## Nuclear identities and Scottish independence[[1]](#endnote-1)

### Introduction

Scotland is home to the UK’s nuclear weapons based at the Faslane Naval Base on the river Clyde, west of Glasgow. The Scottish National Party (SNP) and many civil society organisations in Scotland have long opposed to presence of these weapons and have campaigned for their removal.[[2]](#endnote-2) In 2014 the SNP as the Scottish Government finally found itself in a position to demand 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 surface the answer might seem straight-forward: the SNP has long opposed nuclear weapons and would use independence as a means of exercising a sovereign right to be non-nuclear. Scratch beneath the surface, though, and a rich and complex picture emerges about the relationship between nuclear weapons, the meanings that constitute them, and intersubjective conceptions of national identity. The underlying argument here is that 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 and constitutive of shared understandings of national identity, and how these meanings are reproduced and challenged. The Scottish case adds a novel addition to the body of theory and case study that has explored these relationships.

The article’s specific argument is that the Scottish National Party (SNP) and wider independence movement assigned particular meanings to nuclear weapons in Scotland that constituted those weapons *and* the SNP in specific ways through linguistic and non-linguistic practices. These meanings were wrapped in the Saltire as the SNP and the independence movement actively constructing an independent Scotland’s identity rooted in a centre left political ideology. The article demonstrates how the SNP actively destabilised the meanings assigned to UK nuclear weapons in Westminster, how significant political work was required to both reproduce and challenge those meanings, and the importance of parochial political context to the politics of nuclear weapons. In the Scottish case the successful embedding within the independence movement of particular meanings assigned to nuclear weapons by the SNP and civil society organisations was facilitated domestically by the expensive Trident replacement programme initiated in 2006, the coalition and then the Conservative governments’ austerity programme in response to the 2008 global financial crisis, the impact of the Iraq War on the legitimacy of UK military interventionism, and, relatedly, the collapse of the Conservative and then Labour vote in Scotland. Internationally, it has been facilitated by a normative structure of nuclear abstinence re-activated most recently by the so-called ‘humanitarian initiative’ on nuclear disarmament that has gathered significant political momentum since the 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference.

This perspective speaks to a constructivist epistemology about how we understand the social world in general and the politics of nuclear weapons in particular. With that in mind, the article proceeds in four steps. First, it sets out the theoretical context of the relationship between inter-subjective meanings, nuclear weapons and identity conceptions. Second, it provides an overview of the rise of the SNP, the independence referendum and the Trident nuclear weapons system. Third, it investigates how nuclear weapons were constituted by the SNP through discourses of national identity. Fourth, its examines how Scottish independence and the prospect of nuclear disarmament for the UK brought the SNP into serious tension with a pro-nuclear normative and institutional social structure epitomised by the debate on Scotland’s membership of NATO after independence.

### Meanings, identities and nuclear weapons

An important way of explaining the role of nuclear weapons in Scotland is examining the meanings assigned to them in the context of the independence referendum. That, in turn, means engaging with conceptions of national identity for which social constructivism provides an invaluable set of conceptual tools.[[3]](#endnote-3) It is through this lens that we can ask questions about the divergent values assigned to UK nuclear weapons in Scottish and UK national identity conceptions. The bedrock of constructivist theory that has become embedded in International Relations scholarship over the past 20 is that actions, causes and effects depend on and are constituted by meanings and that meanings are socially constructed. As Wendt puts it, “a fundamental principle of constructivist social theory is that people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them” and that are intersubjectively constituted.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Constructivists have been particularly concerned with intersubjective conceptions of the self and other, the social processes of intersubjective identity formation, how identities shape conceptions of interests, and how these conceptions legitimise some policy actions as appropriate and delegitimise others.[[5]](#endnote-5) Wendt defines identities as contingent social definitions of an actor that are reproduced through social processes and subject to change through social interaction. They are constituted by intersubjective understandings about who ‘we’ are and how ‘we’ should act that are formed through interstate interaction.[[6]](#endnote-6) 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.[[7]](#endnote-7) We certainly see this in relation to Scotland and the SNP’s interest in nuclear renunciation. Weldes argues that identities are established through representation. State actions require it to create broad representations (descriptions of situations and definitions of problems) of the international political environment and the state’s 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”.[[8]](#endnote-8) These representations establish relations among different political objects that legitimise particular actions and interpretations. Interests subsequently emerge “out of the representations of identities and relationships constructed by state officials”.[[9]](#endnote-9) These representations are “socially and historically contingent rather than logically or structurally necessary” and have to be continually reproduced.[[10]](#endnote-10) We see this, too, in the Scottish case through the SNP’s representations of a independent Scottish self against a Westminster other and the political work put into producing and reproducing its anti-nuclear disposition.

