Nuclear identities and Scottish independence
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ABSTRACT
This article argues that the study of national identity is central to understanding and explaining national and transnational nuclear politics. It argues that the meanings assigned to nuclear weapons are not fixed or self-evident, but are instead changeable and contingent on social and historical context. The article develops this argument by studying how the Scottish National Party has framed UK nuclear weapons in ways very different from those of the major UK political parties. It argues that the SNP has done this by developing and promoting a specific national identity for an independent Scotland in which nuclear weapons have no place. This identity is juxtaposed against that of a “Westminster other” for whom nuclear weapons remain highly valued. The article provides an original constructivist case study of contemporary Scottish-British nuclear politics and the social construction of nuclear identities in the context of the 2014 Scottish-independence referendum and the 2015 general election.

Scotland is home to the United Kingdom’s nuclear weapons, based at Her Majesty’s Naval Base (HMNB) Clyde, west of Glasgow. The Scottish National Party (SNP) and many civil-society organizations in Scotland have long opposed the presence of these weapons and have campaigned for their removal. In 2014, the SNP-led Scottish government held a referendum on Scottish independence. Getting rid of nuclear weapons was an important part of the independence campaign. This article examines how and why that was the case. On its surface, the answer might seem straightforward: the SNP has long opposed nuclear weapons and would use independence as a means of exercising the sovereign right to be non-nuclear-armed. Scratch beneath the surface, though, and a rich and complex picture emerges about the relationship between nuclear weapons and shared conceptions of national identity. Explaining the politics of nuclear weapons requires an understanding of the meanings assigned to them in their social and historical contexts, how these meanings are embedded in shared understandings of national identity, and how these meanings change and develop. The Scottish case adds a novel dimension to the body of theory and case studies exploring these relationships.

The article’s specific argument is that the SNP and the wider independence movement framed nuclear weapons—and, by extension, the SNP itself—in specific ways through linguistic and non-linguistic practices. By wrapping specific meanings about nuclear weapons in the Saltire—the Scottish national flag—the SNP and the independence
movement actively constructed an independent Scottish identity rooted in a center-left political ideology, one that undermined established understandings of the UK arsenal as articulated in Westminster. Significant political work is required both to perpetuate and to challenge established meanings. In the Scottish case, the SNP’s success in embedding its understandings of nuclear weapons within the independence movement was facilitated by the expensive Trident replacement program, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government’s austerity program (in response to the recession that followed the 2007–08 global financial crisis), the effects of the 2003–11 Iraq War on the legitimacy of military intervention, and, relatedly, the collapse of the Conservative (“Tory”) Party and Labour Party vote in Scotland. Internationally, it was facilitated by the normative structure of nuclear abstinence re-energized by the “humanitarian initiative” for nuclear disarmament, which gathered significant momentum before and after the 2010 Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

This article relies upon a constructivist understanding of the social world in general and the politics of nuclear weapons in particular. The constructivist view holds that shared ideas matter profoundly; they shape social and political relations in ways that are not inevitably determined by material considerations. With that in mind, the article proceeds in four steps. First, it sets out the theoretical context of the relationship between shared understandings, nuclear weapons, and identity conceptions. Second, it provides an overview of the rise of the SNP, the independence referendum, and the Trident nuclear-weapon system. Third, it investigates how nuclear weapons were represented through three inter-related practices: the independence campaign that developed and promoted a civic internationalist identity for an independent Scotland; a discourse that sharpened the differences between the Scottish “self” and the Westminster “other,” as defined by the SNP; and growing international antinuclear norms that supported the SNP’s antinuclear position. Fourth, the article examines the SNP’s embrace of NATO, which clashed with the party’s antinuclear position.

**Meanings, identities, and nuclear weapons**

The bedrock of constructivist theory that has become embedded in international relations scholarship over the past twenty years is that international politics is socially constructed; it holds that how and why we act as we do is fundamentally shaped by shared understandings within a society. International politics, especially changes in international politics, cannot be explained just by focusing on the material world. The collective ideas that coalesce into shared identities, norms, and meanings also matter. Of particular importance for the argument presented here is the idea that collective identities define collective interests, including a national interest in developing, retaining, or relinquishing nuclear weapons. From a constructivist perspective, one way to explain the role of nuclear weapons in Scotland is through the particular understandings assigned to them in the context of the independence referendum. That, in turn, means examining competing British and Scottish conceptions of national identity, which assign sharply diverging values to UK nuclear weapons.

Constructivists have been particularly concerned with shared conceptions of the “self” and “others,” the social processes of shared identity formation, how these identities shape understandings of collective interests, and how these understandings legitimize some policy actions and delegitimize others. Alexander Wendt defines identities as contingent
social definitions of an actor that are established, sustained, and changed through social interaction. They provide common understandings of who “we” are and how “we” should act.⁷ He argues that, at a fundamental level, a government or policy elite cannot know what it wants and therefore what its interests are until it defines its identity in relation to others.⁸ We certainly see this phenomenon in relation to Scotland and the SNP’s interest in nuclear renunciation. Jutta Weldes argues that a state must create broad representations (descriptions of situations and definitions of problems) of the international political environment and its place in it, and that states do this by creating representations of the self and others drawing on “a wide array of already available cultural and linguistic resources.”⁹ These representations establish relations among different political objects that legitimize particular actions and interpretations. National interests subsequently emerge “out of the representations of identities and relationships constructed by state officials.”¹⁰ These representations are “socially and historically contingent rather than logically or structurally necessary” and are therefore subject to change.¹¹ We see this, too, in the Scottish case through the SNP’s representations of an independent Scottish self against a Westminster other and the political work put into producing and reproducing its antinuclear disposition. As SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon put it in 2014, “Just think about it—as the world’s newest country, one of the first things an independent Scotland will have the chance to do is rid itself of weapons of mass destruction. I cannot think of any more powerful statement we can make to the world about what kind of country we will be, and what our place in the world will be. With all of the main Westminster parties making it absolutely clear that they intend to make the monumental mistake of renewing Trident, September’s referendum is the only real chance we have of ridding ourselves of nuclear weapons.”¹²

