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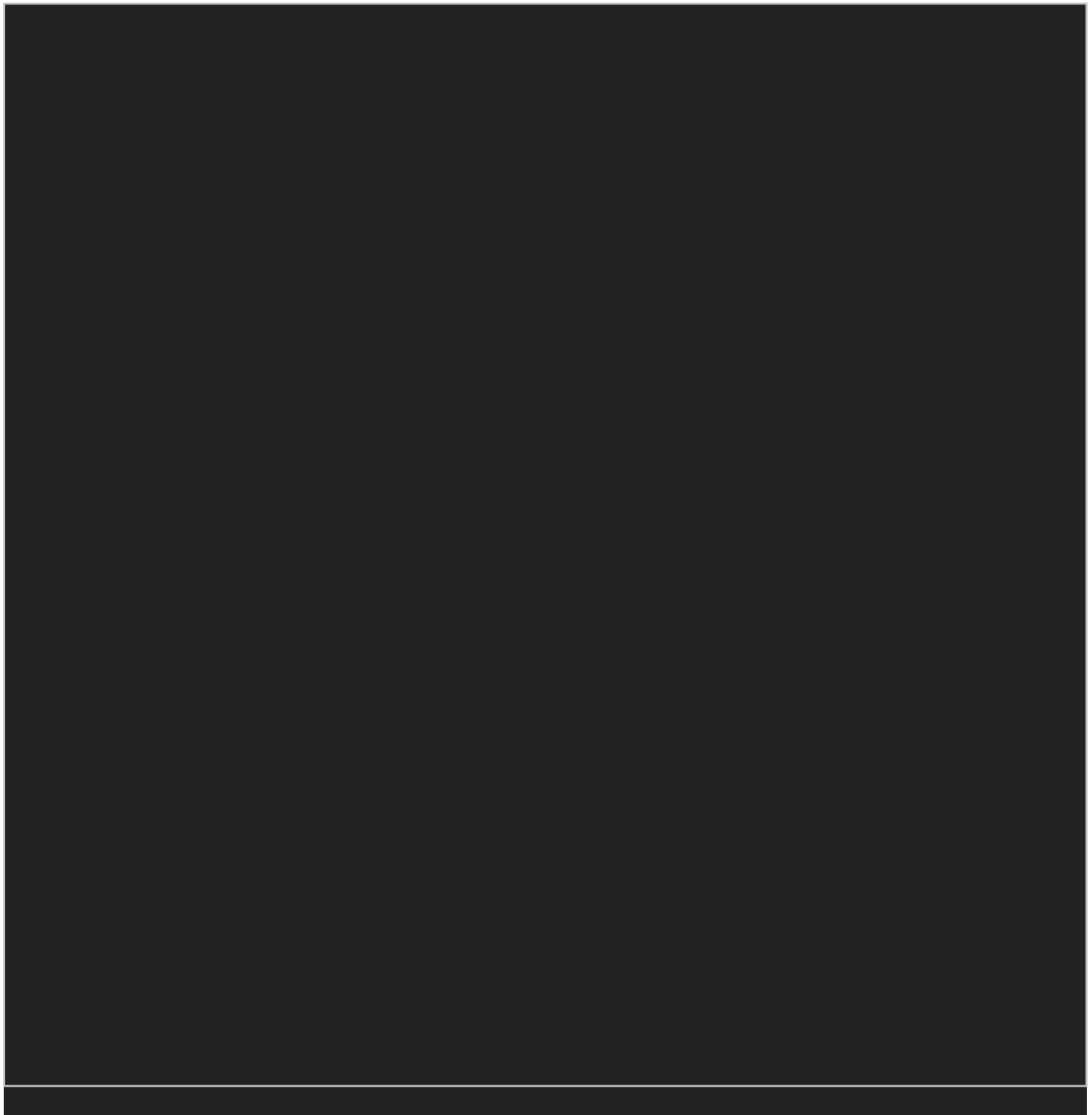
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We need to talk about an independent Scotland's foreign policy – Alastair Stewart





Abdelbaset al-Megrahi, the only person convicted of the Lockerbie bombing, was released on compassionate grounds from a Scottish prison (Picture: Danny Lawson/AFP/Getty Images)

By

[ALASTAIR STEWART](#)

Published: 11:40

Wednesday 18 December 2019

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The government of a newly independent Scotland might try to be a “good global citizen” but power and evil have a tendency to go hand-in-hand, writes Alastair Stewart.

In the furore over whether Scotland should be independent, few ask what a Scottish foreign policy might look like. The SNP repeatedly says that Scotland would be a “good global citizen”, but beyond ‘the vision thing’, what does this mean in practice?

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John Wayne (of all people) got to the crux of it: “Each of us is a mixture of some good and some not so good qualities.” For all the illusion of a borderless and digital 21st-century world, power politics has never gone away. Well-wishing idealism has seldom ever trumped realpolitik. One look at the 19th, 20th and early 21st centuries tells that disheartening story.

The Scottish Government has yet to prove it can be any other way (nor has any other government, for that matter). In 2012, Alex Salmond allegedly snubbed the Dalai Lama’s visit to Scotland to assuage Chinese government sensibilities and notoriously said Vladimir Putin’s patriotism was “entirely reasonable”. The Scottish Government provoked general ire over the release of Lockerbie bomber Abdelbaset al-Megrahi in 2009 and was more recently accused of supporting businesses involved in arms sales.

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All this is not to make a political point about hypocrisy but to ask a serious question. Could an independent Scotland do better, and if so – how?

US academic Hans Morgenthau is widely regarded as one of the 20th century’s central figures in the study of power politics. He also spent a substantial portion of his career exploring the controversial idea that power is free of ethical concerns.

‘No escape from evil of power’

Morgenthau admitted that there is “no escape from the evil of power regardless of what one does”. He also added that “the moral strategy” of politics is to “try to choose the lesser evil”. Whether morality comes from god, gods or laws is almost irrelevant – if you need to wage war, do the least harm.

Any independent Scottish administration would probably have to ‘get its hands dirty’. It would eventually have to respond to events that are impossible to predict in an appropriate manner. The question about being a “good global citizen” is less about dealing in moral absolutes, and more about the effort to limit the awesome power of the state.

Scotland working toward a better world is a noble idea in the long tradition of idealism, but it has to be tempered by reality. Jim Sillars made the case that an independent Scotland could use soft power, over military might, to help the world. Such views shouldn’t be indulged or dismissed needlessly but incorporated into a realistic strategy that sees the world as it is.

To mitigate the brutal realities of nation-state relations requires accepting that there will never be a 100 per cent adherence to what we now call human rights standards. Morality is better understood not as trying to be without sin, but by trying not to be the worst.

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Winston Churchill once remarked that “the human race cannot make progress” without idealism. Hans Morgenthau offers some of the best guidance to bridge the gap between expectation and what an independent Scotland would be capable of. Whatever the party of the day, being a “good global citizen” will be a guiding principle, not a proclamation, and one that we should embrace.

Alastair Stewart is a freelance writer and public affairs consultant. He regularly writes about politics and history with a particular interest in nationalism, and the life of Sir Winston Churchill. Read more from Alastair at www.agjstewart.com and follow him on Twitter @agjstewart

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