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Implications for United Kingdom nuclear deterrence should the Union fail

POLICY BRIEF

EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY

Rear Admiral John Gower CB OBE

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The European Leadership Network (ELN) is an independent, non-partisan, pan-European network of nearly 300 past, present and future European leaders working to provide practical real-world solutions to political and security challenges.

About the author

Rear Admiral John Gower CB OBE, served, until his retirement in Dec 2014, as Assistant Chief of Defence Staff (Nuclear & Chemical, Biological) in the UK MoD. Previously, he had spent nearly half his 36-year military career at sea in ships and submarines culminating in the sequential command of two globally deployed submarines. He then spent 17 years ashore, mostly in the MoD in London, increasingly specialising in UK nuclear weapon and counter-CBRN policy but also with time in Washington DC as the Assistant Naval Attaché and twice on the staff of the UK Defence Academy. He had a key leadership role in the UK contribution to the international activity between 2011 and 2014 to counter the threat of Syria's CW programme, culminating in the successful removal and destruction of Assad's UN-declared stocks. With very close ties to his US and French counterparts, he represented the UK in senior relevant NATO committees for the last 6 years of his career.

While committed, through experience and analysis, to the currently necessary existence of strategic nuclear deterrence, he advocates broadly for continued actions from the nuclear weapons states to reduce their reliance on these weapons for their broader national security and to seek pragmatic yet innovative ways to make progress on all fronts in pursuit of their obligations under the NPT. To those ends he has been a speaker and contributor in related events across the world most recently in Europe, South and South-East Asia and the US. He has also spoken on nuclear cruise missiles at the United Nations on the invitation of the Swedish and Swiss governments, and more recently to the First Committee on concrete measures on reducing nuclear risk. He writes on these specialist issues and participates in strategic dialogues wherever he feels he can add value. He is a Consulting Member of the [IISS](#) with recent related work in India and Pakistan.

RAAdm Gower is also involved in transatlantic efforts to reduce the rising risks of nuclear conflict through parallel threads of promoting and improving strategic stability including concrete risk reduction, reinvigorating arms control - especially after the loss of the INF Treaty, and through the [Nuclear Cruise Control](#) initiative to constrain, remove and ultimately ban nuclear armed cruise missiles as a first step along a long road.

He was invited in February 2019 to join the [Council on Strategic Risks](#) as a senior adviser. He is active with them in sketching out a strategic framework for reducing nuclear risk, reigniting arms control, and reinvigorating the NPT.

This paper reflects the personal views of the author, and while informed by his service in the Royal Navy and as an official in the UK Government, it does not necessarily represent the views or policy of the UK Government or the UK Ministry of Defence.

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Executive summary

- Since the momentous vote on 23 June 2016 which triggered the long process of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, the spectre of the secession of Scotland from the United Kingdom has been resurrected time and again. The COVID pandemic response has weakened, not strengthened, the ties which bind the Union, and the manner and detail of the final EU exit agreement has further exacerbated the differences between Scotland and England.
- The ballistic-missile submarine base and the bulk of the operational support facilities for the UK's independent nuclear deterrent are based on Scottish soil or in Scottish inland waters and territorial seas. A Scottish secession would therefore generate fundamental operational and fiscal issues for the UK's nuclear deterrent. The changes in UK nuclear policy announced in the 2021 Integrated review have further distanced UK policy from the principles of the Scottish National Party, thereby increasing the risk of secession. This would significantly impact the UK's ability to field a submarine-based deterrent.
- This paper examines the deterrent issues arising from a future secession of Scotland and her likely desire for subsequent independent accession to the EU and NATO. It analyses the options which would then face both the UK and her close allies in NATO.
- President Trump's term saw major changes in the attitude of the United States towards NATO, its relations with Russia, as well as the future of nuclear arms control and reduction. This shift had direct impact on the security of the UK, her close allies, and the North Atlantic alliance, with or without a future seceded Scotland. Trump's departure has not yet lessened the uncertainties which his presidency triggered.
- Bringing these themes together, the paper suggests that a full and frank debate about the impact of Scottish secession on the UK's nuclear deterrent is necessary to avoid significant downstream negative effect on Euro-Atlantic security.
- The paper further charges NATO nations to reaffirm the necessity of the UK nuclear deterrent to Alliance security, as emphasised repeatedly in summit communiqués over the last decade and beyond.
- NATO must also clarify that, should an independent Scotland adopt policies that seriously jeopardise or remove a nuclear deterrent which provides a vital element of Alliance security, this would at the very least present a major obstacle to, and could very well render impossible, NATO membership for a future independent Scotland.

Introduction

Arguably, on the face of it, the exit of the UK from the European Union should not perturb the status of the UK's nuclear deterrent one iota. An acrimonious dispute, however, between successive UK Prime Ministers and Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, about a second referendum for Scottish independence have rumbled on since 2016. This dispute has been put into stark focus by the mission of current Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, to "save the Union", as outlined in his late January 2021 tour of Scotland. At the same time, there is renewed scrutiny on the implications of possible secession for the UK's nuclear deterrent, based in Scotland. This originally formed part of the campaigns at the last independence referendum in 2014. The calls for a second referendum, which petered out after the EU vote in 2016 are once again strident. Whatever the effect of the breakaway Alba party, led by Alex Salmond, its formation on this single issue will maintain their prominence.