International norms play an important role in defining state identities, assigning meanings and constituting interests such that upholding or disregarding particular norms defines and validates what sort of state the state is, for example a ‘civilised’, ‘responsible’, or conversely ‘rogue’ state. As Finnemore and Sikkink argue, “states comply with norms to demonstrate that they have adapted to the social environment – that they ‘belong’.”[[11]](#endnote-11) A state’s image, role, and self-esteem are reinforced through norm compliance and associated social approval from the identity group they belong or aspire to, for example a ‘Western’ state identity or a ‘non-aligned’ state identity.[[12]](#endnote-12) A number of scholars have explored the relationship between identity, meanings and nuclear weapons from a constructivist standpoint. Much of this literature has focussed on why states have decided to acquire or renounce nuclear weapons. Jacques Hymans’ 2006 study, for example, develops a psychological constructivist framework that argues that the national identity conceptions of individual state leaders are instrumental in decisions to acquire or forgo nuclear weapons. He argues that we need to delve below the intersubjective social level of identity conceptions to the level of the individual leaders that make concrete decisions. For him, the intersubjective level sets the parameters for ideational possibility within which leaders’ discrete national identity conceptions develop based on a continuous social psychological process of self-other comparison.[[13]](#endnote-13)

A number of studies have looked at the case of Ukraine’s post-Soviet denuclearisation. Stevens argues that national identity conceptions determined whether it was in Ukraine’s interest to retain its legacy nuclear arsenal. He contends that the emergence of an intersubjective independent Ukrainian national identity that did not negatively identify with Russia was key to elite decisions to relinquish the country’s Soviet nuclear inheritance.[[14]](#endnote-14) Long and 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.[[15]](#endnote-15) 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.[[16]](#endnote-16) The Ukraine example is instructive in relation to the SNP’s experience with NATO explored below.

Tannenwald has argued that a ‘nuclear taboo’ emerged in the United States after 1945 whereby the use of nuclear weapons was framed as unacceptable to the extent that a norm of nuclear non-use came to constitute US identity and interests.[[17]](#endnote-17) Rublee has also engaged extensively with the effect of norms and ideas by focussing on decisions by states not to acquire nuclear weapons. She argues that international normative nuclear structures centred 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 stigmatise nuclear weapons; through social conformity whereby fear of social costs and desire for social rewards motivate states to abjure nuclear weapons; and identification, whereby states forgo nuclear weapons because they identify with highly valued others that do the same.[[18]](#endnote-18) Furthermore, she argues that norms are affective 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 emphasised as important over other, perhaps contradictory, norms that have not; and consistency, whereby actors adhere to norms because they have adhered to it for some time and/or they adhere to similar norms already.

Constructivist theory also alerts us to the co-constitution of agency and structure. In the Scottish case we can see how transnational normative structures of nuclear abstinence play a part in constituting an independent Scotland as envisaged by the SNP, and how the SNP’s anti-nuclearism plays a part in constituting, or reproducing, those transnational normative structures. The former draws on Rublee’s analysis of the social impact of transnational norms on nuclear abstinence. The latter highlights the important of agency, especially that of a policy elite, and how identity representations are often articulated through policy speeches that connect particular views of history, traditions, national myths, and institutions to current and future political choices, as seen below in the case of the SNP.[[19]](#endnote-19) In this context, policy-makers and opinion-formers do not passively follow prescribed social scripts, but are actively involved in shaping and reproducing particular conceptions of identity and interests through practice. What’s interesting in the Scottish case, though, is the presence of a second dichotomous normative structure in the form of a nuclearised NATO. As we will see, an SNP-led independent Scotland would seek to join NATO as a collective security institution whilst rejecting nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence, a policy that was subject to ridicule by supporters of UK nuclear weapons.

