had had the sense to simply state the truth—that the Bucharest 2008 declaration about Ukraine in Nato was a sham—the war might have been prevented.

What might have been

Another ‘might have been’ preventive measure lay in the Minsk agreements I and II, which followed the 2014 Maidan uprising in Ukraine, the product of the then government’s decision to seek closer ties with Russia.

The Minsk agreements were designed to ease tensions between Ukraine and Russia and were signed on to by both countries, along with France and Germany.

Their main stipulations included a ceasefire and removal of combatants from sensitive areas on both sides of the Ukraine/Russia border, and referenda on autonomy (not independence) for the disputed Donbas regions, Donetsk and Luhansk.

Regrettably, Minsk was never implemented—the main backsliding coming from Kyiv.

This was likely due to two forces: internally, from Ukraine’s far-right military ‘irregulars’, which are by now virtually inseparable from the official armed forces; and externally, from pressure by the Atlanticist states, the US and UK, whose opposition to any recognition of what Russia sees as its legitimate regional concerns has helped drive the crisis from the beginning.

Two points concerning today’s Nato are relevant to the Ukraine crisis. The first is that the history of the alliance over the past 30 years lays bare the lie about Nato as a ‘purely defensive’ entity dedicated to building peace and democratic governance in countries that had suffered under communist despotism in the cold war.

Many of us argued indeed that, if this were so, what country had suffered more under communist rule than Russia? Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya are all clearly outside the alliance’s geographical purview, and none posed a direct threat to Nato’s legitimate area of protection.

The US/UK-led massive military assistance to Ukraine not only prolongs the death and destruction but raises the spectre of war between Nato and Russia themselves, with potentially catastrophic global consequences.

These loom as a result of the tension between Ukraine’s increased weaponry expectations and Nato’s willingness to deliver materiel that could expand the war into Russian territory.

On June 10, Ukraine’s defence spokesman Mikheil Podolyak [said](#): “We need parity [with Russia] in heavy weapons”, meaning tanks and armoured vehicles, along with drones and, most especially, multiple-launch rocket systems that could strike deep into Russia.

Second, Nato’s eastward expansion involved an outright lie to Russia, which had given consent to Germany’s unification in exchange for verbal assurances of Nato moving ‘not an inch’ to the east. This means Nato is plausibly seen as a threat to Russia.

To this we can add the US tearing up the anti-ballistic missile treaty, nuclear installations in Poland and Romania and increasingly robust multi-Nato country exercises that encircle Russia, from the Baltics to the Black Sea.

Even Pope Francis has [spoken](#) of “Nato barking at Russia’s door”.

Independent Scotland

The Ukraine tragedy and its knock-on consequences should encourage sober consideration of possible Nato membership for an independent Scotland. Several thoughts occur.

First, do we follow Finland and Sweden in seeking Nato membership, or remain in the alliance under an arrangement with the UK? Sweden and especially Finland both have complicated historical relationships, and geographical proximity, to Russia that Scotland does not have.

Nor does Scotland present any strategic threat to Russia or others—apart from the UK’s nuclear submarine fleet capacity at the Faslane base on the Clyde, which, as far as I can see, would be Scotland’s sole value to Nato.

The other element in the current UK nuclear weapons arsenal, Trident, is a perennial source of debate in Westminster. Scotland’s position should be to scrap it—as both hideously expensive and of limited utility. The notion that the UK would launch a nuclear attack without US consent is fanciful.

Second, Nato currently stipulates that 2% of a member state’s GDP be allocated to defence spending as a condition of membership, a level that has until recently only been fulfilled by a handful of states. The ante is very likely to be raised in the post-Ukraine war security environment.

Is this an investment that an independent Scotland with predictable economic challenges and choices feels it necessary to make?

I would also note that pre-war Ukraine had the third largest army in Europe, after Russia and Turkey, and military expenditures were 6% of GDP. Money, to paraphrase the old adage, can’t buy security.

Mediator

Third, a more esoteric but interesting thought: Scotland in a mediator role. I would argue—more in hope than expectation—that after the Ukraine war the US should sideline itself, that this is a European problem, for a European discussion of a European future, and again, Russia will be part of that discussion.

Zelensky has allowed as much in a recent, rather strange address to the nation that basically said: the war will continue, there will be more death and destruction, but ultimately a ceasefire reached and peace restored as a result of diplomatic engagement.

The Ukraine conflict will come to an end—one hopes not with an escalation of hostilities between Russia and Nato, but at the negotiation table, as Zelensky suggests.

It is often forgotten that there were three months of talks in Vienna and Geneva before the

outbreak of war in late February, and there are negotiators and proposals on hand from those talks. These can, and must, be reconvened, perhaps with the Minsk agreements on the table for updating.

Beyond Nato, there is a quietly effective European outfit named the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The OSCE has been a presence in areas of conflict such as Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, in the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and it has a high commissioner for minorities to address issues of minority populations in east and central Europe. These are issues that loom ever larger in Europe's future.

The OSCE's non-military, mediatory role has quite clearly been curtailed by Nato's assertion of territorial primacy, but I would argue that this role will be a vital one in the tough discussions on a new Europe.

It might clearly be in Scotland's best interest to seek a role for itself within the OSCE, rather than one as a minor player within Nato.

The point is that some of Europe's smaller players—the Scandinavians and the Benelux countries, along with Germany and France—should be called upon to help lay the foundation for a secure European future.

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