The implications of the possible secession were brought into sharper relief by the hardening of NATO stance following Russia's annexation of the Crimea in 2014, the continued

fomenting of instability on NATO's eastern flank, and Russia's conduct throughout the Trump presidency. NATO's position on Russia has hardened year-on-year since Crimea with the security salience of its nuclear deterrence significantly increasing since the rosy optimism of the Strategic Concept of 2010 and the subsequent Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR).

There is a stark difference in opinion between Westminster and Holyrood on the necessity, in the current world security climate, of existential nuclear deterrence. The SNP is implacably and repeatedly against nuclear weapons yet has declared intent to seek NATO membership once independent. The March 2021 announcements in the UK's Integrated Review¹, that the UK will reverse its previous policy of drawing down its nuclear stockpile to 180 warheads by instead setting a new, and higher even than 2010, stockpile ceiling of 260 has widened the gulf between the SNP's and the UK's policies. This paper will not examine the rationale or impacts of this policy *volte face*, except to understand its role in increasing further policy tension and lessening the will of a newly independent Scotland to accommodate the UK's policies.

1. "Global Britain in a competitive age. The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy", UK Govt CP403, March 2021 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/969402/The_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf

The historical happenstance which placed the entirety of the operational infrastructure of the UK's deterrent in Scotland offers a unique opportunity to achieve *force majeure* UK nuclear disarmament through secession. The broader negative consequences of the single-issue (independence) agenda are not well understood by the electorate and most of the UK's political leadership on either side of the border. Similarly, the immediate existential risk to the continued nuclear deterrent from Scottish secession from the UK seem insufficiently understood amongst NATO Allies, but is almost certainly understood in Moscow.

This paper examines the deterrent issues arising from a future secession of Scotland and her likely desire for subsequent independent accession to the EU and NATO, taking into account in particular the UK-French relationship and the influence of the US. It then analyses the options which would face both the remainder of the UK (rUK²) and her close allies in NATO.

Bringing these themes together, the paper suggests that NATO needs to agree its position in advance, and that a full and frank debate is necessary to inform Scottish decision making. This must include clarity on likely consequences for Scotland's desire

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to join NATO as an independent state, and how to avoid significant downstream negative effect on Euro-Atlantic security.

Previous analyses

The issues surrounding the effects of a secession of Scotland upon the safe and effective delivery of UK defence, and particularly nuclear deterrence, have not really been explored in objective detail since 2001, when Professors Malcolm Chalmers and William Walker wrote a book on the subject.³ Apart from occasional think-tank short papers, theirs was the only significant objective contribution to the debate until the General Election of 2010 and its pledge to hold an independence referendum, which spawned a series of (mostly less objective) analyses in 2012 and 2013.

2. rUK was introduced as a shorthand for the remainder of the UK after Scottish secession in “Uncharted Waters” below

3. Malcolm Chalmers & William Walker, *Uncharted Waters: The UK, Nuclear Weapons and the Scottish Question* (Tuckwell Press: East Linton, 2001)

The most relevant of these ranged from the largely objective House of Commons Defence Committee report on the defence implications of Scottish independence⁴ through the largely partisan House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee report on how swiftly “Trident” could be removed from an independent Scotland⁵ to the utterly (and perhaps understandably) partisan Scottish CND report on basing alternatives for the deterrent elsewhere in the UK⁶. The decision by the Cabinet Office to conduct no studies into the implications of a “Yes” vote before the referendum meant there are no equivalent government papers from that period, although both sides of the referendum campaign drew on the points of the reports mentioned above which supported their case and included them in their literature.

A thorough understanding of the underlying issues is assisted by study of these earlier papers.

The enduring rationale for UK continuous at sea deterrence

The UK is a nuclear weapons state. It is a nuclear weapons state because from atomic inception to today successive UK governments of all colours have studied and concluded that the medium to long-term risk to the UK, her allies, and vital interests from adversarial nuclear coercion and attack remain sufficient to maintain the capability (albeit at a lower level than any time since the earliest days). Since before the first Polaris SSBN patrol established Continuous At Sea Deterrence (CASD), the UK has declared the entirety of its nuclear forces to the collective defence of NATO. The importance of this is reflected in NATO’s current (2010) Strategic Concept⁷ and reiterated in each Summit Communique, the latest being from the Brussels Summit in 2018⁸. There are plans to hold the delayed 2020 summit this year with a new POTUS; it seems likely that the communique will be at least as strong on the threats from Russia.

