



# BULLETIN

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## The Uncertain Future of the British Nuclear Arsenal in the Context of the Scottish Referendum

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*If Scottish pro-independence voters prevail in the upcoming referendum, the United Kingdom must face the problem of the relocation of the British nuclear arsenal from Scotland. Despite numerous obstacles, the UK will most likely strive not only to retain but also to modernize its nuclear forces, especially in light of the growing tensions between NATO and Russia.*

**Consequences of Scottish Independence.** The future of the British nuclear forces is uncertain, as on 18 September Scotland will vote on secession from the United Kingdom. The Scottish National Party (SNP), which currently runs Scotland's autonomous government, has vowed to get rid of the British nuclear arsenal from an independent Scotland by 2020, decrying nuclear weapons as immoral. All of the British nuclear forces, composed of 225 nuclear warheads and four Vanguard-class submarines armed with Trident ballistic missiles, are based at the Clyde military complex, located around 40 kilometres northwest of Glasgow. Clyde is currently the only nuclear base in the United Kingdom, as it retired its nuclear air force in 1998 and the U.S. withdrew its tactical nuclear warheads by 2008. Therefore, if Scotland secedes, the UK government would have to relocate its arsenal and would face significant logistical, political and financial obstacles: the estimated cost of the removal ranges from £3.5 billion to several dozen billion pounds. The biggest problem, however, would be posed by the timeframe of around 10-20 years to prepare new facilities. Thus, the UK would be unable to provide new bases for its nuclear forces before 2020.

Nonetheless, it is very likely that London would manage to secure an agreement that would temporarily extend the stationing of nuclear force in an independent Scotland until it could establish new bases on British soil. Although SNP currently rules out such a deal, the party could possibly change its stance in order to gain concessions regarding such things as retaining the British pound as Scotland's currency or London's consent to Scottish membership in NATO or the EU.

The UK could also potentially omit some of the difficulties related to the relocation of nuclear force to the British Isles by at least temporarily rebasing them to another country, specifically the United States. The Vanguards could station at the naval base in King's Bay, Florida, where they already visit on a regular basis to hand over Trident missiles for maintenance purposes and to load serviced missiles—formally owned by the U.S., while the UK has purchased the rights for the annual use of 58 missiles from the common pool.

Moreover, British nuclear forces rely to a significant extent on equipment and technologies either acquired from the U.S. or co-developed under bilateral efforts started by the 1958 Mutual Defence Agreement. British nuclear warheads are most likely a modified version of the American W-76 warhead. The British reliance on U.S. assistance has caused long-standing concerns over the independence of the UK's deterrence. In turn, London underscores its full operational independence, which lies in command and control over its nuclear forces, especially the British prime minister's exclusive right to launch Trident missiles. But even independence defined as such would drastically lose its credibility if the U.S. gained direct influence on the ability of the UK's nuclear forces to perform current operations. Analogously, there are similar arguments against relocation to France, which has cooperated with London on the maintenance of nuclear warheads since 2010.

**Dilemmas of Modernisation.** The relocation-related problems could also have an impact on the direction of the ongoing debate on the modernisation of UK's nuclear forces. All of the main British political parties—Conservatives (Tory), Labour, and the Liberal Democrats (Lib Dems)—support the plan to replace the aging *Vanguards* starting in 2028. The parties also endorse the intent to cut the size of Britain's nuclear stockpile to no more than 180 warheads by the mid-2020s. There is, however, no consensus on the size of the future fleet of nuclear-armed submarines. The final decision is to be taken in 2016 after the parliamentary elections in 2015.

The Tories and Labour endorse the preservation of the current deterrence posture and the like-for-like replacement of all four submarines—a move that would allow the UK to maintain a fleet of submarines each armed with eight ballistic missiles and around 40 nuclear warheads, available for a quick retaliatory strike against an aggressor, at sea, at any given time. By contrast, the Lib Dems perceive such a concept as a Cold War-era anachronism and emphasize that the UK is no longer under threat of a surprise nuclear strike.