### The rise of the SNP

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 neighbour.[[20]](#endnote-20) 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 New Labour the 1990s an important change through the devolution of some of Westminster’s power to three devolved administrations in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Each has different powers and responsibilities and each has had political parties or coalitions in government different from the UK government in London, and from each other.[[21]](#endnote-21)

The Scottish National Party 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 centre-left social democratic party that called for Home Rule and later full Scottish independence. The political fortunes of the SNP rose markedly in the early 1990s after decades in the doldrums. The Tory vote steadily collapsed in Scotland in the 1980s in response to Thatcher’s brand of free-market neo-liberalism and trial of the deeply unpopular Poll Tax in Scotland. With the Conservative victory in the 1992 UK general election the Scottish people had rejected the Tories at four consecutive general elections only to see a Conservative government returned power in Westminster on each occasion. Anti-Tory and anti-Westminster sentiment ran high.[[22]](#endnote-22) 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”.[[23]](#endnote-23) Drift they did, particularly when New Labour under Tony Blair later moved to the political centre vacating the left for the SNP to fill in Scotland.

In 1997 New Labour won a landslide victory on a platform that promised and delivered a referendum on devolution for Scotland on which the Scottish electorate voted overwhelmingly in favour. 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 Scottish parliament was reinstated together with the Scottish Executive (later changed to the Scottish Government) under the 1998 Scotland Act introduced by the Labour government after the referendum. It set out the legislative competence of the new parliament in terms of devolved powers and those reserved for London. The latter included foreign and defence policy as well as a number of constitutional, financial, trade, energy, and home affairs policy areas.[[24]](#endnote-24) A defence concordat was negotiated between ‘Scottish Ministers and the Secretary of State for Defence’ in 1999 to ensure full cooperation of those administrative departments in Scotland necessary for the unimpeded conduct of defence policy, in particular nuclear weapons policy.[[25]](#endnote-25)

The first elections to the Scottish Parliament were held in 1999 and won by Labour led by Donald Dewar 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 (47 out of 129 seats compared to Labour’s 46) 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. The SNP had, as Hassan observed, moved over 40 years “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 centre stage and forced other political parties to respond on their terms.”[[26]](#endnote-26)

The SNP had not fared particularly well in the 2001 or 2005 UK general elections or the 2003 Scottish election. Its electoral success in 2007 was due in large part to its more positive vision of Scotland as a self-governing nation based on what the SNP could and would do as a party of government.[[27]](#endnote-27) This was the culmination of the professionalisation of the party and the consolidation of a party narrative as social democratic, anti-Tory and anti-New Labour. It also reflected growing disillusionment with New Labour and its neo-liberal economic policies but also its foreign and defence policy, notably the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the decision to begin the process of renewing the Trident nuclear weapon system in 2006 (to which Blair’s heir apparent Gordon Brown had already committed himself in July 2006[[28]](#endnote-28)).

### Scotland, the SNP and Trident

Scotland has a long history of anti-nuclearism as part of the wider UK anti-nuclear movement. It has found voice across civil society in grass roots movements, campaigning and non-violent direct action groups, trade unions, churches, and political parties. Support in Scotland for nuclear disarmament took hold in the late 1950s and early 1960s following Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s decision to allow US Polaris submarines to be based at Holy Loch beginning in March 1961. US plans, together with atmospheric nuclear testing and the escalation of the nuclear arms race, prompted the formation of the Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in March 1958, a month after the formation of CND in London. CND members formed a flotilla of small boats and canoes to intercept the arrival of the first US Polaris support ship USS Proteus. Over 300 of the ‘Glasgow Eskimos’ were arrested.[[29]](#endnote-29) In 1963 the UK government announced that the naval scrapyard at Faslane would be transformed into Her Majesty’s Naval Base (HMNB) Clyde to host the UK’s new Resolution-class ballistic missile submarines armed with Polaris missiles purchased from the US under the 1963 Polaris Sales Agreement. The base, which is only 25 miles west of Glasgow, comprised two areas: the Faslane Naval Base on the Gareloch where the submarines are homeported and the Royal Naval Armaments Depot (RNAD) Coulport on Loch Long where the UK’s nuclear warheads are stored, processed, maintained and issued for the UK’s ballistic missile submarines. These developments prompted anti-nuclear activists and socialists to leave Labour for the SNP. The Clyde naval base and adjacent Holy Loch became a site of ongoing protest that “brought the politics of direct action and peace camps to Scotland and served to underline to many how unradical Labour was despite its protestations”.[[30]](#endnote-30)

