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Britain's wee nuclear problem

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Publication date: Tuesday 16 September 2014

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Special to QMI Agency

Friday, September 12, 2014

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If Scotland votes Thursday in favour of Scottish independence, yet another small country could soon join the United Nations. The Scottish National Party (SNP), which supports an independent and non-nuclear Scotland, wants Scotland to be a member of NATO and the European Union but rejects nuclear weapons, including nuclear-armed United Kingdom submarines now based in Scotland.

The SNP pledges it will negotiate the removal of the UK's Trident nuclear weapon system from the Faslane naval base, 40 km from Glasgow. The UK's four Vanguard submarines are stationed on the Firth of Clyde, a series of rivers, estuaries and sea lochs.

A Yes vote would mean Britain's 20-billion-pound replacement of the four Trident submarines during the next decade could not go ahead.

It also could mean the UK's commitment to nuclear weapons would need to be rethought.

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

If an independent Scotland fulfills its policy to remove the submarine-based Trident nuclear weapons system from its territory, the UK will need, within four years, to find another stationing location for all its sea-based nuclear warheads,

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since it costs too much to deploy them at sea for months at a time.

This will be a difficult task, almost as tough as it would be for Vladimir Putin to find another home for Russia's Black Sea fleet stationed in the Crimean Peninsula.
If the UK wants to maintain its nuclear-armed submarines, it would need to find another deep-water port, preferably on British turf and not on another colony's territory.
(Canada loans the U.S. Navy its deep-water nuclear torpedo testing grounds at Nanoose Bay, north of Nanaimo, B.C.)

The UK government says other potential locations in England are unacceptable due to their proximity to population centres, although the UK has housed nuclear submarines and loaded nuclear weapons onto them not far from Glasgow since 1969.

If Westminster does decide to relocate the weapons, cost estimates vary enormously.
Some argue building a new base would cost merely 2.5 billion to 3.5 billion pounds ($4.47 billion to $6.26 billion), while others say moving the Tridents will cost closer to 50 billion pounds. Certainly, it would be a lot extra for English and Welsh taxpayers to pay for in the wake of their country's partition and probable economic decline.

Whether an independent Scotland would continue to use the British pound has been a subject of much political debate, with the Scottish government saying it would but the unionist parties threatening to oppose that. People also wonder whether Scotland could play a key role in nuclear disarmament if it became a NATO state.

But if an independent Scotland decided to join the alliance, it could follow the example of other NATO states such as Canada, Norway and Lithuania, which do not allow nuclear weapons on their soil. Furthermore, if an independent Scotland spearheaded initiatives to establish more international treaties to prohibit nuclear weapons, its approach could have a major impact on other NATO members, despite the inclination to erect a new central front in Europe to protect the Baltic states.

Even if not enough Scots vote Yes to win independence, their voting patterns could provide an opportunity for Britons as a whole to rethink their approach to nuclear weapons. The very high costs of replacing the submarines, coupled with the logistical challenges of relocating the weapons, means there is a strong opportunity to reject the nuclear option, should a Westminster political party adopt such a policy.

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

In the face of such opposition from Scotland even in the possible wake of a decided No vote it will remain difficult for the UK government to continue its absurd and costly pursuit of renewing the Trident nuclear weapons system against the backdrop of international negotiations to ban nuclear weapons. Scotland's vote this Thursday could go either way, but it is already sure to push Mother England to overcome her Cold War thinking about security by undermining traditional arguments in favour of maintaining these weapons of mass destruction.

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