

# Scotland needs a pragmatic strategy for its EU and global relations

*In recent months, the Scottish government has made clear its intention to increase its European and global profile. However, it is limited by the impact of Brexit, its antagonistic relationship with the UK government, and polarisation over its EU and international engagement, writes **Anthony Salamone**. He argues the government should use its promised Global Affairs Framework to establish a credible and pragmatic strategy which recognises these challenges and articulates a post-Brexit, long-term vision based on Scotland's current constitutional circumstances.*

With the combined salience of Brexit and the Scottish independence debate over recent years, Scotland's distinct relationships with the rest of Europe and the wider world have become a subject of growing interest. Nevertheless, these relationships are not new. Scottish political institutions have engaged at the European and global levels since the beginning of devolution.

Given that most policy fields have European and global dimensions, it makes sense for the Scottish government, the Scottish Parliament and wider Scottish actors to interact with EU and international colleagues, whatever Scotland's constitutional future. At present, however, the state of affairs in Scotland is strained. Increasingly, European and international relations are interpreted and portrayed, by those on both sides, as merely an extension of the independence debate.

Since the [Holyrood election](#) this past May, the Scottish government has demonstrated the ambition to increase its European and global profile. Its current [programme for government](#) lists a series of commitments in this area, the most notable of which is a Global Affairs Framework. Its development is a vital opportunity to [establish strategic direction](#) on European and external relations, as well as to rekindle a stable cross-party basis for such engagement.

## State of affairs in Scotland on EU and global relations

The state of affairs in Scotland on European and international relations is defined by [two principal factors](#). The first is a lack of Europeanisation of Scottish politics and public life. In general terms, Scotland's politics, government, media and wider institutions are largely disconnected from the politics and debates of the EU collectively and of the member states individually.

A strange and persistent gulf exists between Scotland's ostensible pro-EU position and its relative absence from the topical matters of the EU. This situation is a question of degrees: Scotland and its actors of course engage in European affairs, but not to [the extent or the depth](#) which one would expect – certainly not for a country which might seek to join the EU in the years to come.

The second factor is a lack of consensus on the Scottish government's European and international engagement. With the advent of Brexit, and its resulting challenges for [pro-EU Scottish unionism](#), the growing trend in Scotland is for advocates of independence to support government participation in EU and global affairs and for advocates of the UK union to oppose it. Discord [over the purpose](#) of the Scottish government's representative offices in EU member states and elsewhere in the world is a prominent case. These two factors have fostered a strong tendency for polarisation on Scotland's European and external relations. Hyperbolic arguments have gained increasing prevalence.

At present, some proponents of independence contend that all such engagement, irrespective of purpose, content or outcomes, is unreservedly welcome. Under their logic, the Scottish government should use its position to make the case for independence at European and global levels in preparation of imminent statehood. Conversely, some opponents of independence argue that any engagement, even if it relates directly to the competence of Scottish institutions, is manifestly unacceptable. By their argument, the Scottish government should desist from involvement in foreign affairs and leave all engagement to the UK government.

Such extremes ignore reality. It is entirely sensible, and usually beneficial, for the Scottish government to engage with European and global institutions. However, that engagement should be structured on the basis of Scotland's current constitutional circumstances, not on the grounds of aspired independence. This current polarisation is not a sustainable basis for good public debate.

## Strategic realities for the Scottish government

For its new Global Affairs Framework to be credible and effective, the Scottish government will have to contend sufficiently with four strategic realities. The first is that Brexit has been concluded. The centrepiece of the Scottish government's communications with EU and global actors since the 2016 referendum – that Scotland did not support Brexit – is no longer relevant. That message has already been successful and reiterative opposition alone will have ever less utility over time. The government should focus on [sustaining and growing European relationships](#) through substantive cooperation oriented to the future.

The second is that international relations are a complex business. If the Scottish government aims to engage more substantively in this arena, it should be cognisant of the realities of the international system and Scotland's relatively peripheral place within it. Scotland is not a state and it is not part of the EU. Its capacity for overall EU and global influence will be modest. Moreover, the Scottish government's credibility will depend on acknowledging that many global situations – for which it often has no direct competence – do not have straightforward solutions.