International norms play a vital role in defining state identities, assigning meanings to events and material objects like nuclear weapons, and constituting interests such that upholding or disregarding particular norms defines and validates the state’s reputation as, for example, “civilized” and “responsible,” or, conversely, “rogue.” As Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink argue, “states comply with norms to demonstrate that they have adapted to the social environment—that they ‘belong’.¹³ The image, role, and self-esteem of a state—or, perhaps more accurately, of a state’s elite—are reinforced through norm compliance and associated social approval from the group they belong to or aspire to, such as, for example, a “Western” or a “non-aligned” state identity.¹⁴

A number of scholars have explored the relationship between identity, meanings, and nuclear weapons from an overtly constructivist standpoint. Much of this literature has focused on why states have decided to acquire or renounce nuclear weapons. Jacques E.C. Hymans, for example, argues that the national-identity conceptions of individual state leaders are instrumental in decisions to acquire or forgo nuclear weapons. For Hymans, a shared national identity sets parameters for the development of individual leaders’ personal conceptions of the national identity, based on a continuous social-psychological process of self/other comparison.¹⁵

A number of studies have looked at the case of Ukraine’s post-Soviet denuclearization. Christopher A. Stevens argues that national-identity conceptions determined whether it was in Ukraine’s interest to retain its post-Soviet nuclear arsenal. He contends that the emergence of a widely shared independent Ukrainian national identity that framed Kiev’s relationship with Russia in positive terms was key to the elite’s decision to
relinquish the country’s nuclear inheritance. William Long and Suzette Grillot explore the cases of Ukraine and South Africa and argue that beliefs about what sort of country each was and wanted to be played a major role in the formation of preferences about nuclear weapons. Scott D. Sagan similarly argues that “numerous pro-NPT Ukrainian officials insisted that renunciation of nuclear weapons was now the best route to enhance Ukraine’s international standing” and confirm its new identity as a full and responsible member of the international community. The Ukraine example is particularly instructive in relation to the SNP’s experience with NATO, explored below.

Nina Tannenwald has argued that a “nuclear taboo” emerged in the United States after 1945 that framed the use of nuclear weapons as unacceptable, giving rise to a norm of nuclear non-use that became part of US national identity and interests. Maria Rost Rublee has also engaged extensively with the effects of norms and ideas upon decisions by states not to acquire nuclear weapons. She argues that international normative nuclear structures centered on the NPT have a social effect on states in three ways: through persuasion, whereby states are convinced by conceptions of security that forgo and stigmatize nuclear weapons; through social conformity, whereby fear of social costs and desire for social rewards motivate states to abjure nuclear weapons; and through identification, whereby states forgo nuclear weapons because they identify with highly esteemed others who do the same. Furthermore, she argues that norms operate in three ways: through “linking,” whereby a particular norm is connected to well-established values; through “activation,” in which actors are more likely to adhere to a norm that has been repeatedly emphasized as important over other, perhaps contradictory, norms that have not; and through “consistency,” whereby actors adhere to norms because they already have adhered to it, or similar norms, for some time.

Constructivist thinking also alerts us to the ways in which actors and structures of international society shape one another. The Scottish case illustrates the relationship between international norms and domestic politics. In this case, the existence of an international norm of nuclear abstinence justified the SNP’s vision for a nuclear-weapon-free, independent Scotland, and at the same time, the SNP’s position validated and reinforced that norm, consistent with Rublee’s analysis of the effects of transnational norms on nuclear abstinence. It also highlights the agency of policy elites, and how, through policy speeches, they offer conceptions of national identity that connect particular views of history, traditions, national myths, and institutions to current and future political choices. In this context, policy makers and opinion formers do not passively follow prescribed social scripts, but are actively involved in reshaping particular conceptions of identity and interests. The Scottish case is further complicated by the presence of a second set of international norms embodied by NATO that are supportive of nuclear weapons. As we will see, an SNP-led independent Scotland would seek to join NATO while rejecting nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence, a position that the party’s opponents were swift to ridicule.

**The SNP, the independence referendum, and Trident**

Scotland has enjoyed a popular sense of national identity since the thirteenth century, forged in no small part by the wars of independence against its larger southern neighbor. The current constitutional position of Scotland as part of the United Kingdom is
underpinned by the regal Union of the Crowns of 1603 and the parliamentary Acts of Union of 1707. Under the “New Labour” governments in the 1990s, Westminster’s powers partly devolved to separate administrations in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales, each with different powers and responsibilities, and each with political parties or coalitions different from those in the UK government in London and from each other’s.23

The SNP was formed in 1934 as an amalgamation of the Scottish Party and the National Party of Scotland. It has evolved from a cultural movement into a nationalist center-left social-democratic party that first called for Home Rule and later for full Scottish independence. The political fortunes of the SNP rose markedly in the early 1990s after decades in the doldrums. The Tory vote steadily eroded in Scotland in the 1980s in response to Margaret Thatcher’s brand of free-market neoliberalism and the deeply unpopular “poll tax,” which was implemented first in Scotland. By 1992, the Scottish electorate had rejected the Tories in four consecutive general elections, although the Conservatives returned to power in Westminster on each occasion. Anti-Tory and anti-Westminster sentiment ran high.24

Scottish writer and activist Kevin Williamson recalls the sentiment at the time: “A right-wing government in London, with alien values, was being imposed on Scotland against the will of the Scottish people. The political relationship between Scotland and England would never be the same again. The two countries were drifting apart.” And drift they did, particularly when the Labour Party, under Tony Blair, later moved to the political center, vacating the left for the SNP to fill in Scotland.25 Then, in 1997, Blair’s New Labour won a landslide victory on a platform that promised a referendum on devolution for Scotland. The Scottish electorate voted overwhelmingly in favor. The people of Scotland would now be voting in UK general elections to send MPs (members of parliament) to Westminster and Scottish elections to send MSPs (members of the Scottish Parliament) to the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood, Edinburgh. The first elections to the reinstated Scottish Parliament were held in 1999 and won by Labour led by Donald Dewer, who formed a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, leaving the SNP as the main opposition. The next election in 2003 once again produced a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition. But in 2007, the SNP won an historic, if narrow, single-seat victory over Labour (forty-seven out of 129 seats compared to Labour’s forty-six), with SNP leader Alex Salmond becoming Scotland’s first minister. After failing to negotiate a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, the SNP formed a minority government.