4. House of Commons Defence Committee Sixth Report of Session 2013–14, *The Defence Implications of Possible Scottish Independence*, 27 Sep 13

5. House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee Fourth Report of Session 2012–13, *The Referendum on Separation for Scotland: Terminating Trident—Days or Decades?* 25 Oct 12

6. Scottish CND (John Ainslie), *Trident: Nowhere to Go*, 2nd edition March 13.

7. *Active Engagement, Modern Defence, Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization* adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Lisbon 19-20 Nov 10, http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/pdf/Strat_Concept_web_en.pdf

8. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm 11 Jul 18

At the same time, the UK has also been the most schizophrenic of the nuclear weapons states, both those recognised by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) or the *de facto* nuclear states outside it. Since the inception of the UK's nuclear deterrent capability, in 1952, it has periodically struggled with the existence, nature, and scale of the UK's nuclear deterrent. The latest full review was the Trident Alternatives Review (TAR)⁹, conceived in the Coalition Agreement of May 2010 and completed in July 2013. The TAR remains one of the most significant reviews as, unlike almost all the others, it was led politically by a party whose manifesto was explicitly against the planned so called "like-for-like" replacement of the Vanguard class SSBN.

This continued self-examination in London has been unmatched by any similar angst in Washington or Paris (let alone Moscow or Beijing, or more recently New Delhi, Islamabad, Pyongyang, or Jerusalem). In parallel, a fluctuating cocktail of geopolitics, greater national adherence to the principles of the NPT, waning industrial capabilities, and economics have combined to reduce and concentrate the UK's deterrent to no more than 40 warheads spread among 8 operational missiles on each of three operational

SSBN (out of a force of four). While the announcement in the 2021 Review made no mention of a change in deployed warheads, the increase in the stockpile ceiling and the re-cloaking of the numbers in a shroud of secrecy implies that these are likely to increase in the coming years.

For a host of political, economic, and operational reasons prevalent in the late 1950s and early 1960s, those SSBNs are based at Faslane, on the Gareloch, west of Glasgow. Although the submarines refit in Devonport on the south coast of England, the bulk of their physical operational support as well as their trials and testing ranges are located ashore in Scotland or in Scottish (currently UK) inland waters or territorial seas.

My 2016 paper supporting the need for CASD¹⁰ drew the following conclusions about the necessity of CASD which drove the continuity of the UK government's commitment to it through all these reviews:

- CASD is the strongest indicator today, to ally and potential adversary alike, of the UK's commitment to a credible minimum deterrent and the collective defence of NATO. CASD reduces the risk to the UK and NATO in any nuclear crisis.

9. HM Government Report: Trident Alternatives Review 16 Jul 13 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/212745/20130716_Trident_Alternatives_Study.pdf

10. Gower, *TRIDENT - A Necessary Deterrent*, Warship World Vol 15, No 1, 1 Sep 16

- Shorn of the ability to remove our capability pre-emptively, an adversary is significantly less likely to use weapons in coercion or in anger in the first place. CASD also ensures that our deterrent patrols do not in themselves exacerbate any crisis.
- CASD with SSBN allows the UK to field its deterrence at the minimum level, the lowest level of the P5 nuclear weapons states, because that capability is immune to interdiction, preventing deployment or assured destruction by an adversary.
- CASD also maintains a continual focus on the excellence the nation demands in the safe and secure production, custody, transportation, and deployment of these weapons.

The US and France share the UK's analysis of the continued need for robust strategic nuclear deterrence. France has already replaced its older systems; the US soon will. This consensus amongst three allies who often have differing world views is not group think, nor is it unstoppable military-industrial inertia. The UK's closest Allies face equally challenging economic realities. Decisions to replace components of their nuclear deterrent come at a domestic economic and even political cost. They also recognise, however, that nuclear deterrence is an underpinning component of the unprecedented

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strategic stability which has largely endured since 1945.

CASD is, however, almost wholly reliant upon unfettered access to Scotland, its inland waters and territorial seas. Any change in the status quo will threaten all 4 benefits of CASD outlined above and the UK's most significant contribution to NATO security.

The effect of the UK's EU departure alone

Absent Scottish secession, at first sight the departure of the UK from the EU should have little significant material effect on the UK's overall defence posture, and particularly its independent nuclear deterrent.

While the UK contributed to the slowly expanding elements of EU military activity, it did so through the institutional framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) branch of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The CSDP development remains slightly

contentious should there ever be conflicting requirements from NATO and the EU. For most NATO members, these EU “forces” are essentially elements of NATO capabilities from EU members, which are bolstered by force elements from non-NATO EU members that are badged with an EU force designator (for example the EUNAVFOR, or European Union Naval Force).

While seeing EU activity as “complementary”, the UK strongly advocated the primacy of NATO and the nuclear deterrent, fully declared to NATO, is not part of the CSDP. Crucially, the position of the UK Military Representative to NATO (MILREP) and the UK Military Representative to the EU Military Committee (EUMILREP) were vested in the same senior officer and NATO had the primacy in time allocated.

The EU has no nuclear weapons policy, nor any nuclear deterrent. Given the breadth of political position on nuclear weapons existence and ownership across its member states, it is challenging in the extreme to see any change in this position. Indeed, such an EU umbrella over nuclear forces would almost certainly breach the NPT obligations of its member states, as the NPT effectively forbids transnational nuclear co-operation, except those of the pre-existing arrangements in NATO and the then Warsaw Pact.

