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NORTHEAST ASIA

Scotland shows what European regions want from Asia

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IN BRIEF

As the global business epicentre shifts towards East Asia, European regions like Scotland are bolstering their economies by reaching out to Asia for enhanced trade relationships and foreign investment. Harnessing the principle of being a good global citizen is a crucial part of Scotland's approach, which includes development cooperation and a commitment to feminist foreign policy. Scotland may also be attempting to secure international support and legitimacy for its independence ambitions.

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As the epicentre of global business shifts decisively toward East Asia, small sub-national European governments are increasingly drawn to engage more robustly with this dynamic region. Scotland, stressing the importance of its links with Asian partners in its strategic documents, is at the forefront of this movement. The motivations are clear — economic opportunity, ambitions to tackle global problems and strategic positioning.

Attracting foreign investors is a demanding task and regions compete fiercely. Some try to build a network of international offices to attract investment. Scotland has a significant presence, with nine offices worldwide. Belgian Flanders is a European leader, with offices in 70 countries. Smaller and less developed European regions, like Lodzkie province in central Poland, also sometimes establish representative offices in Asian countries, counting on inward investments. These efforts often pay off — foreign investment in Scotland helped to secure more than 8500 jobs in the 2022–23 fiscal year.

European regions diving into East Asian markets are also driven by a desire to bolster their local economies through enhanced trade relations. Scotland’s whisky industry is a prime example. Scotch whisky finds six of its ten most important export markets in Asia, including China, India and Singapore. Asian consumers’ growing appetite for premium imported goods presents a significant opportunity for many European regions to meet this demand with their specialised products.

Some regions leverage unique brands to establish a market presence in Asia. The Italian region of Umbria has tried to export its flagship Umbria Jazz Festival to Japan and China and attract Asian Christians to visit pilgrimage sites like Assisi. The pandemic wreaked havoc on global travel, but regions are eager to rebuild these links. In Scotland the number of Chinese visitors plummeted by 65 per cent in 2023 compared to pre-pandemic levels, making the revival of tourism a priority for economic recovery.

Asian students are also crucial for the financial stability of many European universities. In Scotland, Chinese students constitute 20 per cent of total tuition income. Such an overreliance on one country poses risks, driving regions to seek a more balanced intake of international students. With a young and growing population, other Asian countries, such as India, are natural reservoirs of students.

Scottish global engagements exemplify paradiplomacy driven by the principle of being a good global citizen. Over 70 European regions, besides promoting their interests abroad and facilitating business opportunities, are also engaged in development cooperation. The Scottish government stresses that delivering aid instils a national identity based on ‘Scottish values’, defined as humanity, tolerance, compassion and progressiveness. The region wants to take responsibility for taking part in global action to tackle poverty and climate change and promote prosperity.

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progress towards gender equality in foreign policy.

Making a constructive contribution to addressing global challenges is also an opportunity to build a positive image of the region, sell expertise and build relations with the diaspora. With about 40 million people living abroad and claiming Scottish ancestry, the region has great potential to foster more profound and meaningful relationships with foreign counterparts, including those in the Asia Pacific.

Beyond these tangible benefits, European regions are motivated by the broader strategic implications of engaging with Asia. Establishing a presence in this pivotal region helps regions position themselves as global players, influence international policy and assert their identity on the world stage.

In the case of Scotland, it also serves as proto-diplomacy as it seeks international support for its independence ambitions. The Scottish government [policy paper](#) ‘Building a New Scotland: An independent Scotland’s Place in the World’, published in March 2024, highlights the vital role of Asian partners. Similar to other small, non-sovereign nations with a strong sense of nationhood, such as Catalonia, Scotland ventures into the international arena to gain legitimacy, build and strengthen national identity and find the resources and support it lacks internally.

As the global economic landscape evolves, European regions must look East to harness opportunities for growth, cultural exchange and strategic positioning. Whether independent or as part of the United Kingdom, Scotland has many good reasons to develop its relations with Asian partners. The resurgence of Asia in world affairs and the global economy is undeniable, and European sub-national authorities are increasingly aware of this.

So far the majority have been [focused on China](#), but political tensions with Beijing and the rising prominence of other Asian nations will likely [broaden their partnership portfolio](#). In an increasingly interconnected world, we can expect even more interactions with Asia, not less.

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