

Defence & Scottish Independence

By Steve Coltman

When debate was in full swing for the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, defence and security were barely mentioned. As a second referendum is looking increasingly likely at some point in the next few years, it is vital that the subject of defence is given prominence and serious consideration, both in terms of the security of Scotland itself and of the whole of the British Isles.

The subject has been addressed before, of course. The SNP defence spokesperson wrote in 2012:

'...it is generally acknowledged that potential military threats to an independent Scotland and its strategic assets and national interests would seem to be very low. The UK government's 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) stated that the probability of large-scale military attack against the UK by another state was low, and it therefore prioritised counter-terrorism, cyber-attack, natural hazards and preventing international military crises. Whilst several aspects of this document would not apply to an independent Scotland ... it is probably reasonably safe to say that the same approach to future defence might be adopted by a Scottish government. Scotland is unlikely to face a major military threat in the foreseeable future; on the other hand, there will always be the possibility of terrorism or economic disputes.'

A great deal depends on whether that threat assessment is still true (assuming it ever was, and not just wishful thinking). Even if a military threat did '*seem to be low*', that does not mean it can be dismissed out of hand. Risk is a function of probability and consequence, not just how likely is a threat, but how serious might that threat be if it does materialise. In 2012, indeed in 2019, a pandemic such as we have experienced in the last 18 months with COVID-19 would have *seemed* unlikely. It is sometimes intellectually hard to deal with threats that seem low in probability but are obviously high in consequence. They have to be faced up to, nevertheless.

The rest of the British Isles aside, Scotland's nearest neighbour is Norway, so it is worth looking at Norway and see what they are defending themselves with, and against. Norway's navy has a squadron of modern guided missile frigates, a squadron of veteran conventional submarines but with four new submarines planned to replace them. They also have a squadron of missile corvettes and another of mine-hunters. The air force has 52 F-35A Stealth fighters on order as well as a squadron of five P8 Poseidon anti-submarine patrol aircraft (the same as on order for the UK). The Norwegian Army has an armoured brigade stationed in the north of the country, equipped with Leopard main battle tanks, modern armoured infantry fighting vehicles and new self-propelled artillery on order from South Korea. Norway also has a 40,000-strong Home Guard (conscripted reservists to be mobilised in wartime) as well as a coastguard force with fourteen major vessels.

This impressive list suggests two things – one is that Norway must be quite wealthy to be able to afford all of this, and the other is that Norway must perceive a significant threat to justify such expenditure.

So what does Norway have to worry about? If Norway needs to worry about something, then surely an independent Scotland would have to worry about it too. The answer, of course, is Russia.

The Russian Northern Fleet, and its associated Army and Air Force units, is the biggest of the four fleets that Russia maintains. It includes:

- Ballistic missile submarines: 11
- Cruise missile submarines: 10
- Hunter-killer submarines (SSNs): 6
- Patrol Submarines (conventional propulsion): 6
- Miscellaneous and intelligence-gathering subs: 9

Even allowing for not all of these being active at any one time, it is still a bigger and more powerful submarine force than that of the UK, France, Germany and Italy combined. Also:

- Major surface warships: 10
- Smaller surface warships (corvettes): 8
- Landing ships: 6

This does not include the inactive aircraft carrier *Kuznetsov*. The land forces associated with the Northern Fleet include two army brigades and another of marines. There are many more army mechanized and tank brigades available elsewhere in Russia. The purpose of the landing ships mentioned above is to land the marines on the 'enemy's' coast.

The air forces in this region include Tupelov 22 bombers equipped with cruise missiles, both supersonic and hypersonic. The latter in particular are very difficult to shoot down and some of the anti-missile weapons fitted to western warships (like the famous Vulcan gun) are expected to be useless against them. Other cruise-missile-armed aircraft include the veteran Sukhoi-24 and MiG-31 as well as the more modern Sukhoi-33. Many of these cruise missiles have been tested out on the unfortunate Syrian people. The combination of cruise missile-carrying aircraft and the aforementioned submarines, many of which are also armed with cruise missiles, will make the waters to the north of Scotland quite a dangerous place for Western warships to venture. There are also, of course, the fighter squadrons that usually equip the (temporarily) out-of-service aircraft carrier, anti-submarine patrol aircraft and electronic intelligence-gathering aircraft as well. The whole of Russia's northern and arctic region are protected by an impressive array of land-based surface-to-air missiles. These are the S-300 and S-400 weapons with ranges of typically 100-400km, certainly comparable with the US Patriot system (the UK simply has nothing comparable save for the Aster missiles carried by our six guided missile destroyers).

All in all, the picture of Norway is of a country that has to take defence very seriously indeed.

Then there is the Baltic area, another matter of concern to the Scandinavians as a whole, not just the Norwegians. The Russian Baltic fleet includes another three major surface warships and two dozen or so smaller ones, plus a large number of landing ships and landing craft. There are also in this region another four squadrons of fighter-bombers plus other aircraft, surface-to-air missile batteries and six brigades of army and marines. In addition, the Russians have a brigade of Iskander 500-km-

range ballistic missiles (with either nuclear or conventional warheads) stationed in the Kaliningrad 'oblast' as well as another land-based brigade of Bastion 300-km range supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles. It is not hard to imagine that, in wartime, the Russians would seek complete control of the Baltic area, making it their '*mare nostrum*'. Indeed, it is in the Baltic region that most worries are centred. Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia used to be part of the Soviet Union, and the fact that they are now in the EU and NATO is seen, by Russia, almost as an offence against the natural order. Vladimir Putin's government believes it has a right to a 'sphere of influence' surrounding Russia.

An interesting story was told by a Lithuanian officer at a conference the author attended. In 1990 the Soviet Union had been in the process of disintegrating, and the cohort of Lithuanian conscripts that were due to join the Soviet Army instead joined the newly-formed Lithuanian Army. So far as Moscow is concerned these men, now about 50 years old, are deserters and ever since then have had to be careful which countries they travel to. They dare not go anywhere with an extradition treaty with Moscow. The recent hijacking by Belarus (part of Russia's sphere of influence) of a Ryanair jet merely reinforces the point.

In the Baltic states are based a squadron of NATO fighter aircraft to prevent Russian incursions into their air-space, and NATO tanks (including British ones) are stationed on the soil of these Baltic states too.

The British public are largely unaware of this situation. Defence is barely given any serious treatment in the mainstream media so it is hardly surprising that the voting public and many of our elected politicians are living in ignorance of the facts. These are very inconvenient facts for Scottish Nationalists. Defence need not be a major issue in any independence debate if you assume there is nothing much to defend against, but this is clearly not so.

Should Scotland opt for independence, what might Scotland's defence picture look like? Indeed, what would Scottish independence do to the defence and security of England, Wales and Northern Ireland? These are questions for another paper, another day. The first step in solving any problem is to admit that you actually have a problem, and Scotland (indeed the entire UK) does not seem to have reached that point yet. But with a referendum around the corner, we need to.