Therefore, the Lib Dems opt for the acquisition of two or three submarines, that would not be on constant patrols and would usually ship out without nuclear warheads on board. Armed submarines would only carry out longer patrols in case of a crisis. The purchase of just three vessels would also allow the UK to save £4 billion from a projected total cost of £100 billion, including the £15-25 billion that would be spent on four submarines as well as the maintenance costs of the entire nuclear arsenal during the new fleet's service life.

The coinciding costs of modernisation and relocation could prompt wider support for the Lib Dem's proposals. It is also possible that further complications around both issues would revive a debate on the merits of keeping a nuclear force at all, especially given that as a NATO member the UK is protected by the nuclear guarantees provided by the U.S., which possesses a much larger nuclear arsenal.

**The Role of British Nuclear Forces.** The potential overlap of the American and British nuclear deterrence has posed a problematic issue for the UK since the country acquired its first nuclear weapons in 1952. The UK has avoided any remarks that would call the credibility of the U.S. guarantees into question, and instead have described the British nuclear arsenal as a reinforcement, rather than an alternative to America's nuclear deterrence capabilities within NATO. The UK's forces have also been assigned roles as part of the common nuclear plans of the Alliance.

The traditional argument describes a scenario in which an aggressor incorrectly doubts that Washington would be willing to retaliate for an attack on a U.S. ally, especially if the enemy were able to respond with a counterstrike on American territory. The British arsenal would, in turn, force an adversary to take into the account the existence of not just one but two decision centres and, in effect, to consider the increased risk of nuclear retaliation from at least one of the Allies. The likelihood of British retaliation would be very high in case of an attack on the UK itself, and much lower with respect to strikes against other allies, but even in the latter case, the enemy's calculation would still be much more complicated than if it faced only one decision centre.

The purposefulness of the UK's sustained nuclear deterrence policy has been increasingly questioned since the end of the Cold War, especially given that the risk of nuclear attack or large-scale conventional warfare has radically decreased. Nevertheless, London underscores the need for protection against potential, future threats. Nuclear proliferation means there is a risk that Iran or North Korea could at some point attack or intimidate Britain, possibly in order to prevent the UK from involvement in regional military interventions. Before the Ukraine crisis, British officials also hinted at uncertainty over the country's future relationship with Russia, which has been modernising its nuclear forces. This argument has gained validity in light of the current tensions between NATO and Moscow.

Although the UK's official argument focuses on its nuclear forces' role in protection of Britain and the NATO Allies, it is also possible that some British politicians perceive their arsenal as an instrument that underscores London's exceptional status within NATO, as well as in the global arena, especially considering that the UK and the other permanent members of the UN Security Council together constitute the sole group of formally recognized nuclear weapon states. Nuclear cooperation also seems to be an important element of the UK's "special relationship" with the United States.

**Conclusions.** Considering the role played by nuclear weapons in British policy, it should be expected that London will strive to retain its arsenal even if Scotland chooses independence. It is possible that various problems would force the British government to relinquish its nuclear weapons, though it seems much more realistic that the UK would manage to induce Scotland to temporarily extend the timeframe for allowing Britain's nuclear forces to remain on its territory. Russia's currently hostile policy towards NATO will most likely increase support for the like-for-like replacement of Britain's submarine fleet. Continuous at-sea deterrence could appear to be a much more adequate option in the opinion of British politicians, since such a posture would prevent difficult dilemmas from occurring in increasingly more probable scenarios. It is conceivable that British decision-makers would hesitate over the resumption of combat patrols during a crisis, due to the fear that such move could be taken by Moscow as an act of escalation.

From Poland's perspective, independent and credible British nuclear forces make a substantial and voluntary contribution to NATO's overall deterrence posture. They limit Moscow's ability to intimidate the Alliance's members or to discourage them from sending troops to a region with potential armed conflict with Russia.