After the UK’s departure from the EU, wherever on the hardness scale you considered the final agreement to lie, militarily the UK has joined the US, Canada and the other four European NATO members not in the EU, in participating in NATO-EU meetings but declaring no forces to any EU military co-operation programme. Arguably, since any marginal additional cost driven by EU force attributions, exercises, and staffing has now ceased, the UK might find its ability to maintain the pledged 2% of GDP contribution to NATO very slightly easier to achieve; and in fact, the 2021 Integrated Review announced a contribution of 2.2% (though it was silent for how long this would endure).

Notwithstanding this, the departure of the UK will have broader implications for the deterrent, and indeed the totality of the UK’s integration with NATO, depending on the ultimate effect of the negotiated exit. The complex legal, economic, and existential process of leaving the European Union resembled more a delicate operation to separate conjoined twins than a political process; the risk of severe damage to at least one of the parties was very real. Time will tell whether the current issues are, as the UK Government maintains, “teething troubles”, or the start of a major change in the UK’s economic clout. It is to be hoped that the UK’s former EU partners in NATO will join the UK in managing the inevitable tension between the

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parallel separation of the UK from the EU on the one hand and the agreed need for NATO Allies to join ever more closely with each other in the face of a resurgent and threatening Russia on the other, in addition to increasingly complex transnational threats.

One of NATO’s solution paths for the Russia resurgence has been increasing the security co-operations between NATO HQ and the de-facto capital of the EU; both in Brussels. The UK, conscious of its special security relationship with the US, has always sought to constrain the breadth and depth of NATO-EU co-operation. There is a risk that the departure from the EU could distance the UK from its European NATO allies as a more isolationist Westminster reassesses its priorities, although this will be somewhat balanced by the strength of the UK-French defence Treaties discussed below.

Economically, the future relationship between the UK and the EU is one of the most fraught elements of separation. External trade deals, if achieved, may further weaken the links with former EU partners, either deliberately or as a secondary effect. NATO has strongly indicated that it sees more commonly funded capabilities as its future and a less than sensitively handled exit is likely to disadvantage the UK, its defence industry, and therefore by effect, its nuclear deterrent procurement programmes.

Whatever the future of the UK outside the EU - strong but isolated, weak and isolated, or strong and linked - there will be a significant shift in the relationship with all but 5 of its current NATO Allies. The different possible futures have different potential effects on the UK nuclear deterrent. These effects, whatever they are, will best be managed by a continuing fully unified United Kingdom.

The unintended consequence of referenda

During the months before the referendum on Scottish independence in 2014, the SNP continued its long-established campaign to remove nuclear weapons from Scottish soil and to convert the Faslane Naval Base to solely conventional (and Scottish) defence forces. The relative importance of this in the context of

issues facing the politicians and those eligible to vote waxed and waned in the campaign, but it was evidently not the driving factor for most of the electorate. This was partially because of the position of the coalition government throughout the campaign that it would not examine alternative options for matters reserved for Westminster (including defence and deterrence) on the premise that it might weaken resolve for the Union.

Consequently, no contingency planning was allowed in Whitehall for a secession vote and there was undoubtedly relief in private when the referendum confirmed at least a period of continuity for the Union. It was significant that some officials and senior military officers in several NATO countries and NATO HQ broke silence during the campaign, citing - in rather reserved tones - the difficulties a secession vote would have for the collective security of the Alliance, including its foundation: the contributing national nuclear deterrents of the US, the UK and France. Those interventions, moderated by national disinclination to “interfere”, almost certainly understated the negative effects.

With the Union secure for the foreseeable future, the programme for the replacement of the Vanguard class SSBN proceeded along its approvals route and a Parliamentary vote was anticipated in 2016. The closer nuclear capability programme collaborations with the US (the agreement to co-fund joint activity

to build modular SSBN missile compartments under the Combined Missile Compartment programme) and for the first time with France (announced in the Lancaster House treaty in 2010) gathered momentum with the renewed optimism.

In parallel, the UK lumbered increasingly divisively towards a second referendum promised by the then PM, David Cameron, on membership of the EU. Whitehall’s relative complacency on the result of that referendum meant that the deterrent was even less of a factor in that campaign than the Scottish one. The shock of the referendum result was compounded by the effective resignation of the PM and the Tory leadership fracas which ensued. Despite the immediate and continuing calls from the SNP leader, Nicola Sturgeon, for a new independence vote based on the stark disparity between Scotland and England constituencies on membership of the EU, the issue of the submarine base in Faslane has yet to gain its proper prominence.

The month following the EU vote, the new PM, Theresa May, decided to hold the agreed debate and vote in Parliament on the programme for the Successor SSBN (now named the *Dreadnought* class). On 16 July 2016, in line with every such vote or Government decision since 1952, Parliament voted overwhelmingly to continue the UK’s nuclear deterrent in its current posture through the SSBN replacement programme.

Continuing dissonance regarding the nature of the exit from the EU has increased the tensions between Whitehall and Holyrood and the EU exit deal agreed at the 11th hour late in 2020 has only inflamed them. With different industries and regions suffering vastly inequitable effect from the rushed and increasingly creaky agreement, this is only going to get worse.

