

Nuclear Guantanamo on the Clyde: The plans to keep Trident on the Clyde in an independent Scotland



Faslane and Coulport

July 2020

Introduction

In this paper I will outline the rationale behind the assumption that the UK is almost certainly already developing a contingency plan to retain Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde and the Royal Naval Armaments Depot Coulport in response to a Yes vote in a future Scottish independence referendum. I will then go on and make some brief remarks around some factors that could influence the negotiating strategies of both governments.

At the heart of such a contingency plan will be an attempt to rent these two facilities from the Scottish Government. Had the first independence referendum been a success such an offer would probably have emerged. In "Scotland's Future" the estimated cost of a future Scottish Defence Force was around £2.5 billion. However, as I will outline below, a consensus is emerging that the cost of such a force will be considerably less than half of that.

Under these circumstances the annual rental offer likely to be put forward by the remaining UK (rUK) will be close to matching the annual budget of the SDF. Such an offer will be perceived as attractive by some in the wider independence movement and possibly by some in the SNP.

If the re-establishment of a sovereign Scottish state is the core aim in the constitution of the SNP, then the removal of nuclear weapons from Scottish soil is in its DNA. SNP CND will work to ensure that the SNP holds firm to this, the central tenet of SNP foreign and defence policy.

The Nuclear Calculus and the Independence Movement

Some suggest that the Scottish Government is not doing enough to plan for Indy Ref II. False or true, it is clear that the Johnson administration Indy Ref II campaign has already started with the Brexit inspired power grab from the Scottish parliament.

Moreover, the Ministry of Defence understands Indy Ref II is an inevitability in the medium if not in the short term. Polling evidence suggests that the chances of Scottish secession from the United Kingdom are considerably greater than in 2014.

Consequently, contingency planning for the breakup of what currently constitutes the British state is entirely rational.

However, viewed from a unionist perspective, to publicly endorse such planning or worse, to admit that such planning is already being overtaken would be politically foolhardy. Such a public admission would lead to the UK losing control of any future Scottish Independence narrative, something it worked hard to control in the run up to September 2014, with its ‘too wee, too poor, too isolated’ narratives.

The United Kingdom, as currently constituted, is one of the five permanent members of the Security Council of the United Nations. Consequently, retention of the so called “independent” so called “deterrent” will loom large in the minds of the military staffs that service the armed forces of the UK generally and the naval staff that services the Royal Navy in particular.

In this paper I will explain why it is almost a certainty that plans are being drawn up to retain Trident on the Clyde, not on a temporary basis, not even for the rest of the operational lifetime of the Vanguard boats, but for the lifetime of the Vanguard class successor, the Dreadnought class too, notwithstanding the advent of the re-emergence of a sovereign Scottish state.

I will also discuss some of the potential negotiating cards that the UK may deploy to retain Trident in Scotland and some of the negotiating cards the provisional Scottish government might deploy to see it removed assuming of course that the removal of Trident remains a key aim of a Provisional Scottish Government.

Contingency planning is a key element, indeed the bread and butter work, of all professional staff officers. In peace time military staffs are involved continually in planning for contingencies of all types whether likely contingencies or even sometimes the very unlikely, though less credible contingencies are overtaken invariably for training purposes. For instance, in the 1920’s the United States Army War College staff course included the “planning” for an invasion of the United States by the British Empire from Canada. Those who have suggested that these plans were “real” are nothing more than conspiracy theorists.

However, any claims that the notion of planning for the retention of Trident on the Clyde in the event of Independence belongs to the realm of conspiracy theory are not credible. This is because such narratives are already starting to emerge amongst some commentators with links to the military. (1)

Moreover planning alternative basing arrangements, whether temporary or permanent has always been a core function of naval planners. The notion that the Royal Navy, does not “do” alternative base contingency planning is, in the literal sense of the word, incredible.

The plans to retain Trident on the Clyde are of course partly technical, but they are profoundly political not just for the UK, but also for the Scottish Independence movement in general and the Scottish National Party in particular.

Therefore, not to discuss the matter now and leave it until later when the UK and its media allies would once again try to frame the Scottish defence narrative would be a mistake. This would apply to, indeed even more so, to those in the Independence movement who thinks a nuclear Scotland is a price worth paying.

Some other again might feel it's better to leave the detailed politics of an independence strategy to the SNP's leadership who after all, on issues non constitutional, have in recent months been very successful . However, SNP CND believe, given the existential nature of the threat nuclear weapons poses, that the contrary should be the case.

