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Erika Simpson

Western University, simpson@uwo.ca

Bill Kidd

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Brexit vote could allow for nuclear weapons rethink

If the U.K. votes to leave the EU and Scotland ends up separating, it could leave the U.K.'s nuclear-armed subs high and dry.



A Trident submarine heads out from its base in Scotland in August 2007. Britain's nuclear-armed subs are in need of replacement, which could cost 167 billion pounds. *Flickr photograph by JohnED76*

By **BILL KIDD, ERIKA SIMPSON**

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If Britons vote on June 23 in favour of Brexit, it is expected that Scotland will hold another referendum that could lead to its re-establishment as an independent nation. The Scottish National Party (SNP), which supports an independent and non-nuclear Scotland, wants Scotland to be a member of NATO and the European Union but rejects nuclear weapons, including nuclear-armed United Kingdom submarines, all of which are now based in Scotland.

The SNP pledges it will negotiate the removal of the U.K.'s Trident nuclear weapon system from the Faslane naval base, 40 kilometres from Glasgow, Scotland's largest population centre. The U.K.'s four Vanguard nuclear-armed submarines are stationed on the Firth of Clyde, a series of rivers, estuaries, and sea lochs.

A No vote would mean Britain's estimated 167-billion-pound replacement of the four Trident submarines during the next decade could still go ahead, due in part due to Prime Minister David Cameron's majority hold on U.K. politics. But a weak No vote also could mean the U.K.'s commitment to nuclear weapons would need to be rethought. Further, if Scotland votes to remain in the EU whilst the overall U.K. vote is to leave, this may precipitate a second independence referendum over the following three-to-four-year period.

The U.K. government has assumed since 1968 that the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty gives it some kind of right to possess nuclear weapons.

If the British Labour Party, along with an aligned or independent Scotland fulfilled their policies to remove the submarine-based Trident nuclear weapons system from their shared territory, the U.K. would need to find another location for all its sea-based nuclear warheads, since it costs too much to deploy them at sea for months at a time.

This would be difficult—almost as tough as it would be for Vladimir Putin to find another home for Russia's Black Sea fleet stationed in the

Crimean Peninsula. If the U.K. wants to maintain its nuclear-armed submarines, it would need to find another deep-water port, preferably on British turf and not on another colony's territory.

(Canada loans the U.S. navy's nuclear-weapons-capable subs its deep-water torpedo-testing grounds at Nanoose Bay, north of Nanaimo, B.C.)

If the U.K. government does decide to relocate its nuclear subs, cost estimates vary enormously, but could hit billions of pounds.

An independent Britain that is free of the EU and a potentially independent Scotland could follow the example of other NATO states such as Canada, Norway, and Lithuania, which do not allow nuclear weapons on their soil. Furthermore, if more British and Scottish MPs spearheaded initiatives to establish more international treaties to prohibit nuclear weapons, their approach could have a major impact on other NATO members, despite the inclination to erect a new central front in Europe to protect the Baltic states from Russia.

No matter whether Britons vote yes or no to remaining in the EU, their voting patterns could provide an opportunity to rethink approaches to nuclear weapons. The very high costs of replacing the submarines, coupled with the logistical challenges of relocating the weapons, means there is a strong opportunity to reject the nuclear option, should more Westminster political parties adopt such a policy.

For their part, Labour along with representatives of the SNP should prepare to participate actively in the humanitarian initiative on nuclear weapons and support negotiations on an international treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons, even without the participation of the nuclear-armed states. Such a treaty would make the possession of nuclear weapons unambiguously illegal for all, putting them on the same footing as biological and chemical weapons.

In the face of opposition from the Labour Party—and in the wake of Scotland's narrow yes vote—it will remain difficult for the U.K. government to continue its absurd and costly pursuit of renewing the Trident nuclear weapons system against the backdrop of international

negotiations to ban nuclear weapons. The Brexit vote this week could go either way, but it is already pushing Mother England to overcome her Cold War thinking about security by undermining traditional arguments in favour of maintaining these weapons of mass destruction.

Bill Kidd is the member of the Scottish parliament for Glasgow Anniesland and chief whip of the SNP Scottish government. Erika Simpson is the vice president of the Canadian Peace Research Association, a board member and past vice-chair of Pugwash Canada, and an associate professor of international relations in the department of political science at Western University.

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