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An independent Scotland and NATO

Should the SNP succeed in driving the UK towards a second independence referendum and win, this would add the breakup of the oldest Union in Europe. This remains a very live issue in Westminster and Holyrood, and the complex extraction of the UK from the EU will look simple in comparison to the constitutional, economic, and political maelström which would follow an independence vote.

Indeed, as the Union of the United Kingdom has endured since 1707, it would likely be far more painful and complex. A significant question would centre around how the future security of the two nations would best be sustained. From intelligence gathering, through conventional defence forces and the collective security of the UK as a founding member of NATO, this has been a Westminster collective responsibility. Even the recent broader devolution of powers to Scotland left defence reserved in the UK capital.

In their 2001 book and 2002 paper, Professors Chalmers and Walker examined the repercussions for the UK of Scottish secession, including the residual memberships of international organisations (the UN, the EU, NATO etc). In common with other analyses, they broadly assessed that the remainder of the UK would enjoy continued membership of international treaties and organisations while the newly independent Scotland would need to seek entry as a new nation to them all. They identified the NPT membership status as possibly challenging for both new nations (for the rUK to re-join as an *existing* nuclear weapon state and for Scotland to join as a non-nuclear weapon state - given the location of the rUK's weapons on its soil at transition). For the purposes of this paper, I will solely examine membership of NATO. In 2017 the NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, made it clear that rUK would enjoy continuous NATO membership, but an independent

Scotland would have to seek entry¹¹. Whilst the SNP has flipped its position on NATO membership, support within Scotland for the Alliance has been very high and following the SNP's final volte face on NATO membership near the eve of the 2014 referendum, a re-entry attempt is now considered a given.

As earlier stated, NATO remains an Alliance with its nuclear deterrent at the core of its security strategy and the largely unspoken, until recently, nuclear adversary upon whom that deterrent focussed was Russia. Following the annexation of the Crimea by Russia and its continued fomenting of instability on NATO's eastern flank, NATO rhetoric and physical actions towards Russia have hardened. Both the Warsaw Summit communique in 2016 and the Brussels summit in 2018 used strong language - the hardest language for decades - in condemnation of Russian activities. Following the Warsaw declaration, NATO deployed ground forces to its eastern flank nations (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland) under its Enhanced Forward Presence programme and increased its deterrence rhetoric.

Yet a few short years ago, NATO's collective position on Russia was

more conciliatory and was based on a (clearly erroneous in hindsight) perception that the future could be managed through an improving partnership. In that climate, a reduction in NATO nuclear capacity, however achieved, might perhaps have been met with a more forgiving and certainly less unanimous NATO response. But that is far less likely now.

The SNP's implacably anti-nuclear weapon stance was most recently reaffirmed in their stated intent to sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons if independence is gained¹². Today, for an independent Scotland, joining the nuclear alliance NATO on a political non-nuclear platform would be at best exceedingly difficult. Joining as the country which had either effectively severely destabilised or incapacitated the UK deterrent should be even more challenging. For the foreseeable future, NATO is unlikely to view such a loss with the same potential equanimity it might have done a decade ago.

Even if it managed to swallow the security loss that the cessation of, or major disruption to, the UK nuclear deterrent would represent, it would be slow to forgive that it was by force majeure and unable therefore to

11. Remarks by NATO Secretary General in Faslane, 13 Mar 2017, <https://news.sky.com/story/scotland-will-have-to-reapply-to-nato-if-it-votes-to-leave-uk-10800928>

12. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, "Nicola Sturgeon endorses Scottish Women's Covenant on nuclear weapons", The National, 20 Jan 2019, <https://www.thenational.scot/news/19023428.nicola-sturgeon-endorses-scottish-womens-covenant-nuclear-weapons/> MSP Bill Kidd article for SNP, "Westminster position on nuclear weapons leaves the UK badly out of touch", 21 Jan 2021. <https://www.snp.org/westminster-position-on-nuclear-weapons-leaves-the-uk-badly-out-of-touch/>

extract nuclear security gains from equivalent Russian concessions. The Secretary-General should build on his 2017 warning that Scotland should not assume NATO entry, with a clear message that an anti-nuclear stance with negative effects on the Alliance would likely result in the refusal of an application to join.

It is incumbent upon the Secretary-General to make this abundantly clear to the UK, and Scottish voters in particular, in advance of any future referendum.

Scotland's essential role in CASD: whither the SSBNs?

Should a second referendum be granted, although the Prime Minister is currently adamant it will not, and the Scots reverse their 2014 decision by voting to secede, the existential question of the SSBN base will jump close to the top of the security and political agenda.

The danger is that this question will *not* properly be aired, and the likely political and economic fallout not properly debated *before* such a vote.

This new "Faslane Question" would swiftly overtake the so-called "West

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Lothian Question"¹³ in relevance. There would be two fundamental long-term options for the base: sustain it at Faslane in some sort of lease model or cease operations at Faslane and move the base elsewhere. If the latter was pursued as the longer-term agreed future, then some period of the former would be necessary - unless the UK decided to cease operating the deterrent.

