**Title: The Evolving Scottish Arctic Policy and its Impact on National Identity**

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**Abstract**

This piece provides a short overview of the Scottish interest for and discourse on the Arctic, replaced in the recent historical context. The main contribution of this piece, transitory as they are part of my ongoing research, is to outline a three-step chronology, brushing off the recent history of contemporary Scotland, from the 1970s to today. I first provide a short context on the constitutional and political aspects that occupy the Scottish scene. Second, I explain briefly the Arctic geopolitical context, in which the Scottish interest inserts itself. Finally, I outline where the Scottish interests came from, and how its accompanying discourse to legitimise them have evolved. I conclude by showing how this incremental discourse has become blurred, but that it could be a useful instrument for the Scottish paradiplomacy towards the region.

**Keywords:** Scotland; Arctic; critical geopolitics; national identity; independence

**Main article:**

The Scottish nation is considered by scholars as one of the earliest modern nations, these ‘imagined communities’ (Connor, 1990; Hobsbawm, 1992; Nairn, 2003; Anderson, 2006; Mycock, 2012). Yet, Scotland as a *constitutive* country of the United Kingdom is not a nation-*state*, with several *devolved* powers, allowing a certain autonomy to conduct some of its own affairs.

This autonomy allows the Scottish Parliament and Government - reinstated in 1999 after nearly three centuries of discontinuity - to enact policies in certain areas (Parry, 2001; Horgan, 2004; Thompson, 2006; Himsworth, 2013). However, the UK Parliament and Government retain control over *reserved* matters, including defence, security, foreign and constitutional affairs. Scotland cannot conduct official diplomacy, or unilaterally separate from the rest of the UK (UK Government, 1998; Torrance, 2022).

For the past half-century, political faultlines in Scotland have increasingly cut around independence. Many observers share the view that the discovery of offshore oil bonanza, in the North Sea during the 1970s, was the catalyst for the (re)activation of a latent nationalist movement aspiring to an independent Scotland (Nairn, 2003; Harvie, 2004; Campbell, 2019).

In this context, it is surprising that Scotland developed its own Arctic policy, led by a Government’s Nordic and Arctic Unit, is regularly sending officials to Arctic events and forums, and installed Scottish offices abroad, like the one to Copenhagen’s Nordic Council. In many ways, they are manifestations of an unavowed diplomacy.

For many, the Scottish Arctic quasi-diplomacy conducted under the Scottish National Party (SNP) leadership (in government since 2007), is considered to be a tool to legitimise and strengthen their claims to independence (Johnstone, 2012, 2017; Powell, 2013; Kruse, 2016; Depledge and Dodds, 2017; Depledge, 2018; Escudé-Joffres, 2020). This is what scholars call **identarian paradiplomacy**: an un-official, *de facto* diplomacy conducted by an entity which is not a subject of international law; and with the ambition that it will help strengthen a distinct political identity, and possibly independence (Aguirre, 1999; Paquin, 2004; Cornago, 2010; Rioux Ouimet, 2015; Moreno, 2016; Jackson, 2018; Holmes, 2020).

Scotland's Arctic efforts are limited by both its sub-state status and the principle of circumpolarity. The principle of circumpolarity entertains that only states with territory above the Arctic circle (the 66⁰33” N latitude), are considered full stakeholders in Arctic politics. Only 8 states are recognised as Arctic states: Canada, Denmark (*via* Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Russia and the USA (Steinberg *et al.*, 2015; Keil and Knecht, 2016; Depledge, 2018). This is closely related to the notion of ‘Arctic exceptionalism’: an insulation from global (geo)politics, predominantly affected by endogenous dynamics (Ingimundarson, 2014; Burke, 2019a, 2019b). This exceptionalism was disrupted in 2022 when Arctic states paused cooperation with Russia over its invasion of Ukraine (Brańka, 2022; Kirchner, 2022; Zellen, 2022). Furthermore, in the last two decades, global warming has been on average three times faster in the Arctic (Deshayes, 2021) and assessments of resources (Bird *et al.*, 2008; Tennberg, Lempinen and Pirnes, 2020) have triggered interests in mining, fishing, shipping, and tourism in the region. This has led to the multiplication of national strategies (Heininen *et al.*, 2019), with the UK labelling itself the “Arctic's nearest neighbour” (Depledge, 2018) and China a “near-Arctic state” (Lim, 2018). In this context, the 2019 Scottish policy, *Arctic Connections*, emulated this global movement, revealing an interest not simply due to cultural affinities, but also as part of a global trend.

Yet, I consider the recent and consistent Scottish interest to take root from the discovery of offshore oil in the North Sea during the 1970s, which opened an imaginary of resource frontier, economic and (geo)political opportunities for Scotland, located on its Northern horizon (Nairn, 2003; Watts, 2019; Rioux, 2021; Hau, 2022). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, under the Thatcher’s era, height of deindustrialisation for Scotland, hopes and imaginaries of a brighter future for an independent Scotland have been pushed farther North. The romanticised egalitarian social democratic welfare model of Nordic countries began to capture nationalists’ imaginations. These societies offered, it was argued, an alternative model to neoliberalism which left Scotland in a position further and further peripheral from the concentration of wealth in London. This Nordic alternative was crystalised in the catchphrase ‘Arc of Prosperity’ figuring in the SNP electoral manifesto for the Scottish parliament elections of 2007 (The Scotsman, 2006; Kelly, 2011; Rioux, 2021). In the SNP’s words, Scotland should join the ‘Arc of Prosperity’, spreading from Ireland “the Irish Tiger”, to the Scandinavian countries, ending with Finland.

Few years later, this imaginary of Nordic, small independent yet prosper welfare states appear to have further evolved. Today, Scottish independentists are holding a discourse pointing the similarities between Scottish and Arctic societies and geographies, based on their histories, cultural heritages, economies, to nourish dreams of independent Arctic Scotland. The 2019 *Arctic Connections* cements this vision, perhaps first outlined in 2011 by Angus Robertson, then-MP for the SNP in Westminster in the *New Scotsman* newspapers (Robertson, 2011). For instance, since at least 2015, a Scottish delegation, often accompanied by a high-level official (minister, and a few times the First Minister), is sent to the Arctic Circle Assembly.[[1]](#footnote-1)

However, Scandinavia, Nordics and Arctic(s) seem to be blurred persistently: all Nordic countries (Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Norway, and Sweden) are Arctic, but not all Arctics are Nordics (Canada, Russia and the USA).

In sum, it is remarkable to note how vague, or imprecise is this reimagined geography. The shift in emphasis from the North Sea to the Arctic within the nationalist discourse since the 1970s’ oil discovery, appear to have opened a more general movement toward the Nordic and then the Arctic. Indeed, the journey of this discourse articulating the Scottish independent future with a Northern geopolitical space, shows that Scottish politicians can talk about the Arctic, whilst thinking about Northern Scotland and archipelago, Scandinavia, Nordics or indeed the Arctic. This modulation likely depends on the political circumstances and audiences. One aim of my research is to investigate whether this is done consciously, and for what purposes.



**Data Availability Statement:** data is mainly drawn from secondary sources (academic publications), and publicly available sources (acts, laws, speeches).

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1. See the 2015 event’s programme: https://prismic-io.s3.amazonaws.com/arctic-circle-www/05ea7880-4218-408c-8f1c-c8cfafdf19d6\_2015+Assembly+Program.pdf#page=35. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)