In the late 1970s the UK decided to procure the current Vanguard submarines to replace the aging Resolution-class, to be equipped with the US Trident I (C4) missile (later changed in 1982 to the larger and more advanced Trident II (D5)). This involved a huge works programme at Coulport and Faslane to prepare the base for the new, larger submarines, missiles, and warheads.[[31]](#endnote-31) In December 2006 the New Labour government published a White Paper on *The Future of the United Kingdom’s Nuclear Deterrent* setting out its policy to replace the current Trident system beginning with the procurement of a new fleet of ‘Successor’ submarines. This prompted sustained resistance in Scotland, not least from the SNP. This has been exacerbated by the escalation of the estimated cost of the programme from an original ‘ball park’[[32]](#endnote-32) estimate of £11-14 billion for four new submarines in 2006 to £31 billion plus a £10 billion contingency in 2016.[[33]](#endnote-33) Estimated costs for replacing and operating a new system for 25 years have ranged from £76 billion to £167 billion.[[34]](#endnote-34) This came at time of deep cuts in public services as part of the coalition and then Conservative governments’ austerity programme in response to the global financial crisis.

Protests have continued through a host of civil society groups, notably Scottish CND and the Faslane Peace Camp that has been occupied continuously since 1982, including during its year-long Faslane 365 continuous peaceful blockade of Faslane from 1st October 2006 to the Big Blockade on 1st October 2007. Scottish trade unions have also supported the removal of Trident from Scotland. In 2013 the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) voted overwhelmingly to reaffirm its opposition to Trident, having last debated the issue in 2006.[[35]](#endnote-35) In 2007 Scottish CND worked with the STUC to examine the economic impact of removing Trident from Scotland and develop the economic case for defence diversification.[[36]](#endnote-36) The Scottish churches have also been very active with all the main churches campaigning for the removal of Trident and nuclear disarmament.[[37]](#endnote-37) Anti-nuclearism has been reflected in Scotland’s political parties, including the Scottish Green Party, Scottish Socialist Party and some voices within in the Liberal-Labour coalitions formed in 1999 and 2003. But the political champion of nuclear disarmament in Scotland has been the SNP.

The SNP has consistently opposed not only the siting of nuclear weapons in Scotland but the UK nuclear arsenal per se. It was not the originator of the anti-nuclear movement in Scotland but its members and some its leadership are part of that movement (Nicola Sturgeon, for example, joined CND before she joined the SNP aged 16). Following devolution in 1998 the SNP published a number of manifestos and policy papers on independence. These connected full sovereignty with new political possibilities, including nuclear disarmament. The SNP’s 2005 paper on “Raising the Standard” set out a case for independence that said “An 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.”[[38]](#endnote-38) Its 2007 policy paper on “Choosing Scotland’s Future” said “An independent Scotland could accede to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear weapon state, as have other successor states to nuclear weapon states. Scotland could not then possess nuclear weapons. The nuclear-armed submarines of the Royal Navy would have to be removed from Scotland, and based elsewhere. Whether the remainder of the United Kingdom continued to retain a nuclear deterrent would be a matter for that state to decide.”[[39]](#endnote-39) Its MP’s also voted against the Labour government’s motion in March 2007 to authorise the first stage of the Trident replacement process. Labour carried the motion by 409 votes to 161, but the SNP’s six MPs, twelve Scottish Liberal Democrat MPs and fifteen rebelling Scottish Labour MPs voted against, signifying rejection of Trident replacement by the majority of Scottish MPs at the time.[[40]](#endnote-40) This included Scottish Labour’s Communities Minister, Malcolm Chisholm, who resigned from the Scottish Executive in December 2006 to vote with the SNP.[[41]](#endnote-41)

The SNP leadership consistently reiterated its support for nuclear disarmament as a party of government since 2007. As Alex Salmond stated in his 2010 speech to the SNP spring conference: “on some things we draw the line. We will never desert the cause of unilateral nuclear disarmament. Spending £100bn 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.”[[42]](#endnote-42) The SNP is committed to the logic of nuclear disarmament in contrast to the logic of nuclear deterrence supported by Labour, coalition, and Conservative governments in London.