It's important to understand that it isn't just the very visible facilities at the submarine base on the Gareloch at Faslane and the nuclear weapon support and missile embarkation / disembarkation facilities at Coulport on Loch Long which are in question. UK SSBN operations and effectiveness are also sustained by sea ranges and facilities within what would become (under UNCLOS¹⁴) Scottish internal

13. The West Lothian question refers to whether MPs from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, sitting in the House of Commons of the United Kingdom, should be able to vote on matters that affect only England, while MPs from England are unable to vote on matters that have been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly.

waters and territorial seas, including the necessary surfaced and dived passage between the shore bases and the ranges as well as the shore facilities at these and other locations (Loch Goil, Rona, Raasay, Kyle of Loch Alsh, inner waters exercise areas etc.). In addition, maintaining CASD would require uninterrupted and continuously permissioned (without notification) surfaced and dived transit of Scottish internal waters and territorial seas for passage to and from patrol areas in the deeper waters of the North Atlantic open ocean. There would additionally be very real operational issues caused by the departure from Scotland of all other naval units, beyond the scope of this paper, although it is worth noting that should the deterrent continue, the rUK would almost certainly retain sovereign control of all assets needed to support them; assumptions of a pro rata transfer of units to a Scottish marine force are premature.

CASD is also sustained by the routine transport of support stores, spares, personnel, and (in particular) the nuclear warheads between Aldermarston and Burghfield in Berkshire and Coulport. These routine activities would need to be satisfactorily managed and licensed across a new rUK/Scottish - or ultimately perhaps an rUK/EU - border without risk to the independence and credibility of the deterrent.

It is impossible at this range to gauge the viability or sustainability of any such currently hypothetical agreement both internally, between an independent Scotland and the rUK, and internationally in the face of the issues. Yet it is not necessary to understand the detail to recognise that it would be complex and expensive. The emerging chaos of the UK-EU split shows just how hard it is to predict, but how a general prediction of chaotic and costly is more likely to be right.

As the relatively partisan House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee report of 2012¹⁵ identified, *if the defence, security, NATO and other international relationship implications were conveniently set aside*, it could perhaps be practical to devise a swift timetable where the SSBN and their warheads were removed from Scottish bases and facilities in a matter of months from a decision by a newly independent Scottish government. More practically, however, a lengthy transition would be required with all the attendant costs and complexities alluded to above.

If the agreement included provision to maintain CASD, then the lease on Faslane and associated facilities would need to be in place for some years while alternative locations were scoped, permissions achieved, and the

14. United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea

15. House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee Fourth Report of Session 2012–13, *The Referendum on Separation for Scotland: Terminating Trident—Days or Decades?* 25 Oct 12

necessary construction completed. It is impossible to overestimate the raft of practical, political, and fiscal challenges in such a parallel project and base transfer, especially as it would be conducted while dealing with the aftermath of the extraction of the UK from the EU, sustaining the challenging acquisition programme for the next class of SSBN, and managing the stewardship of the nuclear weapons stockpile through UK capability activity and the UK-FR Treaty covered above.

It is questionable whether there are even sufficient qualified and experienced people in existence to conduct these activities concurrently. In addition, the MoD, and the Royal Navy in particular, has worked hard to make the case to its people of the advantages of a single submarine base in Scotland, with all the investment to sustain its personnel there. To start again in an (as yet undecided) location, which would almost certainly be remotely situated, would add further recruitment and retention challenge during the transition between classes of SSBN. Such a transition has historically been sufficiently demanding in itself.

The documents referenced at the start of this paper examine alternative locations in the UK as well as the possibilities of temporary or permanent basing in nuclear allies' bases (for example Île Longue in France or King's Bay in Georgia). These studies are highly speculative and driven (in

most) by the predetermined starting position of the author(s). In summary, there appears to be no natural "go-to" location which would duplicate economically, easily, and swiftly the natural and operational advantages which drove the choice of Faslane in the 1960s. The English alternatives to Faslane which existed then are more challenging in the increasingly congested land of the 21st century. As for the sole surviving Welsh option from the 1960s studies, Milford Haven, apart from the congestion of the developed oil terminals it would be a bold government which would extricate - at great expense - its SSBN operations from one devolved (and now independent) country and relocate it in a second similarly devolved element of the UK.

One cannot rule out the rUK Government using sweeping statutory powers to force planning approval of a replacement base. It has done so for far less nationally important projects such as HS2, a mere railway line. It would, however, perhaps be seen to be politically "courageous" to do so with ballistic missile nuclear submarines and nuclear weapons, particularly for a government which had just failed to maintain the Union. It is therefore a reasonable assumption that achievement of the necessary planning permissions would be testing or impossible.

There appear to be no *prima facie* absolute blocks to an overseas basing of UK SSBN although the concept is

insufficiently studied by experts. This would, however, be virgin territory for the IAEA, the relevant national regulation and licensing authorities, as well as the provisions of the NPT. Even if all of these could be satisfactorily negotiated, basing it in a foreign state would at best complicate the principle of maintaining deterrence credibility through continued unfettered national independence of deployment, operations, and - in extremis - employment of the SSBN and its weapon system¹⁶.