Indeed, given the anti-nuclear consensus in the SNP, having a discussion around likely attempts at Trident retention on the Clyde UK would in the view of SNP CND not be seen as particularly controversial. Solid proof of this is the SNP CND inspired motion that was passed unanimously at the SNP Conference in 2018.

SNP CONFERENCE MOTION "ROADMAP TO NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT" (2018)

- *Conference welcomes the continued support for nuclear disarmament and, with the impending inevitability of independence, we need to set out a clear timetable for removal of nuclear weapons from Scottish soil and waters.*
- *Conference believes that we need a practical description of the process and timescale to safely remove nuclear weapons at the very earliest opportunity on Scotland regaining our independence.*
- *Conference therefore agrees that we should develop a credible road map that has at its end point the removal of the Royal Navy's nuclear armed and nuclear powered submarine fleets from Scottish soil and the repurposing of related support bases on Scottish soil.*
- *Conference calls on the Scottish Government to work with the STUC to undertake a diversification study that will set out the positive contribution the skilled workers of Faslane and Coulport can make to the Scottish Defence sector free of nuclear weapons.*

The UK's Trident Retention Options

The armed forces of the rUK could almost certainly easily turn the base at Faslane base and the weapon storage facility at Coulport, into a de facto colonial possession.

However, the political impact of such a move would be significant, not least in the rUK where it would potentially become a hugely destabilising factor in the post Scottish Independence political discourse of England.

Moreover, the international implications would be huge and damaging for the rUK in a whole series of international fora from the United Nations to EU and others. Establishing a Guantanamo on the Clyde would of course make Scottish membership of NATO a non-starter. It would completely blow away any claims that UK foreign policy was rules based.

On a more practical level the requirements to maintain the bases in such a context would be quite extraordinary and of course financially costly indeed in the post Brexit context possibly beyond the means of the rUK.

Moreover, the anti-nuclear movement specifically and the political left of the rUK would be energised by a decision of any rUK Government to force its will on a sovereign Scotland.

We can confidently assume therefore that the rUK would turn to a more familiar and indeed tried and tested strategy to retain the bases using diplomacy. The rUK aim would be to ensure HMNB Clyde and RNAD Coulport merely become new additions to the many overseas military bases that the United Kingdom currently have.

Political progressives in Scotland the UK and elsewhere, for understandable reasons, are not slow to remind us of the extensive network of overseas US bases. However, few realise the extent of UK overseas military basing. That the UK is second only to the USA in that regard, in fact ahead of all of the other permanent members of the Security Council of the United Nations.

Securing an agreement therefore with the Scottish Government would be the obvious way forward for the UK. Moreover, it is by no means an incredible strategy. Hence the need for the Independence movement to consider the matter now rather than later to avoid being bounced into de facto long-term retention on nuclear weapons on the Clyde.

Boiling the Scottish frog

Some may be familiar with the fable of the boiling frog. (3) This would be the strategy overtaken by the UK Government to retain Trident. It would start from a perfectly “reasonable” proposition , that the Vanguard class submarines that carry the Trident missiles could not be expected to “up anchor” and sail away to Devonport, or some such, the morning after the vote after the night before.

This entirely reasonable expectation is one end of a very, very long continuum that has at the other end a decades long lease to host the Vanguard class replacements until well into the second half of the 21st century. In between would be more gradual steps including a short-term lease of Faslane for five years or ten years or more. Bear in mind also that like the Astute class replacements for the Trafalgar class hunter killers the decommissioning of the old Vanguards and replacement with the new Dreadnought boats would be piecemeal as each is built and enters service.

Also note the Dreadnought class is due to enter service in 2028. However, with cost overruns and the financial impact of Brexit far less Covid, that timetable is already slipping. (4)

However, the complications of gradual disengagement from the Clyde is not the only matter to be considered. Arguably of more importance are the incentives that would be offered to establish a British Guantánamo on the Clyde.

What will almost certainly happen is that an offer will be made to pay a rental cost for Faslane that will cover the entire or almost the entire Scottish defence budget of an Independent Scotland.

Put simply, it is now becoming clear that proposals that a future Scottish Defence Force of modest size is no longer incurring the opprobrium, indeed ridicule, that they once did from the British military commentariat. (5)

In the run up to Indy Ref I, the Royal United Service Institute (RUSI), published “A the Blue Bonnets: Defending an Independent Scotland” written by LT Col Stuart Crawford (Ret) and his colleague Richard Marsh. In it the authors presented a quite comprehensive and realistic force structure for Scotland’s armed forces. (6)

However, it fell foul of the constituency interests of the then SNP Westminster Leader Angus Robertson. The Scottish Governments White Paper proposals saw Scotland retain a fast jet capability in his constituency. This produced a financially top-heavy commitment to keeping a minimum of 12 fast jets as part of the Scottish Defence Force SDF, structure. (7)

On the other hand, the Crawford/Marsh proposals suggested the fast jet capability abandoned. A cursory glance at a map will illustrate why. Every time a couple of ageing Russian bombers appear in the North Sea, they have already been “handed on” through Finnish, then Swedish, then Norwegian military air controllers not to mention whatever assets the United States Navy has in the Barents and Norwegian Seas at the time.



