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## Scotland could go nuclear over the retention of Trident

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In its white paper "The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent", the government envisages new Trident submarines being introduced in the late 2020s and operating into the 2050s. Over the same period, it is likely either that Scotland will become an independent state or that the Union will survive through a more extensive devolution of powers to the Scottish parliament. This is a safe prediction given the strength of forces impelling greater political autonomy north and south of the border. Nowhere does the white paper consider these changes and their implications.

They matter because the government's proposals would perpetuate the basing of all British nuclear weapons in Scotland (there are none in England). Tens of billions of pounds could be spent providing a nuclear deterrent for a state that no longer exists, or a deterrent that could become increasingly unreliable and even inoperable under devolution.

The government has made no effort to win hearts and minds in Scotland on this issue. No minister, let alone the prime minister, has ventured north of the border specifically to argue the case for Trident's retention, feeding a perception of imposition. Instead, there has been strict observance of the 1998 Scotland Act, which reserves defence and foreign policy to London, allowing Scottish political institutions no role. The UK is, after all, a union state in which no region has rights to interfere with its sovereign parliament's decisions on defence. Scottish MPs, various ministers among them, also have full rights to express their opinions and cast their votes in Westminster.

Would that it were so simple. Scotland is developing its own political sensibility that shows increasing dis-respect for legal boundaries separating reserved and devolved matters. Furthermore, a decision to replace Trident will carry little legitimacy north of the border if it depends on the Labour Whip and votes cast by a Conservative party with little standing in Scotland.

The Trident debate coincides with the run-up to Scottish elections on May 3. If opinion polls are any guide, the Scottish National party will emerge as the largest party with strong claims to lead a coalition government. The SNP has pledged to call a referendum on independence and to evict Trident and renounce nuclear weapons under international law if it wins. This may or may not be cloud cuckoo land. The party's elite is also aware that Trident's presence in Scotland would be a valuable bargaining chip when seeking international recognition for a Scottish state and negotiating a favourable economic settlement with London. However, opposition to nuclear weapons in Scotland is too

deep-seated, going far beyond the SNP, to allow it to play this game with any finesse. It is also highly questionable whether the Ministry of Defence and the Navy would want to run nuclear-armed submarines out of the Clyde after independence.

Trident's operation out of Scotland is set to become more problematic even under the current devolution settlement. As policing, transport, emergency services and land-use planning are devolved to Scotland, Trident cannot function without the Scottish executive and parliament's full co-operation with the UK government. The more powers that are devolved, the more the MoD must rely on Scottish goodwill. Co-operation is framed by a concordat on defence, a gentlemen's agreement that has worked reasonably well with Labour in office in both Edinburgh and London since 1998. It will be another story when different parties dominate those parliaments, especially if an SNP-led coalition and a Conservative government find themselves cohabiting.

Mr Blair claims, in the white paper's foreword, that "the government's decision followed a careful review of all the issues and options". I beg to differ. If its review had encompassed the Union's prospects, weapon systems that could be located in England (involving missiles launched from aircraft, silos or surface ships) would have been valued more highly, as would the option of abandoning the deterrent.

When the Westminster parliament convenes to debate and vote on the government's proposal, it should understand that the futures of Trident and the Union are now inextricably entwined and that Trident may become a significant agent of the UK's disintegration if more care is not taken. The irony of ironies is that a system designed to guarantee the UK's survival could hasten its political demise.

The writer is professor of international relations at St Andrews University and author with Malcolm Chalmers of *Uncharted Waters: The UK, Nuclear Weapons and the Scottish Question* (Tuckwell Press, 2001)