This was reflected in a number of anti-nuclear initiatives supported by many in the Scottish Labour Party, and Scottish Liberal Democrats, as well as smaller parties such as the Greens. In June 2007 the new SNP government introduced a motion to the Scottish Parliament against New Labour’s plans for Trident replacement whilst acknowledging the decision was the reserved to Westminster. The motion was supported by 71 MSPs to 16 with 49 abstentions, most of whom were Labour MSPs.[[43]](#endnote-43) In April 2008 the SNP 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 located opposition to nuclear weapons in the context of internationalist SNP agenda that recommended an independent Scotland position itself as an international advocate for nuclear disarmament in line with “a national identity as a progressive peace-making state”.[[44]](#endnote-44) In 2010 SNP MSP Bill Kidd put forward a motion to register Scotland with the UN as a single-state nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ) drawing on the examples of New Zealand that declared itself nuclear free in 1984 and Mongolia that registered itself as a NWFZ in 1992.[[45]](#endnote-45)

**The independence campaign and Trident**

In 2011 the SNP won a second victory in the Scottish parliamentary elections, this time forming a majority government with 69 seats over Labour’s 37. In October that year the SNP formally launched its campaign for independence, pledging a referendum within that five-year parliament. After much wrangling this led in October 2012 to the ‘Edinburgh Agreement’ between SNP First Minister Alex Salmond and Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron. This paved the way for a vote on independence on 18 September 2014 with a single yes/no question on Scotland leaving the UK.

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 Democrat and Scottish Conservative ‘Better Together’ unionist campaign. The campaign focussed primarily on economic issues, notably jobs, social welfare, economic and fiscal viability, monetary and currency policy, and energy. But defence 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.[[46]](#endnote-46) The ‘yes’ campaign was also a grass roots political movement of individuals and civil society groups. These tended to support the SNP and denuclearising Scotland, though not exclusively so. In fact, public support in Scotland for denuclearisation whilst strong was not comprehensive. Some polls showed clear majorities for the removal of nuclear weapons, whilst others showed greater support for nuclear renunciation but fell short of a majority. A constituency also emerged that both supported independence *and* retention of nuclear weapons and vice versa. [[47]](#endnote-47)

Grassroots independence organisations such as Generation Yes, Women for Independence, the National Collective, Common Weal, the Radical Independence Campaign and blogs like 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.[[48]](#endnote-48) The Radical Independence Campaign, for example, said “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”.[[49]](#endnote-49) A detailed survey and analysis of ‘yes’ campaign volunteers by Common Weal revealed five core beliefs that included “Independence would allow Scotland to get rid of nuclear weapons.”[[50]](#endnote-50) The Scrap Trident coalition tapped into the politicisation of women in the independence movement through a ‘Bairns not Bombs’ campaign that connected nuclear disarmament with women’s rights and social justice.[[51]](#endnote-51) This reflected a broader strategy of juxtaposing spending on nuclear weapons against spending on health, education, and social programmes, such as disability benefits and rights.[[52]](#endnote-52) The social opportunity costs of committing finite resource to nuclear weapons and the inability of the Scottish Government to make its own decisions about spending on military interventions and nuclear weapons were highlighted by the SNP as reasons for independence. For example, SNP MSP Maureen Watt’s argument in 2006 that “The estimated cost of replacing Trident is £25 billion - about £2.1 billion for Scotland. That could pay for new secondary schools, five new hospitals, 30 new community sport centres, 100 new doctors, 100 dentists and 200 teachers - the list goes on. The money would be much better spent in that way” became a familiar refrain.[[53]](#endnote-53)