In 2011, the party won a second victory, this time forming a majority government with sixty-nine seats over Labour’s thirty-seven. In October of that year, the SNP formally launched its campaign for independence, pledging a referendum within the five-year term of that parliament. Much wrangling led in October 2012 to the “Edinburgh Agreement” between Salmond and Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron. It paved the way for a vote on independence on September 18, 2014, with a single yes/no question on whether Scotland should leave the United Kingdom. The SNP lost the vote by 44.7 percent to 55.3 percent on an 85 percent turnout. Alex Salmond announced his resignation a few days later, and on November 20, 2014, the Scottish Parliament elected his deputy, Nicola Sturgeon, as first minister. She went on to turn the referendum defeat into a landslide victory in the 2015 UK general election the following May, when the SNP swept away practically all opposition in Scotland. The SNP won fifty-six of Scotland’s fifty-nine Westminster seats, crushing Labour and increasing its presence in the House of Commons by fifty MPs. Over forty years, the SNP moved, as Gerry Hassan observed, “from being a
marginal force often ridiculed, patronised, and caricatured by opponents to a force which is both respected and feared, and which has defined and reshaped Scottish politics, brought the Scottish dimension center stage and forced other political parties to respond on their terms.\textsuperscript{26}

The independence referendum pitted the “Yes Scotland” alliance of the SNP, Scottish Socialist Party, and the Scottish Green Party against the Scottish Labour, Scottish Liberal Democrats, and Scottish Conservative “Better Together” unionist campaign. The campaign focused primarily on economic issues, notably jobs, social welfare, economic and fiscal viability, monetary and currency policy, and energy, but defense and security also loomed large, not least on the issue of Trident. As the eminent Scottish historian Tom Devine writes, the removal of Trident from the Clyde was “the most explicit symbol” of the new order proposed by the SNP.\textsuperscript{27}

The United Kingdom’s\textit{ Vanguard}-class nuclear-armed and nuclear-powered submarine (SSBN) fleet is based at HMNB Clyde, 40 miles west of Glasgow. The base is composed of two areas: the Faslane Naval Base on the Gare Loch, where the\textit{ Vanguards} are homeported, and the Royal Naval Armaments Depot Coulport on Loch Long, where UK nuclear warheads are stored, processed, maintained, and issued for the US-supplied Trident missiles deployed aboard the\textit{ Vanguard} boats. Nuclear weapons have been present at the Clyde base since the late 1960s, when UK\textit{ Resolution}-class SSBNs armed with US Polaris missiles began ocean patrols in June 1968. In the late 1970s, the United Kingdom decided to procure the current\textit{ Vanguard} submarines to replace the aging\textit{ Resolution}-class, to be equipped with US Trident I (C4) missiles, replaced in 1982 with larger and more advanced Trident II (D5) missile. This decision involved a huge works program at Faslane and Coulport to prepare the base for the new submarines, missiles, and warheads. In 2006, the New Labour government made the case for replacing the Trident system, beginning with procuring a new fleet of\textit{ Successor}-class SSBNs. The original estimate of £11–14 billion for four new boats has since escalated to £31 billion plus a £10 billion contingency.\textsuperscript{28}

The SNP is committed to removing Trident from Scotland. If an independent Scotland insisted on the repatriation of nuclear weapons, the consequences for Westminster’s ability to retain a nuclear arsenal would be severe. London would have to build new facilities elsewhere to replicate the functions of Faslane and Coulport, but no other viable sites are currently available in the UK.\textsuperscript{29} Even if a solution could be found that involved relocating residential, commercial, and industrial premises to accommodate new facilities, the costs would be huge, and the work could require about twenty years to complete.\textsuperscript{30} Other solutions floated include an agreement to carve out Faslane and Coulport as a UK base on a long-term lease in an independent Scotland or homeporting UK SSBNs in France at Île Longue (home to France’s\textit{ Triomphant}-class SSBNs) or in the United States at Kings Bay (home to the Atlantic fleet of\textit{ Ohio}-class SSBNs). These alternatives, too, present major challenges.\textsuperscript{31} The SNP flatly ruled out a long-term lease in Scotland and the coalition government in London at the time was dubious.\textsuperscript{32} UK Defence Minister Phillip Dunne rejected the overseas basing option in February 2014, saying, “It would be ridiculous to conceive of storing nuclear warheads not on sovereign UK soil.”\textsuperscript{33} London would therefore be forced to reconsider the value of remaining a nuclear-weapon state given the time and expense involved in replicating Faslane and Coulport south of the border or developing a non-Trident-based nuclear-delivery system and infrastructure, especially with lethargic
public support and a constrained defense budget. Scottish independence could therefore lead to the United Kingdom’s involuntary nuclear disarmament, according to Admiral Lord West, James Arbuthnot (former Conservative chairman of the House of Commons Defence Committee), and others.34

Constituting nuclear weapons through national identity

The stakes of the nuclear question for Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom are therefore very high. I argue that the salience of denuclearization in the pro-independence movement can be explained through the construction of a Scottish national identity by the SNP and the host of grassroots organizations that make up the popular pro-independence movement. Three interrelated issues are at work: 1) the framing of a civic—as opposed to an ethnic—liberal internationalist identity in which the threat of nuclear violence against others could play no part; 2) the construction of an independent Scottish self against a “Westminster,” unionist other; and 3) internalization of the NPT’s international norms of nuclear nonproliferation and progress toward nuclear disarmament.

