

Discussion meeting: Trident after the Scottish referendum

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Trident's future after the Scottish referendum raises a number of questions that have no straightforward answers. It is clear that the referendum did not mark an end to Scottish efforts to achieve independence. At the same time, the constitutional and other turmoil in the UK begs many questions about the future of the Trident project.

The Trident replacement decision in 2007 lacked legitimacy in Scotland. It was legal in that it was endorsed by the UK parliament which had sovereign authority on this issue. Scottish MPs were involved in the decision, although the majority of them voted against. But it was all happening down in London – no attempt was made by government ministers or officials to go to Scotland to persuade the Scottish people of the decision's legitimacy. The Defence Select Committee also refused to include the Scottish issue in their enquiry on Trident. In June 2007 the Scottish Parliament voted against Trident replacement, exercising its right to debate reserved issues.

Although removing Trident has long been the goal of the Scottish National Party, the issue did not play a major role in the referendum on either side of the independence debate. Both shied away from it: the Scottish the government spoke of removal but struggled with the unpredictability of how soon could Trident be removed and how, what its impact would be on NATO etc. The UK government on the other hand was happy for the issue to be buried as they did not know what to do about rebasing. There was a great reluctance in MOD to discuss the matter at all. The Better Together campaign did not press the issue though MOD was taking seriously the issue of future removal of Scottish bases, as was the US.

Since the referendum there has been little discussion of the issue. It forms no part of Lord Smith's devolution proposals, which exclude defence and foreign policy. Trident is unlikely to be a major issue in the May 2015 election as the Main Gate decision is not due until 2016.

For the future, a state of 'neverendum' is thought to be quite likely. The Scottish Nationalists have emerged strengthened from the referendum. New SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon is likely to prepare the ground for another referendum or another means of achieving independence which may well happen, barring unforeseen events.

So in thinking about the 2016 Main Gate decision, MOD has to assume that there will be another bid for independence which may be successful in next 10 or 15 years, which might precede the deployment of the new submarines. The Scottish Nationalists are likely to gain more MPs in the next Scottish Parliament and might consider asserting their right to close down the Trident base(s)

in Scotland, possibly quite quickly, using powers already devolved to Scotland (on policing, etc.). Consequently the MOD cannot ignore the issue in future.

In the various versions of devolution – even with ‘devomax’ - the UK government would retain complete authority in defence and foreign policy. Is this plausible politically? Trident’s replacement will likely be the largest defence procurement project in the coming two decades, the bulk of manufacturing happening in England. It would nonetheless absorb Scottish tax revenues. Does the UK government have absolute authority in this area? Inevitably Scotland and the Scottish Parliament will have more presence abroad in foreign policy, if not in defence. There is a political expectation that the 2016 Main Gate decision will come back to the UK Parliament. What would happen if it confirmed the decision but the Scottish Parliament, with more SNP members, rejected it? The authority of the Scottish Parliament will be increased under any new devolution arrangement. The UK Parliament is also expected to give up its current legal right to dissolve the Scottish Parliament.

One consequence of the referendum has been the development of active grassroots movements on many issues in Scotland. Will they regard Trident as marginal or important? If it is thought to be important, it would be harder for Sturgeon and others to keep a lid on this issue. There may be radicalisation in the SNP and less tolerance for pragmatism. How would the Scottish government react to mass protest, for example, from Trident Ploughshares in alliance with other groups?

A further question is whether the Main Gate decision will be made before or after Scottish parliamentary elections in 2016. The SNP might try to make Trident a big issue in this election to embarrass the Scottish Labour Party. It is possible that in 2016 the SLP will distance itself on the Trident issue from Labour at Westminster.

Would the UK government press ahead on the Main Gate regardless of what the Scots say? If so, what would the Scottish Government do about it? In the past Alex Salmond has avoided confrontation, his priority being to demonstrate Scottish government’s competence. In future the Scottish Nationalists will want to consolidate their status and build bridges with the US and other foreign governments. What would be their reaction to a strong protest movement against Trident?

It is not clear how many people in Scotland oppose Trident, or that they are necessarily well informed. The Scottish government has not engaged in international discourses on nuclear weapons, for instance regarding nuclear weapons and humanitarian law. The main focus of the opposition to nuclear weapons has been on moral grounds. There has been very little debate in Scotland about Trident’s strategic value. What if the threat from Russia and China, turmoil in international relations and the weakening of the US created more tension, making nuclear deterrence appear more attractive? What would the Scottish reaction then be?