

Scottish National Party seeks military role in the Arctic

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10 September 2012

The Scottish National Party (SNP) is seeking membership of NATO in an effort to secure a share in a new geo-political carve-up of the oil rich Arctic Ocean for its wealthy backers.

Whereas once the SNP presented itself as an opponent of militarism, membership of the NATO alliance is now seen as obligatory. The SNP leadership has made clear they intend to do away with the party's long standing opposition to an independent Scotland joining NATO.

Press commentary suggests that SNP leader Alex Salmond hopes to prevent any serious debate on the matter at the party's October conference by saturating the event with flag-waving celebrations over an anticipated deal with the UK parliament at Westminster on the terms and date of a referendum on Scottish independence. The vote is expected in 2014.

However, Defence Spokesman Angus Robertson has repeatedly presented "melting Arctic ice" as the party's overriding security concern. Writing in the *Scotland on Sunday* in August, Robertson spelled out the party leadership's views.

By contrast with Denmark, Norway and Iceland, complained Robertson, who is also vice-chairman of Westminster's All Party Offshore Oil and Gas Group, the UK was not taking the "geostrategic importance of the High North and northern Europe around Scotland" seriously.

The British government, he pointed out, had "systematically dismantled" the Scottish-based "conventional defence infrastructure", including scrapping the entire British fleet of Nimrod reconnaissance aircraft.

Robertson's concerns were highlighted by a recent article in the *Financial Times* by Canadian academic and policy adviser Irvin Studin.

Studin warned that the sharply escalating geo-political conflicts in the South China Sea will soon be replicated in an ice-free Arctic. The opening of the north-west and north-east passages will cut travelling distance between Europe and Asia by thousands of kilometres, while the 90 billion barrels of oil and 1,699 trillion cubic feet of gas under the sea floor dwarf the South China Sea's resources.

The entire Arctic is already contested between Canada, the US, Russia, Denmark and Norway, but this will sharply escalate into a struggle for resources and choke points to control potentially crucial trade routes.

This is the real context of the SNP's and Robertson's continued opposition to the British Trident ballistic missile submarine fleet, based at Faslane near Glasgow.

Scotland's large Aberdeen-based oil extraction and exploration industry is seeking a major role in the far north. But rather than being a source of geo-political clout, the vast cost of the US-backed Trident nuclear missile system precludes the purchase of the frigates, fast jets and conventional submarines necessary for a "sovereign Scotland" to throw its relatively light weight around in the Arctic.

The SNP, which hopes to base a conventional naval fleet at Faslane, also undoubtedly sees protracted negotiations over the removal of Trident as a valuable bargaining tool with which to extract concessions from London.

Similar calculations dictate the SNP's attitude to NATO.

Robertson, Westminster MP for the Moray constituency near Aberdeen, views an independent Scotland's conventional military assets as useless outside of access to NATO's Denmark-based air policing command centre and maritime patrol resources. Allied within NATO, to Norway, Denmark,

Iceland, the rest of Britain and the US, Robertson reckons that Russian and Chinese aspirations in the region can be contained.

Within the SNP, Robertson is opposed by only a minority of members at Westminster and Holyrood, the devolved Scottish parliament. Led by Dave Thompson, Skye and Lochaber MSP, and a member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the opposition view continued NATO membership as likely to make Trident's removal more difficult.

Thompson *et al* represent a declining layer in the SNP, recruited in an earlier era when the party was more concerned with obscuring the class interests for which it speaks by adopting a left and anti-war image. Only 10 of the party's 67 MSPs have come out in support of a position long presented as one of the SNP's fundamental principles.

Nor, in any case, is the SNP's current line opposed to militarism. The SNP presently promote membership of NATO's "Partnership for Peace" programme, which includes most of Eastern Europe, Russia, Finland, Sweden and Ireland, and is a vehicle through which the US has instigated ad hoc military and political alliances across Central Asia.

The programme has also served as an NATO ante-chamber, through which many former members, such as Poland, Latvia and Bulgaria have become fully integrated into its structures.

In power in Edinburgh, the SNP has adapted itself completely to the demands of British military involvement in NATO's numerous foreign wars.

The entire debate exposes the claim of the ex-left tendencies that the establishment of an independent capitalist Scotland somehow weakens British imperialism. The SNP's trajectory makes clear that the breakup of the UK into component powers threatens only to replace one imperialist power with two NATO members of greatly differing weights but equal belligerence, one of which would take particular responsibility in the Far North.

The ex-left response to these developments has been instructive, further revealing their bourgeois, pro-imperialist character and extreme parochialism. Writing for the pro-independence Reid Foundation, named after the Stalinist trade union leader Jimmy Reid who betrayed Glasgow's shipyard workers in 1971-2, Robin McAlpine, editor of the *Scottish Left Review*, warned

that should the SNP back NATO Scottish diplomatic and industrial interests might be harmed.

"We would have picked one side in a geopolitical war for commercial access to global natural resources and strategic position, and once that side is picked there is no nuance," he wrote.

McAlpine complained, "Perhaps the day the first shot is fired over Arctic snow by soldiers who flew there from Scottish air bases Russia and China will instigate a boycott of Scotch whisky."

The ex-lefts are also concerned that the SNP's turn to NATO will further erode support for independence. James Foley of the International Socialist Group warned that "the meaning of NATO is simple: keep the workers down, the Muslims down, 'Old Europe' down, Russia down, and America in. This is not an agenda I would vote for."

Foley argued instead, not for a socialist opposition to imperialism based on the world mobilisation of the working class, but for a less overtly pro-US policy. He called for a campaign by the ex-lefts "to save the independence campaign from the Scottish establishment".

The Scottish Socialist Party, whose leader Colin Fox is on the advisory board of the official "Yes Scotland" campaign, hardly bothered to comment on the internal SNP feud. A four page pro-independence handout from the SSP merely criticised NATO, made the briefest mention of the SNP's change of policy and called for an "alternative peace policy" based on economic nationalism and meaningless expressions of international solidarity. There was not the slightest hint that the SNP's embrace of NATO might cause the SSP to question their support for Salmond and his organisation.



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