A civic internationalist identity

The process of constructing national identity involves legitimizing a sense of political community by authoritative social sources such as nationalist parties, churches, unions, and protest and civic groups.35 Geography, ethnicity, religion, race, historical narratives, and myths can all play a part, but articulating a set of national values at the heart of a distinct national culture is central. Construction of a distinct national identity is essential to separatist claims and movements. Consistent with the concepts articulated by Weldes, Alex Salmond, and Nicola Sturgeon, the SNP elaborated the broad parameters of a Scottish national identity by positing a Scottish “self” throughout the independence campaign. This identity is imagined into being but it is not arbitrary: its success is founded upon appeals to authentic, existing sentiments. This project built on a popular attachment to a Scottish over a British identity and a long tradition of defining the Scottish self against a Westminster other.36 This is not to argue that referendum votes were cast simply on the basis of identity, but rather that the SNP and the wider independence movement sought to elaborate a particular vision for an independent Scotland, one that encompassed nuclear renunciation.

The SNP took great care to frame this identity as an inclusive civic nationalism, in contrast to an exclusionary identity based on ethnicity, race, or religion, or overtly “anti-English” nationalism.37 Charles King called this a “novel argument for independence: that the people of Scotland embrace political and social values that set them apart from the inhabitants of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.”38 In a 2007 speech to the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, Salmond insisted that “the re-emergence of Scotland is based on a peaceful, inclusive, civic nationalism—one born of tolerance and respect for all faiths, colors, and creeds and one which will continue to inspire constitutional evolution based on a positive vision of what our nation can be.”39 This contemporary iteration of Scottish identity was associated with the egalitarian politics of the left.40 In fact, Salmond’s “civic nationalism” is remarkably reminiscent of New Labour’s 1997 internationalist social-democratic electoral platform. At the domestic political level,
there is little difference between the SNP’s “vision” for an independent Scotland and Labour’s traditional social-justice agenda that enjoyed popular support in Scotland before a profound disillusionment with Tony Blair and New Labour policies set in.  

It is at the international level that the SNP has crafted a national-identity conception that differentiates an independent Scotland from the Union. Here, it developed a narrative based on a “positive vision” of Scotland as a small but effective internationalist power committed to peace, conflict resolution, and disarmament: a “committed and active participant in the global community,” in the words of the Scottish government’s 2013 white paper on Scottish independence. Salmond called this the “new politics”: “a progressive vision for a modern Scotland—a nation which governs itself wisely and fairly, and is also a good citizen of the world.” It is a vision that frames a future independent Scotland “in the role of mediator, broker, and wise counsel,” a small but influential state committed to multilateral peacekeeping forces under UN auspices and development aid for the world’s poorest. It invokes Norway, Finland, New Zealand, Sweden, and Switzerland as examples of states of comparable size and status that have made a sustained and significant contribution to conflict resolution, peace, reconciliation, and diplomacy.

The SNP framed this vision for foreign and defense policy as different from that practiced by New Labour and the Conservatives, one that rejected expeditionary warfare and military interventionism and could only be realized through independence. It insisted that Scotland have an independent voice in matters of war and peace and rejected continued representation “by a Westminster Government that has based its actions, too often, on different international priorities.” It was legitimated by invoking a “democratic deficit” in foreign and defense policy under the terms of the 1998 Scotland Act, which reserved to Westminster matters considered fundamental to the United Kingdom as a state, including foreign affairs, security, and defense. Two touchstone issues—the unwanted presence of Trident and the 2003 invasion of Iraq—were routinely invoked by the SNP to differentiate an independent SNP-led Scotland from a Westminster-led Scotland by demonstrating what it would do differently when informed by a different national-identity conception.

These two issues underpinned the SNP’s internationalist case for Scottish independence rather than autonomy within the Union. The SNP’s manifesto for the 2007 Scottish Parliament elections, for example, read: “Together we can build a more prosperous nation, a Scotland that is a force for good, a voice for peace in our world. Free to bring Scottish troops home from Iraq. Free to remove nuclear weapons from Scotland’s shores…. These are some of the best reasons for independence and why the SNP trust the people of Scotland to decide on independence in a referendum.” In 2011, Salmond outlined the progress made by the SNP government in Edinburgh, but insisted this was not enough: “even with economic powers Trident nuclear missiles would still be on the River Clyde, we could still be forced to spill blood in illegal wars like Iraq, and Scotland would still be excluded from the Councils of Europe and the world. These things only independence can bring which is why this party will campaign full square for independence in the coming referendum.”

A determination to realize a sovereign right to decide the constitution of armed forces, including nuclear weapons and how to use them or not, became symbolic of the SNP’s case for independence. As SNP MSP Bob Doris argued in 2009, “Some of us just want good old independence for the Scottish people. We want the ability to use our resources, to raise
our own revenues and to decide whether to send our men and women to war and whether to have or reject weapons of mass destruction such as Trident. We just want independence—the natural, honest, dignified position of any self-respecting country." The SNP demanded a democratic right to realize its national-identity conception that was not possible within a Union that reserved decision making to Westminster on issues of war and peace. In Salmond’s words again: “the alliances we may forge, the bonds we make, the interests shared—are ours and ours alone to determine. That is what independence means. … . The age of benign dictat is over. This Parliament is not a lobby group, begging Westminster for what is already ours. This Parliament speaks for the people of Scotland and they shall be heard.”

This narrative of a democratic deficit and the absence of consent has a long history, having also underpinned the political momentum for devolution realized in 1998 on the heels of collapsing Tory support in Scotland.