The importance of UK-French defence and nuclear cooperation

After decades of relative ambivalence post-Suez, including France's unique "onelegin,onelegout" relationship with NATO¹⁷, the UK and France signalled strongly the 21st century renaissance of a close defence relationship with the two Lancaster House Treaties signed in 2010 and in force by the end of 2011. The first is a general defence cooperation Treaty¹⁸ and, more relevantly perhaps, the second¹⁹

is a detailed Treaty establishing joint facilities on either side of the Channel for stewardship of the two nations' separate and independent nuclear warhead stockpiles.

While both Treaties (amongst countless other statutes and treaties) will require amendment to consider the UK's EU exit, they brought clarity of language for the first-time outside NATO documents on the intertwining of the threats to both countries' vital interests, the defence against which was underpinned in both nations by their independent nuclear deterrents:

"Bearing in mind that they do not see situations arising in which the vital interests of either Party could be threatened without the vital interests of the other also being threatened."

This joint commitment, prominently referred to in the recent UK Integrated Review, reflected and strengthened the recurrent language in NATO communiques on the fundamental position of the UK and French nuclear deterrent in the support of NATO collective defence and deterrence, including the latest from Brussels in July 2018 (my emphasis):

16. It is probable these last two paragraphs contain some elements of understatement.

17. <http://www.rpfrance-otan.org/France-and-NATO>

18. *Treaty between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the French Republic for Defence and Security Co-operation*, 2 Nov 10, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/238153/8174.pdf

19. *Treaty between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the French Republic relating to Joint Radiographic/Hydrodynamics Facilities*, 2 Nov 10, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/238226/8289.pdf

*"Allies' goal is to continue to bolster deterrence as a core element of our collective defence and to contribute to the indivisible security of the Alliance. Following changes in the security environment, NATO has taken steps to ensure its nuclear deterrent capabilities remain safe, secure, and effective. As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance. The strategic forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States, are the supreme guarantee of the security of Allies. **The independent strategic nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France have a deterrent role of their own and contribute significantly to the overall security of the Alliance.** These Allies' separate centres of decision-making contribute to deterrence by complicating the calculations of potential adversaries."*²⁰

France has expended considerably more national treasure than the UK in developing and maintaining its nuclear deterrent over nearly six decades because it chose to do so independently of the US. For some years now, France has eyed an increasing relationship with the US as a means of defraying future expenditure. As there are those in the UK who cling ridiculously to ancient enmities, there will undoubtedly be some in France for whom any degradation of the

"...there can be confidence that the shared goals expressed in the Lancaster House treaties ensure that France would not exploit any UK weakness from a prospective Scottish secession."

UK deterrent, particularly if it led to a dissipation or even a breakdown in the enduring nuclear relationship between the UK and the US, would be an opportunity.

Notwithstanding this risk, there can be confidence that the shared goals expressed in the Lancaster House treaties ensure that France would not exploit any UK weakness from a prospective Scottish secession. Moreover, France may well form part of an effort to ensure that Scottish decision-makers fully understand the post-secession security realities in advance of any future independence vote.

20. Brussels Summit Communiqué, Brussels 11 Jul 18

The Trump complication lives on

The turbulent term of the 45th President of the United States, Donald Trump, did little to combat the profound unease felt throughout NATO capitals at his campaign comments regarding the utility - or even relevance - of NATO to US national security. While some of his Secretaries of Defense, and to a lesser extent his Vice President, moderated the language of irrelevance, the clear predilection of the last President to view the Alliance predominantly in fiscal transactional terms threatened Alliance cohesion and delighted Vladimir Putin in equal measure.

Pragmatists on both sides of the Atlantic are confident that this rhetorical activity will not have harmed the Alliance in the long term, but when examined in the context of the future of the UK deterrent and broader deterrence, elements of the Trump effect remain disturbing. The mantra of "America First", even shorn of its historically fascist-leaning connotations, had potential implications for the concepts of collective defence and extended deterrence that underpin NATO and linger on after his departure. In addition, the repeatedly reputed links and affinity between the Trump administration and that of Putin worried NATO allies privately and in public.

While the risks are undoubtedly receding with President Biden, they have not gone away. There is a higher-than-average chance that this will be a 4-year pause in a longer-term trend of US isolationism, unless there is more healing in that fractured Union than currently seems possible. Trump broke clean away from the continuity given by Presidents from either Party in their full-throated support of NATO. It is more likely than not that a successor Republican president would do likewise. The long-term outlook for US-NATO unity therefore remains fragile.

Taken against this complicated and strained backdrop, any perturbation in the UK nuclear deterrent would further imperil European and NATO security.

Economic implications

There are as many predictions on the resultant UK economic situation after the departure from the EU as there are commentators on the unfolding geopolitical drama. The focus here is on the funding of the UK nuclear deterrent.

The economics of the deterrent have been a recurring theme in each review to which I earlier referred. Indeed, while many of the reviews were initiated also for broader national and geopolitical reasons, some of them may not have been required had the

cost of the deterrent and its perceived effect upon the broader defence spend not been a driver.