The third is that the Scottish government's relationship with the UK government matters. It is a defining aspect of Scotland's global engagement now – and it would be important if Scotland were an independent state. The two governments have an antagonistic relationship and differing political agendas on EU and foreign policies at present. That situation is negative for the Scottish government. Since it is not the central state, this discord reduces its ability to engage productively with EU and global actors due to their desire to avoid involvement in the UK's internal politics.

Most notable of all, the fourth is that Scotland will not be part of the EU for years, whatever its constitutional future. [Scotland's EU accession process](#), as an independent state, could reasonably take 44-78 months, and probably 48-60 months, from the point of application to the point of accession. If a hypothetical referendum agreed by the Scottish and UK governments were held in September 2023, with a result for independence, an independence transition of 36 months and an application preparation period of three months, Scotland could become an EU member between December 2030 and December 2031. If the voters rejected independence, or an agreed referendum did not happen, Scotland would not join the EU – unless the UK [successfully rejoined](#). In any event, Scotland will most likely not be part of the EU for the rest of this decade.

## Principles for a pragmatic Scottish strategy

In response to these realities, the Scottish government should adopt a pragmatic strategy for its EU and global relations. The Global Affairs Framework should be based on five core elements. First, it should define its primary principles and objectives which are values-based, ensure alignment between domestic policy and external action, and correspond to Scotland's current constitutional circumstances. Second, it should cover a specific long-term horizon, such as the rest of this decade (2022–2030) and assume that Scotland will not be part of the EU throughout that time.

Third, the framework should serve as the singular foundation for all the government's frameworks and plans in this domain. Current policy documents (such as [the Arctic policy framework](#)) and proposed ones (such as a cultural diplomacy strategy) should fall under its jurisdiction and accord with it. In general, the government's EU and global engagement should align with the strategy to ensure coherence. If existing engagement does not align, it should be discontinued.

Fourth, the Global Affairs Framework should minimise Scottish constitutional affairs and facilitate purposeful separation of European and international relations from the independence debate. Government political leaders should reduce their regular references to independence in their EU and global engagement, recognising the limited value in reminding actors continually of their position on that issue. Fifth, it should facilitate cross-party engagement on the government's European and external relations, developing new meaningful avenues for cooperation.

A pragmatic Scottish strategy should give relationships with the European Union – the EU institutions and the member states at all levels – the greatest attention, investment and engagement. Given that the Scottish government does not have the powers or resources of a state, the balance of its engagement should be notably in favour of European relations, with international relations strategically targeted. Moreover, it should establish an order of priority, defining a sequential prioritisation of states, regions, subjects and other themes for engagement.

Such a strategy should foster greater interaction with the Scottish global diaspora, defined broadly as anyone with affinity for Scotland – among them those [educated in Scotland](#) who now occupy positions of influence worldwide. Diaspora relations should not be focused only on trade and investment, and should instead promote meaningful connections in a unique global community. The strategy should emphasise the development of high-quality bilateral relationships with relevant states, based on productive cooperation on areas of mutual interest. It should ensure that the government's [representative offices](#) function as a coherent network to serve strategic objectives.

The Scottish government's European and international relations are now an intrinsic part of modern Scottish governance. Such engagement is logical, when founded on the present constitution. Yet the current challenges are significant. Scotland is no longer part of the EU, with its access and relevance reduced as a result. The Scottish and UK governments hold divergent views on EU and foreign policies. Scottish politics is marked by polarisation on European and international engagement, with its dual lack of Europeanisation and consensus.

At this stage, the Scottish government should ensure that its promised Global Affairs Framework sets a [post-Brexit, long-term vision](#) for European and external relations. Since the government intends to increase its European and global profile, the Scottish Parliament should intensify its scrutiny of the government in this field. Rebuilding cross-party consensus is vital. Responsibility for separating Scotland's EU and global relations from the independence debate rests with both sides. Given the current state of affairs, such expectations might appear excessively aspirational. It is time, however, to test the proposition that Scottish politics is defined by collegiality.

***This article draws on the author's recent report, [Scotland's Global Standpoint: Strategic Principles for Scotland's European and International Relations](#)***

---

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Scottish Government \(CC BY 2.0\)](#)*

---