**A Scottish self against a Westminster other**

The SNP framed this “democratic deficit” in anticolonial terms *vis-à-vis* the English “other,” or, more precisely, a UK other in the guise of “Westminster.” The SNP frequently referred to common bonds with other Celtic nations and communities in Wales, Ireland, and Cornwall, but, as Andrew Mycock argues, rarely portrayed the Union or the United Kingdom in a positive light: “Although the SNP has strongly condemned expressions of anti-Englishness and have de-emphasised explicit references to the English ‘other’, a more subtle post-colonial narrative has emerged whereby the UK state is often represented by the terms ‘Westminster’ or ‘London’.” Tom Gallagher notes a “victim mentality” based on a long struggle against an unequal and oppressive Union that has fostered hostility toward England and Westminster. Indeed, Graeme MacDonald argues that leftist intellectual writing, critique, and political sentiment in Scotland is based on “Scotland’s current unsatisfactory situation as a devolved nation or ‘semi-state’” as well as an “anti-imperialist, internationalist commitment.”

This anticolonial rhetoric is evidenced in statements juxtaposing an SNP national identity against Westminster that portray the SNP as rightfully resisting an “imperial” Westminster elite. The SNP’s Roseanna Cunningham, for example, rebuked the “post-imperial desperation that leaves the United Kingdom Government tied too often to the coat tails of the United States of America. I am more interested in my country playing a positive role in brokering peace for the future than swaggering on the world stage trying to recapture old glories.”

This anticolonial sentiment extends to nuclear weapons and a narrative of the UK-as-Westminster foisting unwanted nuclear weapons on Scotland akin to the manner in which the Thatcher government tested the poll tax in Scotland before introducing it in England and Wales. This narrative took hold again in July 2013, when news leaked that the defense ministry planned on designating Faslane a UK sovereign base area in the event of a “yes” vote for independence. Downing Street quickly disowned the plan as neither credible nor sensible, but it reinforced the SNP’s narrative, which compared the plan to Iraq’s annexation of Kuwait in 1990. Scottish novelist and commentator A.L. Kennedy, writing in the *Guardian*, described the plans as “a gift to the SNP, now denied and passed from hand to hand like a vomiting baby. That the idea was ever floated offers us another reminder of the colonial attitudes so catastrophically embedded
in nuclear policy; a fundamental, fatal dismissal of ‘ordinary’ people … . Scotland can feel that being threatened as if it’s a colony is par for the course. England can feel the post-colonial UK project is unable to shake off a legacy of violence … .” Independence advocates argued that this was part of a broader narrative of Westminster’s imposing undemocratic policies upon Scotland within the Union. They framed an SNP Scotland as “internationalist, progressive, peaceful” compared to “imperial, nuclear, militarist” Westminster. They associated Trident with an imposed, undemocratic, Tory “imperialism” in which New Labour had been complicit; immoral and illegitimate threats of nuclear violence; the pathologies of the US-UK “special relationship” evidenced by Iraq; and an outmoded symbol of a bygone era of “great powers” defined by military assets, at odds with the requirements of an interdependent community of states and societies grappling with global-security challenges. This vision contrasts with the values assigned to UK nuclear weapons in Westminster and by many in the United Kingdom who associate Trident with national strength and prestige; a UK role as a “pivotal” power and “force for good” in global politics; and as a necessary and legitimate means of protection, or an “ultimate insurance” against strategic threats. This anticolonialist framing is a powerful political theme informing the SNP’s conception of an independent Scotland with the democratic right to decide on issues such as Trident and Iraq.

An interesting comparison can be drawn with Kazakhstan’s post-Soviet experience detailed by Aida Abzhaparova, who examines the construction of a post-Soviet national identity in Kazakhstan antithetical to the retention of Soviet nuclear weapons. Here, the “new” identity of Kazakhstan was constructed in binary position to the “old” Soviet identity such that “Kazakhstan is represented as “democratic,” “peace loving,” “non-nuclear” in opposition to the Soviet rule which was “totalitarian,” “cruel,” “aggressive,” and “nuclear.” Becoming non-nuclear became essential to a new post-Soviet national identity. Through a process of “de-Sovietisation,” nuclear weapons were framed as a danger to the material security and identity of Kazakhstan as a newly sovereign state rather than as valuable assets and a guarantor of security. Scotland’s experience within the United Kingdom bears no resemblance to the repression experienced in the Soviet republics or the social and environmental impact of Soviet nuclear testing at Semipalatinsk, as Christopher Whatley notes. Nevertheless, as in the Kazakhstan/Soviet case, the binary opposition of Scotland/Westminster and non-nuclear/nuclear has been an important part of the SNP’s construction of an independent Scotland’s post-Trident identity.

This binary narrative was reinforced during the 2015 UK general-election campaign, when it looked likely that Labour, under Ed Miliband, would win enough seats to form a minority government and establish an informal coalition with the SNP based on an anti-austerity policy agenda. SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon was adamant that Trident was a “red line” for any form of political deal with Labour. She insisted Labour would have to “think again about putting a new generation of Trident nuclear weapons on the River Clyde” if it wanted SNP support for a minority government. “If we deliver a strong team of SNP MPs at the general election, an absolute priority will be getting Trident renewal halted.” The Conservatives and right-wing press vilified the resurgent SNP, branding Sturgeon “the most dangerous woman in Britain.” The Conservatives accused Labour of willing to sell out “national security” by trading Trident for SNP support to get the keys to the prime minister’s office in a “grubby deal.” Defence Secretary Michael Fallon’s personal attack on Miliband, in which he accused the Labour
leader of planning to “stab the country in the back” on Trident as he had his own brother in the 2010 Labour leadership election, equated disarmament with emasculation, duplicity, and weakness.68 Facing these attacks, and despite its deep internal divisions, Labour committed itself to Trident replacement. Miliband rejected even talking to the SNP about possible post-election arrangements.69

This outcome reflected a wider, shared Labour and Conservative narrative of the dangers of independence. Former Labour Defence Secretary and NATO Secretary General George Robertson, for example, claimed that Scottish independence would leave the United Kingdom “a very diminished country whose global position would be open to question . . . . The loudest cheers for the breakup of Britain would be from our adversaries and from our enemies. For the second military power in the West to shatter this year would be cataclysmic in geopolitical terms . . . . The forces of darkness would simply love it,” referring primarily to Russia and the conflict in Ukraine.70 Vice Admiral John McAnally insisted in March 2014 that “our relationship with the United States, our status as a leading military power and even our permanent membership of the UN Security Council would all probably be lost. We would be reduced to two struggling nations on Europe’s periphery.”71 Similar sentiments abounded at the prospect of an informal coalition between the SNP and Labour. For example, Conservative Mayor of London (and potential future leader of the Conservative Party) Boris Johnson declared:

If a Labour-SNP coalition were to junk Trident, Britain would be vulnerable to nuclear blackmail; but it is worse than that. We would suffer a public and visible diminution of global authority; we would be sending a signal that we no longer wished to be taken seriously; that we were perfectly happy to abandon our seat on the UN Security Council to some suit from Brussels; that we were becoming a kind of military capon.72

It was clear to the SNP that they had no place in government at Westminster. Instead, the SNP framed itself as the “real” opposition in the House of Commons, with Sturgeon forming a “progressive alliance” with Plaid Cymru (the Welsh nationalist party) and the Green Party to oppose the Conservatives’ austerity agenda, and to assert a left-wing agenda that included terminating the Trident program and diverting the Trident replacement budget to health and education.73

**International nuclear social structure**

The SNP and the wider independence movement’s commitment to denuclearization is not just explained by pitting an independent Scottish self against a Westminster other, but also by the construction of sovereignty as non-nuclear statehood in an international normative context. First as a party and then as the Scottish government, the SNP has long accepted and internalized an international norm of nuclear nonproliferation and the more contested norm of continuous progress toward nuclear disarmament, as embodied in the NPT.74 For the SNP, sovereignty means embracing and being defined by the established international nuclear normative environment. This is not a case of reluctant conformity, however, because the SNP are among what Rublee calls the “persuaded” within the normative nuclear social structure. She argues that “persuaded” states will “lead the nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament movements. States that choose nuclear forbearance due to internalized convictions can be expected to act on those convictions—that is, to
put effort into having their beliefs realized.” This formula neatly captures the SNP’s
determined antinuclear disposition.

The SNP has consistently opposed not only the siting of nuclear weapons in Scotland
but the UK nuclear arsenal *per se*. As Salmond stated in his 2010 speech to the SNP
spring conference:

> [O]n some things we draw the line. We will never desert the cause of unilateral nuclear dis-
armament. Spending £100 billion we do not have on a weapons system we don’t need, which
takes much needed money from every other budget, is a criminal act. The renewal of Trident
is an obscenity and this party will continue to oppose it tooth and nail.

In stark contrast to the logic of nuclear deterrence supported by successive governments in
London, the SNP is committed to nuclear disarmament. It has long insisted that “[a]n
independent Scotland would be a nuclear free Scotland. The UK’s nuclear submarines
would have to be removed from Scottish waters, encouraging the UK, we hope, to end
its dangerous reliance on an outdated nuclear deterrent.”

The SNP government has undertaken a number of initiatives reflecting its opposition to
nuclear weapons. In April 2008, it established a working group on “Scotland Without
Nuclear Weapons,” chaired by the minister for parliamentary business, Bruce Crawford,
with representatives from across Scottish civil society. The group’s report opposed nuclear
weapons in the context of SNP’s progressive internationalist vision, recommending that an
independent Scotland position advocate for nuclear disarmament in line with “a national
identity as a progressive peace-making state.” In 2010, SNP MSP Bill Kidd put forward a
motion to register Scotland with the United Nations as a single-state nuclear-weapon-free
zone (NWFZ), drawing on the examples of New Zealand, which declared itself nuclear-
free in 1984, and Mongolia, which registered itself as a NWFZ in 1992. In 2012,
Salmond insisted that a nuclear-weapon-free status would be written into a new consti-
tution for an independent Scotland, if it won the referendum. Such a provision appeared
in the draft constitution published in June 2014. The SNP intended to remove Trident by
2020, within the first parliament of an independent Scotland, should it win the new coun-
try’s first general election. Denuclearization appeared repeatedly in the SNP’s largely
aspirational 2013 white paper on “Scotland’s Future.”

The SNP’s antinuclear policy reflects public opinion: a majority of Scots are consistently
in favor of removing Trident from Scotland. Many in the Scottish Labour Party and the
Scottish Liberal Democratic Party, as well as many Greens, share an anti-nuclear-weapon
stance. In June 2007, the new SNP government in Scotland introduced a motion to the
Scottish Parliament against New Labour’s plans for Trident replacement, while acknowl-
edging the decision was the responsibility of Westminster. The motion passed with
seventy-one MSPs in favor, sixteen opposed, and forty-nine abstentions. Only four Scot-
tish Labour MSPs voted against, with the remaining forty-two Labour MSPs abstaining.
Every Conservative MSP voted against the motion.

As the SNP’s Foreign Affairs and Defence Spokesperson Angus Robertson argued
in 2013:

The majority of MPs from Scotland and the majority of Members of the Scottish Parliament
have voted against Trident renewal. The Scottish Government are opposed to Trident, the
Scottish Trades Union Congress is opposed to Trident, the Church of Scotland is opposed,
the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland is opposed, the Episcopal Church of Scotland is
opposed, the Muslim Council of Scotland is opposed, and, most important, the public of Scotland are overwhelmingly opposed to the renewal of Trident. A YouGov poll in 2010 showed 67% opposed, as against only 13%. There was majority opposition among the voters of all four mainstream parties in Scotland, including Conservative voters and Liberal Democrat voters. The Westminster Government are aware of the objections but are ploughing on regardless. Then, at the end, they plan to dump this next generation of weapons of mass destruction on the Clyde. It is an affront to democracy and an obscene waste of money.85

SNP parliamentarians routinely invoke the importance of the NPT and its norm of progress toward nuclear disarmament. For example, in a 2014 debate on Trident in the Scottish Parliament, Cabinet Secretary for Justice Kenny MacAskill said, “[n]uclear weapons present no deterrent to the threats that we face today or to those that we will face tomorrow. It is time for the UK and other nuclear-weapon states to fully embrace the NPT’s principles and to work towards the abolition of nuclear weapons.”86 In 2013, Minster for Transport and Veterans Keith Brown said:

The international community has signalled its commitment to nuclear disarmament through mechanisms such as the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. However, to take the NPT further, we believe that a positive and fitting step would be to place on record our support for the five-point plan on nuclear disarmament of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. That plan calls on all NPT parties, and in particular the nuclear weapon states, to undertake negotiations on effective measures leading to nuclear disarmament.87

This stance has now extended to full support for the humanitarian initiative on nuclear disarmament and the negotiation of a treaty at the UN in 2017 to ban nuclear weapons due to the unacceptable and unmanageable humanitarian and environmental impact of their use.88 In December 2014, MSP Angus Robertson attended the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons—the third such international gathering—which 158 states attended. He subsequently declared:

[I]t is high time the Government stated their support for a new legal instrument prohibiting nuclear weapons that would complement our disarmament commitment under article 6 of the non-proliferation treaty[.] It is time that the Government recognised that the success of past international bans on weapons of mass destruction such as landmines, cluster munitions and chemical and biological weapons must be applied to nuclear weapons.89

Scottish civil-society organizations have routinely “activated”—to use Rublee’s terminology—the norms of nonproliferation and disarmament in ways that have normalized Scottish opposition to Trident and the SNP’s denuclearization policy. Groups such as Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), Faslane Peace Camp, Trident Ploughshares, Scottish churches, and the Scottish Trades Union Congress have long protested the presence of nuclear weapons on the Clyde. Beginning in 2012, these organizations successfully embedded denuclearization into the wider grassroots independence movement. They linked ethical and moral concerns about the use and possession of nuclear weapons to other values that underpinned the independence movement, in particular a social-democratic commitment to social justice in an optimistic “quasi-evangelical mission of liberation.”90 Here, in Rublee’s terms, linking is a process of connecting a norm (denuclearization of Scotland) to well-established values (of the wider independence movement) mobilized by the independence process launched by the SNP after its victory in the 2011 Scottish elections.91
Grassroots independence organizations such as Generation Yes, Women for Independence, the National Collective, Common Weal, and the Radical Independence Campaign, whose views were reflected in magazines such as Bella Caledonia, framed independence as a means to a fairer society through a discourse that “connected national identity politics with social aspirations,” including nuclear disarmament. The Radical Independence Campaign, for example, declared, “Independence will open the door not just to removing Trident from Scotland but also achieving UK nuclear disarmament and giving a major boost to the international disarmament campaigns.” The Scrap Trident coalition tapped into the role of women in the independence movement through a “Bairns not Bombs” campaign that connected nuclear disarmament with women’s rights and gender equality. A detailed survey and analysis of “yes” campaign volunteers by Common Weal revealed five core beliefs across volunteers, including “Independence would allow Scotland to get rid of nuclear weapons.” The SNP was fully engaged with this broader antinuclear movement. First Minister Sturgeon, for example, who joined CND at age sixteen, long before she joined the SNP, addressed a major “Bairns not Bombs” anti-Trident rally in Glasgow in 2015, where she described Trident as “morally obscene” and “economically indefensible,” and participated in a major anti-Trident march in London in February 2016 alongside Green Party MP Caroline Lucas and Welsh National Assembly Member Leanne Wood, the leader of Plaid Cymru. The international normative social structure that delegitimized nuclear weapons underpinned ideas of national identity for many in the independence movement.

**NATO tension**

The SNP framed an independent Scotland as a European, internationalist, and non-nuclear sovereign state based on “independence in Europe.” The party’s decision to commit to the European Community was a major policy change, formalized in 1988. During the independence campaign, this multifaceted identity came into conflict over NATO, highlighting the different and contradictory normative international structures into which an independent Scotland would be socialized.

The SNP’s opposition to nuclear weapons previously extended to NATO as a nuclear alliance committed to nuclear deterrence, and one to which UK nuclear weapons are formally assigned. In 2012, the SNP leadership controversially reversed this position and narrowly passed a motion at its annual conference that an independent Scotland would remain in NATO with certain caveats, including the removal of UK nuclear weapons. SNP leadership had viewed this commitment as crucial to reassuring voters that independence would not mean international isolation. The SNP aligned membership of NATO with its national conception of an independent Scotland as a “responsible” and “civilized” Western European state. It framed NATO as an essential vehicle for the cooperative regional-security relationships upon which defense of an independent Scottish would invariably rely. The policy reversal reflected the political reality that the Scottish people firmly supported an independent Scotland’s remaining in NATO. Salmond expressed this position by declaring that an independent Scotland would remain part of “five unions” (the European Union, NATO, the sterling currency union, the Union of the Crowns, and the social union between British peoples) but leave the “political union” with the United Kingdom.
This was an attempt to reduce the perceived risks associated with independence in voters’ minds.104 Critics derided the SNP’s position as hypocritical, one that professed newfound support for a nuclear-armed alliance while decrying the nuclear weapons on its soil.105 As Conservative MP David Mowat put it in October 2012: “the Scottish National Party decided that an independent Scotland would join NATO, availing itself of the nuclear umbrella. It then voted to evict the UK deterrent from the Clyde. Replicating that facility would cost millions and take many years. Is that a coherent policy or a hypocritical rant?”106 NATO Secretary General Robertson warned that an independent Scotland would have to keep nuclear weapons to remain part of the military alliance.107 In April 2013, a Scottish newspaper reported that senior NATO officials would not allow an independent Scotland to join NATO if it forced the removal of Trident.108 Conservative Minister for the Armed Forces Andrew Robathan said, “I think it incredible that NATO would accept in the alliance a country that would not allow the various weapons used by NATO to be stationed in or pass through it.”109 The SNP countered that the majority of NATO members do not host nuclear weapons and that a number have strong antinuclear histories.110 Given staunch UK opposition, US misgivings about the effect of Scottish independence on the UK nuclear capability, and the requirement of unanimous agreement among the NATO allies to accept new members, the SNP faced a dilemma between NATO membership and denuclearization.111 It faced an odd choice, pursuing the status of a modern, liberal sovereign state constituted in part by an international social structure of norms, shared meanings, and institutions that generally reject nuclear weapons while simultaneously seeking to participate in norms and institutions of regional collective security through NATO that required it to accept the value and legitimacy of nuclear weapons. Here, a comparison with Ukraine’s experience is instructive, in that a post-Soviet non-nuclear identity emerged and was actively encouraged rather than resisted by European states and the United States. As Sagan noted, the normative international social structure into which post-Soviet Ukraine emerged meant that declaring itself a nuclear-weapon state would have placed it in the undesirable company of “pariah” states such as Iraq and North Korea and subjected it to international opprobrium and sanction.112 For Scotland, European isolation could stem from a decision to relinquish nuclear weapons.