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Interestingly although the Royal United Services Institute and indeed Westminster engaged with Crawford and Marsh the Scottish Government did not. This time around it may be different, not least as the constituency calculus of 2021 has changed since 2014.

With the probability of an Indy Ref II, Crawford and Marsh are understandably in the process of updating their proposals for a Scottish Defence Force. (8)

From what they have said so far, they are once again approaching the matter taking account of current perceived threats. However crucially, in terms of the Trident retention calculus, they have managed to reduce their costs still further while maintaining a force level above the basic gendarmerie force level of say the Republic of Ireland.

The Indy Ref I white paper proposal had a defence budget of £2.5 billion a figure that would have had Scotland, in the ratio of GDP to defence spending terms, as a big defence spender. We can be confident, from recent comments of Crawford and Marsh that their updated paper will have a budget considerably well below that.

As I have already indicated there are already calls that rental of Faslane and Coulport to the Royal Navy should be considered. Nuclear multilateralists will argue that ‘we’ have the UK ‘over a barrel’. That we should take the money for a short time, for a longer time and, for others, for as long as the rUK has nuclear weapons.

SNP CND are of the view that the SNP needs to develop a policy, this side of the 2021 election so that when the SNP seek a mandate for an independence referendum that SNP policy makes it clear that the SNP will not negotiate a lease on Faslane and Coulport.

SNP CND will once again seek sponsorship for a motion for the next SNP Annual Conference for the following motion, clearly the discourse around the timescale is crucial, but as democratic political party SNPCND have faith that if such a motion were considered by a properly constituted SNP conference a motion not dissimilar to the draft below would emerge.

Baseline timescale for removing nuclear weapons from Scotland

- Conference notes the public endorsement of the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons by the First Minister of Scotland and leader of the SNP, and support for the ratification of the Treaty by an independent Scotland.
- Consequently, and in line with the provisions of the TPNW, Conference pledges that a Trident removal timescale of 3 years from a Yes vote on Scottish Independence will be included the SNP manifesto for the election to the first sovereign Scottish Parliament.

Some additional comments

As we in the Independence movement generally and in the SNP specifically prepare for Indy Ref II we need to start to tease out what other negotiating cards might be deployed by both sides

Issues that require to be considered include the key issue of the means of and the rationale around Trident removal, some of which have already been touched upon in a previous SNP CND paper (9) and, of absolute criticality, the timescales of Trident removal as outlined in the late John Ainslie’s “Disarming Trident”. (11)

The peer reviewed “Disarming Trident” should be treated as the negotiating baseline for all who wish to see nuclear weapons removed from the Clyde. It spells out in simple language the early command decisions that can be taken. From removing the firing keys and triggers from the submarines to longer term safe disposal of the warheads. Bear in mind that the missiles are already ‘disarmed’ regularly, as a matter of course as part of their ongoing maintenance programme. Almost, if not all the necessary infrastructure is already in place. What essentially is required is to stop the process from being cyclical.

Bill Ramsay July 2020

Sources

(1) UK Defence Journal, August 13th 2019

<https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/leasing-faslane-could-generate-1bn-a-year-for-an-independent-scotland/>

<https://sourcenews.scot/stuart-crawford-and-richard-marsh-defending-an-independent-scotland-post-brexit/>

(3) The premise is that if a frog is put suddenly into boiling water, it will jump out, but if the frog is put in tepid water which is then brought to a boil slowly, it will not perceive the danger and will be cooked to death. The story is often used as a metaphor for the inability or unwillingness of people to react to or be aware of sinister threats that arise gradually rather than suddenly.

(4) National Audit Office, January 10th 2020

(5) House of Commons Defence Committee, “The Defence Implications of Possible Scottish Independence”, Sixth Report of Session 2013–14

(6) “A the Blue Bonnets: Defending an Independent Scotland”, RUSI

(7) “Scotland’s Future”, Chapter 6

(8) “Defending an Independent Scotland post-brexit” - Stuart Crawford and Richard Marsh, RUSI 2012

(9) “A Roadmap for Trident Removal” – SNP CND

(10) “Disarming Trident” - Scottish CND report