

Discussion meeting: Trident after the Scottish referendum

20 October 2014, University College London

Professor Malcolm Chalmers (RUSI)

Professor Chalmers reflected on the aftermath of the referendum. The smaller than expected (but significant) majority for the 'no' campaign means there is not yet a settled devolution agreement between Scotland and the rest of the UK. The referendum has raised the 'English question' and led to an increase in SNP membership. Together with the question of the UK and the EU, these two issues have created a dual existential crisis which will dominate UK politics for some time to come. On the nuclear question, – the UK government's dilemma is that, given the uncertainty about where things will be in 10-20 years' time, it would be wise to have some contingency plans for possible Trident relocation. But looking at options for relocation is the last thing the government can admit to doing, having won the referendum. The last thing the UK government will want to do is to raise the possibility of a 'plan B' if a 'yes' vote occurred in a future referendum, so the government will have to continue carrying that risk.

One thing that would exacerbate the chances of separation would be if the UK government acted as if separation were going to happen. The private sector and the banking sector may start disinvesting if there is a possibility of a second vote, but this is a difficulty for the public sector and defence planners.

The broader picture of the nuclear order (or disorder) has changed quite a lot since 2011 when the SNP was elected. Before that, Margaret Beckett's speech, Gordon Brown's position and Obama's Prague speech and progress on the NPT agenda of multilateral disarmament suggested some progress on disarmament, which is not the case now. This was in the context of possible reciprocation from Russia, but there was not any interest on their part and the situation has got worse. The Russians have deployed their nuclear card in a rather overt way in Ukraine and Crimea.

It has become clear that Russia, like other states which see themselves as weak in conventional forces, rely on the crutch of nuclear weapons as a way of compensating. The model that suggests multi-lateral disarmament can proceed quite rapidly even in the absence of conflict resolution between states relies on the assumption that countries are only retaining nuclear weapons because others have them. But some nuclear armed states including Russia, Pakistan and North Korea have nuclear weapons in part to deter regime change or conventional interventions such as those seen in relation to Serbia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. The UK was quite forward leaning on multilateral nuclear disarmament but it cannot make progress in multilateral disarmament without Russia, because of the sheer size of its (and the US's) arsenal. Unlike other nuclear weapons states, the UK is not in a competitive nuclear relationship with any other nuclear weapons state.

Thinking about the circumstances in which the UK would give up its nuclear weapons – what would be the reason and how would other countries perceive that reason?

Scenarios: The UK could be forced to give up nuclear weapons because of Scottish devolution – temporarily or permanently. A common view in Whitehall is that this would be rubbing salt in the wound of unionist humiliation. Could it also be too great a cost and therefore a reflection of economic decline? The least likely scenario is the voluntary act (separate from Scottish separation) of giving up of nuclear weapons as too great a breach of humanitarian law. This would need a radical change in the UK's doctrine and a change in the international environment in which UK is situated, and that is not happening in the near term. Multilateral disarmament should be a UK policy objective – but for the world, not just the UK.

Scotland's position would be more akin to that of Denmark. Absent separation, the UK has sovereignty over its foreign policy and defence. There may be nuclear protest movements in Scotland, but if they are linked to independence, they would make it harder for the UK to make concessions.