Denuclearisation was an important plank of the SNP’s independence campaign. In 2012 Alex Salmond insisted that a nuclear weapon-free status would be written into a new constitution for an independent Scotland if it won the referendum. This was set out in the Scottish Government’s draft constitution published in June 2014.[[54]](#endnote-54) The SNP intended to remove Trident by 2020 within the first parliament of an independent Scotland should it win the new country’s first general election.[[55]](#endnote-55) Denuclearisation comes up time and again in the SNP’s largely aspirational 2013 White Paper on *Scotland’s Future*.[[56]](#endnote-56) SNP defence spokesperson Angus Robertson summed up the party’s view on nuclear weapons and public support for its position 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”.[[57]](#endnote-57)

Scottish civil society organisations, notably SCND, worked hard with the SNP to forge a social and political network to nationalise anti-nuclearism in Scotland. This was explicitly linked to the independence campaign when delegates to SCND’s conference in November 2012 passed a resolution supporting the ‘Yes’ campaign as the only way to remove nuclear weapons from Scotland.[[58]](#endnote-58) This “now or never” independence-disarmament connection was reiterated by then-deputy Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon at major CND rally in Glasgow in April 2014.[[59]](#endnote-59) Nevertheless, the SNP went on to lose the referendum by 44.7 per cent to 55.3 per cent on an 85 per cent turnout. Alex Salmond announced his resignation a few days later and on 20 November 2014 his deputy, Nicola Sturgeon, was elected First Minister by the Scottish Parliament having stood unopposed in the SNP. She went on to turn 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 56 of Scotland’s 59 Westminster seats, crushing Labour and increasing its presence in the House of Commons by 50 MPs.

### Constituting nuclear weapons through national identity

The nuclear stakes for Scotland and the rest of the UK were very high. Independence would have very likely led to the repatriation of nuclear weapons to the remainder of the UK (rUK) and could have precipitated the termination of the UK’s nuclear weapon programme altogether. I argue that the salience of denuclearisation in the pro-independence movement is explained through the construction of a Scottish national identity by the SNP and a host of grass roots organisations that constituted the wider movement. The SNP constituted UK nuclear weapons in a particular way through its representation of an independent sovereign Scotland as a particular kind of subject, to invoke Weldes. It was an elite-sponsored process, though one rooted in a popular centre left political ideology that bridged aspirational social, environmental and anti-nuclear agendas, noted earlier.

This is *not* to argue that Scots voted ‘yes’ or ‘no’ on the basis of essentialist or ‘ethnic’ Scottish vs. British national identity conceptions or that they voted en masse on the basis of the future of Trident.[[60]](#endnote-60) Nor is it to argue that this discursive constitution of UK nuclear weapons is unique to Scotland or the SNP – evidently not on the basis of Jeremy Corbyn’s election as Labour leader in September 2015 in part on an anti-nuclear platform and Scottish Labour’s switch to support denuclearisation two months later.[[61]](#endnote-61) The argument here is that understanding the politics of nuclear weapons, in this case in Scotland and by extension the UK, requires engagement with their construction in representations of national identity, in this case in the crucible of the independence referendum campaign. Denuclearisation became an important signifier of sovereign identity for the SNP such that a newly acquired sovereign identity would be performed by the SNP through denuclearisation. The obvious but essential difference between the discursive construction of denuclearisation in Scotland compared to elsewhere in the UK is that Scots were voting for or against an independence movement led by the SNP that would put anti-nuclear policies into practice in a way that no Westminster government is likely to do in the foreseeable future. The SNP’s process of representation took three interrelated forms: 1) the framing of a ‘civic’ 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) internalisation of the NPT’s international norms of nuclear non-proliferation and progress towards nuclear disarmament as a ‘responsible’ sovereign state. These are addressed in turn.

