

FROM SNP CND

CORRECTING THE NATO BRIEFING:

SNP POLICY NEEDS TO BE BASED ON FACTS AND VALUES

Background

Angus Robertson MP has issued a briefing to support his argument that the SNP should change its defence policy and commit to retaining membership of NATO if Scotland becomes independent. The briefing has many factual inaccuracies and clear misunderstandings of real geopolitics. It is therefore important that members of the SNP have accurate and properly-interpreted information on which to make their decision.

National Interests

Key misunderstandings and weaknesses:

- *The Arctic Council, not NATO, is universally recognised as the body responsible for security in the High North*
- *NATO itself is split on the issue of the High North and it does not feature in its existing strategy*
- *The briefing paper does not seem to be aware of the difference between the North Sea and the Arctic Circle*

The only security threat identified in this briefing to justify NATO membership relates to environmental change in the High North and Arctic. No other example of a plausible military security threat is presented to justify such a significant change of policy.

The references to the Arctic are seriously ill-informed. We should definitely not be turning to Nato for a solution to the issues raised by environmental change in this region. In 1996 the eight nations within the Arctic circle formed the Arctic Council. This is recognised as the primary forum for dealing with the complex issues of the region. One of the founding principles of the Arctic Council is that it gives a voice to the indigenous peoples of the area. In 2010 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) affirmed that the Arctic Council should take the lead role in dealing with the issues of the area.

While Norway has argued for a Nato role in the Arctic, Canada is opposed to Nato playing any significant role in the region. As a result of Canadian concerns, there was no mention of the Arctic in Nato's 2010 Strategic Concept. There is universal agreement that the primary way to tackle the complex issues of the Arctic is through negotiation, primarily through the Arctic Council and implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas. The security dimension to the Arctic has been exaggerated; substantial differences have been resolved through negotiation, for example between Norway and Russia over the Barents Sea. In addition some of the outstanding disputes are between Nato members. Canada and the US have very different views on the status of the North-West Passage and the Beaufort Sea. Denmark and Canada disagree over the ownership of Hans island.

Angus Robertson confuses the Arctic with the North Sea. He points out that nations around the North Sea are all members of Nato. But this is not the case for the Arctic. Three members of the Arctic Council (Finland, Sweden and Russia) are not Nato members. The correct way for an independent Scotland to engage with issues of the Arctic would be to ask for observer status on the Arctic Council. In particular we should be stressing that the voices of the indigenous people should continue to be heard.

Defence Interests

Key misunderstandings and weaknesses:

- *There is no credible defence assessment provided to imply that any military alliance is necessary for Scottish security, never mind whether NATO is the right one*
- *No assessment is made of the risk to Scotland's interests (for example, relations with Russia, China or Latin America) of joining one commercially-focussed military alliance*
- *The briefing makes no mention of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or the important role that it plays*

Nato's purpose should have ended with the disbandment of the Warsaw Pact. It has since then been determined to find a military role to justify its existence and those of the defence corporations who depend on selling increasingly expensive and sophisticated military hardware. The main role Nato has chosen has been to act as an expeditionary military force promoting US foreign policy. Its principal activity over the past decade has been the disastrous war in Afghanistan. This does not relate to Scotland's defence interests. Even in Europe its position has been counter-productive. In a House of Lords debate (29.5.12), the former UK Defence Secretary Lord Browne, hardly a radical, described Nato's Deterrence and Defence Posture Review as a missed opportunity to repair relations between the US and Russia. He warned of the 'risk of sleepwalking back into the Cold War'.

The resolution from Angus Robertson says that an independent Scotland should be a member of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), but the briefing fails to mention this organisation or the valuable role it plays in tackling security issues. The OSCE tries to identify areas of conflict in advance and it deploys staff to potential and actual flashpoints. Scotland can fulfil its international obligations through institutions like the OSCE and United Nations, without being in NATO.

Non-Nuclear Nato Members

Key misunderstandings and weaknesses:

- *Although NATO did remove its nuclear weapons from Canada in 1985 and Greece in 2001, this was related to operational factors. NATO has hampered other governments when they have tried to have nuclear weapons removed from their soil.*
- *The briefing confuses never having had nuclear weapons with removing existing weapons*
- *It therefore fails to address the fact that no NATO member has ever unilaterally called for weapons to be removed from their country and been successful but three have tried and failed*

All Nato members are signed up to Nato's nuclear strategy. As well as the three members who have their own nuclear weapons, five other states have Nato nuclear weapons based on their territory. Three of these have parliaments which have tried unsuccessfully to have these weapons removed. The current German Foreign Minister, Guido Westerwelle pledged when his government came to power that "In the coming Government term Germany will at last become free of nuclear weapons". According to a Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) briefing this "sparked fear among many in Nato that the 28 nation consensus on this issue would be rendered impossible". In fact these weapons are now being upgraded by Nato rather than being removed and it now looks certain that there is no prospect of Westerwelle's pledge being achieved.

