

On the 18th of September 2014 the Scottish people will decide their future. With just over 500 days to go, the campaign is beginning to take shape. This week protagonists discussed the defence and security implications of Scottish independence at a seminar convened in London by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) which has also published some related briefing papers on this issue. Angus Robertson MP is the leader of the Scottish National Party and is the SNP's defence and foreign affairs spokesman. His fellow Scots from the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat Parties addressed a question which they considered in terms of "what it..." whilst Robertson was addressing the question "when" reports Nick Watts of Great North News Services

Robertson laid out the key elements of the SNP's approach to defence and security policy. He set the tone by reminding the London audience that many political commentators had discounted the possibility of devolution. They had also discounted the possibility that there would ever be a majority SNP government in Scotland. Those same sceptics were supposing that the Scottish people would not choose to be masters of their own destiny.

If the result of the referendum is in favour of independence the period between 2014 and 2016 would be one of transition. He reminded the audience that under the Edinburgh Agreement whereby the UK government cedes responsibility for the conduct of the referendum to the Scottish government, that both governments agree to work constructively whatever the outcome of the referendum. In this spirit the first order of business will be for the "speediest" removal of nuclear weapons from Scottish soil. There was some discussion about what this might mean in terms of timescale and the impact this might have on Scotland's aspiration to join NATO.

The next matter under consideration was that of funding. There was some discussion on the future of an independent Scotland's armed forces. The precedent the SNP are using is that of the Irish regiments that transferred from Crown service to the Irish army. The target for Scotland's armed forces is 15,000 personnel with an annual budget of £2.5bn. This figure has been chosen by SNP because a similar sized country, Denmark, has a budget of roughly this size. Moreover the SNP asserts that the UK government's Asset Register gives MOD establishments in Scotland a value of 8.4% of the MOD estate. A figure which the SNP would expect to parley into the overall discussions between a Scottish government and the government of the Rest of the UK: R-UK – an acronym we will be seeing more of over the coming months.

Scotland's aspirations in regard to its membership of NATO and the EU will remain a point of contention for academics until the 19th September 2014. The SNP assertion is that they would expect to be a co-operative neighbour and partner. The discussion on security and intelligence co-operation was reminiscent of the days of Francis Walsingham, with Scotland being viewed from London as a soft back door. US-UK intelligence co-operation, and intelligence sharing with Scotland, is an area which will also remain contested. However, a helpful parallel was drawn with UK – Irish security co-operation in recent times which has been positive.

Ultimately this decision will be taken by the people of Scotland. Once the dust settles, then the speculation can cease.