This reversal reflects a particular European normative nuclear structure, in which to be an active member of the pre-eminent European collective-security institution, a state must accept and be socialized into the logic of nuclear deterrence and a national-security culture that depends on nuclear weapons, reaffirmed most recently in NATO’s 2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review.113 The alternative would have been to connect a commitment to internationalism and collective security with the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the United Nations, but not NATO, following the examples of Ireland and Austria. But in Scotland, public opinion pointed to seeking membership in NATO, where a normative social structure that legitimizes nuclear weapons clashed with an international normative structure—internalized by the SNP—that delegitimizes nuclear weapons. A number of SNP members and supporters recognized the move toward NATO as a challenge to the core identity of the party, not least through the prospect of long-term retention of nuclear weapons, however reluctant.114 SNP CND argued that the NATO policy
U-turn compromised key principles and would mire Scotland in the internal politics of the alliance.115

Conclusion

In the context of competing national-identity conceptions during the 2014 independence referendum and the 2015 general election, the SNP assigned very different meanings to nuclear weapons than those assigned to them in Westminster. The practices that generate and reproduce these meanings are deeply political; the significance of nuclear weapons is not inherent to them, but is constituted by webs of shared understandings and practices. This political process is both instrumental-rational (in the context of the independence campaign and general election) and social-constitutive (in terms of the representations of the SNP and of an independent Scotland by the SNP and wider independence movement).

The meanings assigned to Trident are produced through representations of Scotland as an internationalist civic power, through representations of Westminster as an “other” to the Scottish “self,” and through representations of Scotland as a prospective NPT non-nuclear-weapon state committed to disarmament. This stance is based on the SNP’s conception of an independent Scotland as a center-left social democracy committed to the European project: a responsible, civilized, contemporary European state with a strong dose of anticolonialism and anti-Toryism. The SNP leadership presented this as a “positive vision” that could only be realized through full independence, in order to overcome an unacceptable democratic deficit in areas of war and peace, as symbolized by Trident and the war in Iraq. But competing identity commitments, shaped by electoral politics, have also led to a normative clash between NATO’s pro-nuclear social structure and a wider international antinuclear social structure.

The meanings assigned to UK nuclear weapons through representations of the national self and other are contingent rather than obvious, inevitable, or static. The Scottish case therefore encourages us to peer beneath the surface of the state to better explain and understand nuclear-weapon policies and practices. Nuclear weapons are routinely presented in the United Kingdom as an essential form of insurance against future strategic threats in a complex and unpredictable world. The contemporary security narrative declares that the first duty of government is to defend the nation and its people.116 In the UK case, this requires nuclear weapons, but for the SNP, the reverse is true: both the material security of Scotland and cementing a particular idea of Scottish national identity require nuclear renunciation. Nuclear weapons are an asset for Westminster, but a liability for the SNP. This polar opposition crystallized in the 2015 general-election debate, when Labour and the Conservatives competed to outdo each other’s patriotic commitment to “national security” and protection of the citizenry through continued deployment of nuclear weapons, while the SNP-led “progressive alliance” denounced Trident as a “useless and immoral” status symbol.117

It can be argued that the SNP deployed the anti-Trident stance instrumentally to differentiate itself from Westminster and bolster the case for its own attainment of power through control of a new sovereign state—an example of political electioneering rather than a representation of deeply held values. In this case, the meanings assigned to
nuclear weapons would not be a function of national-identity conceptions but rather a narrative strategically developed and deployed to differentiate the SNP in the eyes of the electorate and realize the ultimate prize of independent statehood. Foregrounding Trident and disarmament as a high-profile, left-wing issue, some have argued, “conveniently overshadowed” the commonalities between the SNP’s and Labour’s social and economic agendas. But whereas the NATO policy reversal was a largely tactical move to reassure voters, it is unlikely that the SNP’s deep commitment to the timely repatriation of Trident would be subjected to a similar political and economic calculus in a newly independent Scotland. However its origins might be interpreted, the antinuclear stance has become constitutive of the party’s identity and its very conception of an independent Scotland. The SNP is now rhetorically entrapped by its arguments, obliged to abide by them, and has become, in part, constituted by them. Reneging on a central, if not totemic, campaign promise of disarmament would carry considerable political risk, undermine the party’s credibility, and invite a deep internal split.

One thing is certain: should a future, independent Scotland repatriate British nuclear weapons, the effect upon the United Kingdom would be nearly as profound as the loss of Scotland itself, since nuclear weapons are interwoven with UK national identity conceptions, and would be, moreover, difficult to sustain outside of the current basing arrangement. For many in the SNP, this is no doubt the intention: the idea that dissolving the “imperial anachronism” of the United Kingdom and its political, monarchic, military, and economic structures could precipitate a shift in the rump kingdom’s foreign and defense policy and its abandonment of nuclear weapons.

**Notes**

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9. Jutta Weldes, “Constructing National Interests,” *European Journal of International Relations* 2 (1996), p. 281.
10. Ibid., p. 282.
11. Ibid., p. 285.
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23. Scottish National Party, “Choosing Scotland’s Future: A National Conversation,” August 2007, p. 26, <www.gov.scot/Resource/Doc/194791/0052321.pdf>.

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