A weaker transition or post-EU exit economy would increase the pressure on all spending, including defence and thus the deterrent. The economic challenges will be compounded by the fiscal hangover from COVID-19 economic support and the ongoing issues of post-pandemic recovery. Any additional costs incurred by a subsequent secession of Scotland, and if they include some sort of permanent or transition lease deal on the Faslane estate they are unlikely to be insignificant, would add to these pressures and could be a significant challenge to the future surety of the UK deterrent.

Conclusions

So, what **will** happen and what should interested parties be doing in the meantime? With the fall-out from the UK's actual departure from the EU still unfolding it is frankly far too early to tell.

The UK departure from the EU is a factor in the continuity of NATO Alliance security for three main reasons argued above:

- the potential changes in the UK's relationships with its former EU (and continuing NATO) partners;

- changes in the economy of the UK as a result;
- the nature of the resolution of the Scottish question.

The current UK Prime Minister has stood firm against Holyrood's calls for a second bite at the independence cherry, but his COVID performance and his general demeanour towards Scotland in the first 18 months of his premiership did little to improve relations with the second largest partner in the Union.

Should the Union fail, undoubtedly this would be the worst case for the assured continuance of the UK nuclear deterrent. Therefore, of the three reasons above, the Scottish question looms the largest and while it is entirely possible to envisage a continuance of the deterrent after a Scottish secession, the political, structural, and economic challenges are immense. These challenges would be in addition to the existing challenges of the new *Dreadnought* class SSBN procurement and entry into service.

With the current understandable lack of contingency planning to flesh out the detail, it would be a bold commentator who considered that these additional challenges would not prove to be the weightiest straw laid on the back of the UK government's commitment to nuclear deterrence since 1952, and submarine-based deterrence since 1968.

Scottish secession, the call for which has been amplified by the past pressures of the EU exit negotiations and exacerbated by both the initial evidence of the EU departure and the COVID pandemic responses on either side of the border, poses a clear risk to the UK deterrent.

NATO member nations need to recognise this significant risk to NATO's established nuclear posture at an agreed and repeatedly declared time of increasing risk from an unpredictable and hostile Russia. These nations need to make it utterly clear where NATO would stand on prospective Scottish independent NATO membership should the deterrent have failed as a result of secession. All these factors have significantly altered from even so recently as the 2014 run-up to the first Scottish independence referendum.

Given that the UK-FR defence relationship, massively enhanced by the 2010 Treaty, could further increase in significance after the UK's EU departure, French diplomatic activity and France's ability to see the wider picture of strategic stability is particularly important. France would have to balance her natural, and from founding principles, EU-centric political and economic viewpoint with a more NATO-centric security viewpoint.

“The Scottish people, its parliament, and the wider UK must be in no doubt about the potential effect [of secession] on the UK deterrent and thus the consequences to the security of the NATO alliance and broader European security.”

The UK's referenda in 2014 and 2016 were conducted in what can most generously be described as a swirling fog of doubt about the effects of the choice on each of the ballot papers. The UK will grapple with the consequences of this as it affected the EU referendum for probably the next decade and likely beyond; we are already seeing the reality begin to diverge hugely from the optimistic rhetoric of the ardent “Leave” supporters.

Should the First Minister succeed in triggering a second independence referendum, the Scottish people, its parliament, and the wider UK must be in no doubt about the potential effect on the UK deterrent and thus - in the worse cases - the consequences to the security of the NATO alliance and broader European security. This begs the question of how our allies would therefore react to the separating parts of the Union.

The need for this clarity from NATO was underlined in a late-2020 interview in the Scottish newspaper, the Herald, with Sir David Omand, a Scot and the former head of GCHQ²¹:

The SNP's policy on Trident, Omand said, 'makes NATO membership problematic'. He suggested one way of resolving the dilemma would be 'a long lease on Faslane and Coulport [by England from Scotland] and you swallow your non-nuclear instincts ... I have no answers to any of these problems, all I can point out is that it's difficult and it's expensive and I think I and my fellow Scots deserve to have the proposition fairly set out before any talk of a further referendum. 'There's a risk of falling into magical thinking as you can't actually say how any of this would be done – you're just kind of assuming that somehow it will be.'

America, must ensure that the debate about Scotland's future status accurately reflects the potential repercussions on the future security and foreign relationships of an independent nation north of the border.

It is incumbent upon these allies, through the Secretary-General, to make clear that they hold to what they have declared as essential for Alliance security in successive summit statements over the past decade, and to make it equally clear that a referendum decision that imperilled the continuity of the UK nuclear deterrent would not come without significant censure and subsequent negative impact, including blocking an independent Scotland's application for NATO membership.

The time for making that crystal clear is well before any such referendum. Indeed, unlike the case in 2014, first it should influence with proper significance any decision to allow one.

Bottom line

Many Scottish voters may see the departure of nuclear weapons from an independent Scotland as a cosy feel-good risk-free by-product of independence without being aware of the repercussions for Scotland, the rest of the UK, and the wider NATO alliance. Allies, both in Europe and North

21. "Indy Scotland can't dump Trident and join NATO, warns ex-British spy chief", the Herald, 8 Nov 2020, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/18855540.indy-scotland-cant-dump-trident-join-nato-warns-british-spy-chief>



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