Norway has never had nuclear weapons and, therefore, is in a very different situation from Scotland. Trident is assigned to Nato and given the anxiety outlined above about the much smaller step that Germany was proposing, there is little doubt that if Scotland remained in Nato, it would be

subject to very substantial pressure to 'postpone' any action in the name of consensus decision-making. Since Angus Robertson is now arguing that Nato membership is essential for Scotland's security, a Scottish Government would already have placed itself in a weak bargaining position.

The US withdrew Voodoo air-to-air nuclear missiles from Canada because these weapons were being taken out of service. Nuclear bombs were withdrawn from Greece because the country no longer had aircraft which were able to deliver the weapons.

Public Priorities

Key misunderstandings and weaknesses:

- *Absolutely no serious measurement of public opinion on NATO has been carried out*
- *The polls cited are a post-hoc publicity stunt commissioned by NATO supporters in the SNP to support a pre-existing position, not inform it*
- *There is no evidence whatsoever that the NATO issue will affect voting intentions in the referendum any more than it did in the 2011 Scottish Election*

There has been no public debate until now about Nato and, as we can see that a defence spokesperson is not well-informed, public perceptions are likely to be limited. What we can be fairly sure of is that if the question asked was 'Do you want to join a military alliance based on nuclear weapons?' or 'Do you support Nato's Afghan war' or 'Do you think Scotland is likely to be attacked?' – the responses would be very different.

The SNP has had a long- standing position of consistent and coherent opposition to weapons of indiscriminate mass civilian and environmental destruction. If policy is changed, it immediately undermines this very strong position. Opponents will use the argument that the SNP is being hypocritical in seeking the removal of Trident from Scotland but joining up to a military alliance for which nuclear weapons play a central strategic role. The Defence Secretary has already attacked Angus Robertson in the Commons using this argument.

While NATO membership might not exclude the possibility of getting rid of Trident, it will certainly make it more difficult. Likewise, Scotland would be under more pressure to commit troops to US adventures if it was in the alliance.

It is argued by the supporters of Nato that 'Scotland leaving Nato would have a significant impact on diplomatic, political and defence circumstances.' This sounds like good news. The UK foreign and defence heritage that we have had to live with needs radical change. Better to be among the Austrians, Finns, Irish, Swedes and Swiss and to be seen as a consistent voice in the international campaign against nuclear weapons not tied in to a nuclear alliance.

Conclusions

There are three fundamental problems with the case for the SNP to reverse its position on NATO as demonstrated by the briefing paper:

- **It is devoid of any geopolitical analysis.** It repeatedly uses emotive language of 'threat' and 'risk' and yet no serious threat or risk assessment is made. The only cited case of geopolitical threat appears to be predicated on the assumption that SNP members know nothing about the real geopolitical realities of the High North. Not only is NATO split on this issue (and therefore unable to act), NATO itself does not see the issue as important enough to include it in its own strategy. The lack of basic geopolitical knowledge on the part of those advocating NATO membership is frankly embarrassing.
- **It has no foreign policy element.** This is a military policy in complete isolation from any credible consideration of a foreign policy of an independent Scotland. Simple but crucial

questions such as 'what about the implications for relationships with key trading partners such as Russia, China and Latin America' are not even considered. The impact of NATO membership on Scotland's credibility on other international issues is entirely missing – if Scotland is seen as a US proxy its credibility on issues such as climate change, nuclear non-proliferation and eradicating global poverty are greatly reduced. Surely these issues should at least be considered as part of the decision-making process? Ignoring them altogether is not grown-up politics.

- **It seems to misunderstand the difference between constitutional theory and political reality.** In theory NATO members can choose (of their own accord) to remove nuclear missiles from their soil. In reality, every single country which has tried to do this has failed. In theory NATO members do not have to participate in NATO wars of adventure. In reality, when France and others tried to block NATO participation in the clearly unwise and almost certainly illegal war in Iraq, they faced years of US diplomatic sanctions and consumer boycotts. The case is remarkably naïve and assumes the US and the UK will let Scotland veto what they see as their own national interests.
- **It is strategically inept.** This policy's advocates seeks first to make Scots fear for their security and second to reassure them with promises of nuclear military alliance. It seeks simultaneously to hold to anti-nuclear principles. This glaring hypocrisy will be ruthlessly exploited by political opponents who will mock the willingness to 'shelter under NATO's nuclear umbrella'. All of the available evidence suggests that the public does not see the SNP's non-NATO stance as an electoral weakness. The opinion polls cited are not serious. A 'voter segmentation' analysis would almost certainly demonstrate that a policy change would lose votes because those likely to support independence and see NATO membership as a key issue are almost all likely to oppose membership.

In the end, the lack of credible work that has been done to formulate and argue for this policy change is so substantial that it must be assumed that the policy came first and the justification second. This seems to be an intentional attempt to disguise a policy that favours the interests of the US commercial sector, arms manufacturers and the secret services as something that matters to ordinary Scots. It also appears to be forced upon the Party at a time calculated to minimise proper scrutiny of these glaring weaknesses. This is no basis to alter existing SNP policy,

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