



# Why the Pentagon Should Care About Scotland's Referendum

**Scottish independence won't just be bad for the Scots. It will be a disaster for U.S. foreign policy from Syria to the Arctic Circle.**

By Emma Ashford

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As Scottish voters contemplate whether to withdraw from their 307-year-long union with the rest of the United Kingdom on Sept. 18, U.S. policymakers have their own problem to ponder: What will be the ramifications and potential costs of Scottish independence for U.S. foreign and security policy?

To citizens of a country that celebrates its independence from Britain every July 4, there's nothing threatening about Scottish independence. But policymakers are worried. And they should be. Scottish independence places the United States at risk of losing its key partner in global affairs, leaving the foreign policy and military capability of the remainder of the United Kingdom (let's call it: the "RUK") in chaos in the short-term and diminished in the long-term. In addition, the loss of Scotland as a maintenance port for America's nuclear submarines poses both logistical and strategic issues for Washington.

The United Kingdom has played a strong and supportive role in U.S. foreign policy since World War II. During the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, British soldiers constituted the second-largest contingent of troops, comprising over [18,000 of the 23,000](#) non-U.S. troops involved in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The United States and United Kingdom also have strong military and intelligence cooperation -- particularly on issues relating to terrorism -- and share between them the Trident nuclear submarine arsenal. Britain also continues to be one of the largest non-U.S. military spenders within NATO, contributing around [2.5 to 3 percent of GDP](#) each year, a level matched only by France, Greece, and Estonia.

If the Scots secede, the United Kingdom would lose [at least 8 percent](#) of its population and tax base, as well as the majority of Britain's current oil and natural gas revenue, valued at between

[\\$4.7-9.5 billion](#) each year. Although less likely, the possibility that an independent Scotland will repudiate its share of Britain's debt also risks leaving the RUK with a higher debt-to-GDP ratio than at present, increasing borrowing costs. Finally, the transaction costs of the independence process would also impose significant strains on the RUK's budget, as government agencies are reorganized, and new procedures implemented.

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Scottish independence would severely impact the capabilities of the RUK to act as a partner on foreign and defense issues. the RUK is [expected](#) to retain a U.N. Security Council seat (and veto) in the event of independence, but the country would be smaller, poorer, and less able to commit to joint ventures with the United States.

But the effects on Scottish independence for U.S. security policy aren't only long term. A "yes" vote in the referendum will immediately cause chaos within the RUK's defense and foreign policy apparatus. There are no official figures on how many of Britain's civil servants are Scots, but Scots have typically enjoyed [strong representation](#) in the diplomatic and intelligence services -- including Dame Mariot Leslie, recently the U.K. ambassador to NATO (now retired), and Paul Johnston, current ambassador to Sweden. Of course, Britain's two most recent prime ministers, Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, were Scots. With no official position by the U.K. government on whether civil servants would retain their British citizenship or jobs, there would be years of turmoil.

Similarly, the many Scottish-born members of the armed forces (roughly [one in 10 service members](#)) would be in limbo. Scottish nationalists say these soldiers would be eligible to enlist in the new Scottish Defense Force, but their future with RUK forces would be unclear. Non-Scottish service members currently stationed in Scottish regiments and bases would need to be reassigned elsewhere. During this transition period, the United States will need to fill any gaps in military- and intelligence-sharing that result from the loss of this cooperation. For example, the National Security Agency [funds](#) various programs with its British counterpart, the Global Communications Headquarters; the two agencies operate a joint base in Cyprus. Such programs would be impacted by a nebulous transition process.

Transition problems extend to bases and weapons, too. In the event of a yes vote, negotiations would commence between the government in London and the new government in Edinburgh on how to split the existing British military and diplomatic assets. Unsurprisingly, the two sides have widely varying opinions on how this divorce would play out. The Scottish nationalists' [white paper](#) on independence asserts that any independent Scottish state would be entitled to a share of British embassy facilities and military assets proportional to their population. The current U.K. government, on the other hand, [insists](#) that any division of assets will be based on the success of negotiations on the currency and national debt. Either way, the rebuilding of the RUK's armed forces to an acceptable level of readiness will cost billions of dollars, reducing amounts available for contributions to NATO, and to any joint security operations in Syria, Ukraine, or wherever the next crisis pops up.

But the biggest security issue with an independent Scotland by far comes down to nuclear submarines. The yes campaign has [pledged](#) that the future Scotland will be nuclear-free. As of right now, Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde, at Faslane, Scotland, hosts Britain's nuclear submarines. The United Kingdom currently has four Vanguard-class submarines, equipped with Trident II D-5 ballistic nuclear missiles. The missiles themselves are leased from a joint U.S.-U.K. pool, and are identical to those carried on U.S. Ohio-class submarines. All four subs are based at Clyde, with one submarine always on patrol. They would have to be relocated.

U.S. nuclear submarines are based primarily in the states of Georgia and Washington, but Faslane is strategically important. It's close to North Sea patrolling areas and was a key deployment area for submarines during the Cold War. It remains a frequent maintenance area and port of call for U.S. submarines. There are no obvious alternative sites for the relocation of Trident: the main options (Barrow-in-Furness, Milford Haven, and Plymouth) all have flaws, with waterways potentially too shallow for submarines, and locations dangerously close to population centers. It's possible that British submarines could be relocated to Kings Bay, Georgia, alongside America's Trident submarines. In either case,

Scottish independence will again result in short-term chaos, followed by the long-term loss of a useful, difficult-to-replace forward strategic base.

Neither Scotland, nor the RUK, nor both together would make for the kind of dependable and trustworthy partner Washington has grown accustomed to in London. The white paper on independence proposes a substantially smaller Scottish Defense Force, comparable to those of the Nordic countries, focused on minimal conventional defense, with no real force projection ability.

The nationalists also indicate that they want to move away from the Anglo-American alliance to better integrate with the EU's [Common Foreign and Security Policy](#), which aims to consolidate the military and foreign-policy capacities of European Union states. As many observers have pointed out, the white paper does not make any attempt to assess the costs or time required to set up independent Scottish diplomatic or intelligence operations -- effectively from scratch. As a result, an independent Scottish state, although a probable member of NATO, would have little to contribute to U.S. foreign-policy or military initiatives. In particular, an independent Scotland is unlikely to commit military forces or technical support to ventures such as the current U.S. action in Iraq.

While the impending war against the Islamic State may crowd out the headlines and the fevered discussions in Washington, U.S. policymakers are clearly worried about the possibility of a Scottish yes vote. Although President Obama's [public remarks](#) on the topic in June stressed that the decision is up to Scottish voters, he also emphasized that the United States has a "deep interest in making sure that one of the closest allies that we will ever have remains strong, robust, united, and an effective partner." In August, the U.S. Congress tabled a resolution expressing strong support for continued union, and cited in particular the fact that "military cooperation between the U.S. and U.K. is essential to U.S. national security." [Recent polls](#) indicate a small lead for the no campaign in the Scottish referendum, but this lead has narrowed in recent weeks, with several polls showing a lead of around 5 percent, and one showing the race too close to call.

As the day of decision nears, policymakers in Washington are watching anxiously -- with good reason.

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