### *A civic internationalist identity*

The process of constructing national identity is one of legitimising an imagined but authentic political community by authoritative social sources, such as nationalist parties, churches, unions, protest and civic groups.[[62]](#endnote-62) Geography, ethnicity, religion, race, and historical narratives and myths can all play a part, but articulation of a set of national values at the heart of a national culture is central. Construction of a distinct national identity is essential to separatist claims and processes. Following Weldes, Alex Salmond, Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP elaborated the broad parameters of a Scottish national identity through particular representations of the Scottish self through the process of the independence campaign. 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.[[63]](#endnote-63) But it did build on a popular attachment in Scotland to a Scottish over a British identity and a tendency to define a Scottish self against a Westminster other.[[64]](#endnote-64) In a 2007 speech to the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, for example, 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, colours and creeds and one which will continue to inspire constitutional evolution based on a positive vision of what our nation can be.”[[65]](#endnote-65) Nicola Sturgeon argued in 2012 that independence was not based on asserting an ethnic Scottish identity but about principles of democracy and social justice as a means to end of realising a particular type of Scotland.[[66]](#endnote-66)

This contemporary iteration of Scottish identity was associated with the egalitarian politics of the left.[[67]](#endnote-67) In fact, Salmond’s ‘civic nationalism’ is remarkably reminiscent of New Labour’s 1997 internationalist social democratic electoral platform. Scratching beneath the surface reveals little difference between the SNP’s ‘vision’ for an independent Scotland and a traditional Labour agenda at the domestic political level that enjoyed popular support in Scotland before a profound disillusionment with New Labour and Tony Blair set in.[[68]](#endnote-68) This was reflected in Mitchell *et al’s* surveys of SNP members that show they were motivated to join the party in part to resist unaccountable Westminster/London rule but that “explicit anti-English sentiment was almost nowhere to be seen”.[[69]](#endnote-69) They note that two of the main external ‘others’ that posed potential or real threats to SNP members’ sense of Scottishness were “the London government” and “Thatcherism” with “some members viewing New Labour as continuing to adopt ‘Thatcherite’ policies”.[[70]](#endnote-70)

It was at the international level, however, that the SNP crafted a national identity conception to differentiate an independent Scotland from the Union that combined peace activism with nationalism. 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*.*[[71]](#endnote-71) 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”.[[72]](#endnote-72) It was a vision that framed a future independent Scotland “in the role of mediator, broker and wise counsel”, a small but influential state committed to multilateral peace keeping forces under UN auspices and development aid for the world’s poorest.[[73]](#endnote-73) Countries such as Norway, Finland, New Zealand, Sweden, and Switzerland were invoked as examples of countries of comparable size and status to Scotland that had made a sustained and significant contribution to conflict resolution, peace, reconciliation, and diplomacy.[[74]](#endnote-74)

The SNP framed this as a different foreign and defence policy to that practiced by New Labour and the Conservatives, one that rejected expeditionary warfare and military interventionism and could only be realised not just through independence *per se*, but independence for a particular *kind* of Scotland. 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”. [[75]](#endnote-75) It was legitimated by invoking a ‘democratic deficit’ in foreign and defence policy fixed by reservations in the 1998 Scotland Act. Two touchstone issues – the unwanted presence of Trident and invasion of Iraq in 2003[[76]](#endnote-76) – were routinely invoked to first demonstrate the absence of independent Scottish policy choices in these areas, and second to differentiate an independent SNP-led Scotland from a Union or Westminster Scotland by demonstrating what it would do differently informed by a different national identity conception.

These two issues underpinned the SNP’s internationalist case for Scottish independence rather than further autonomy within the Union.[[77]](#endnote-77) The SNP’s manifesto for the 2007 Scottish Parliament elections, for example, said “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”.[[78]](#endnote-78) In 2007 Salmond said “I look at the foreign policy errors committed in recent times and I know that while the UK government sent Scottish soldiers to Iraq, the vast majority of Scots did not support the invasion. I know too, that most Scots have no desire to have nuclear weaponry in our waters.”[[79]](#endnote-79) In 2011 he 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”.[[80]](#endnote-80)

A determination to secure an independent sovereign right to decide the constitution of armed forces, including nuclear weapons, and whether or not to use them in war in the name of national security became symbolic of the SNP’s case for independence.[[81]](#endnote-81) 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.”[[82]](#endnote-82) The SNP demanded a democratic right to realise its civic internationalist national identity conception that was not possible within a Union in which Westminster reserved decision-making 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 diktat is over. This [Scottish] 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.”[[83]](#endnote-83) This narrative of democratic deficit and absence of consent has a long history and underpinned the political momentum for devolution eventually realised in 1998 on the heels of collapsing Tory support in Scotland.

### *A Scottish self against a Westminster other*

The SNP often framed this “democratic deficit” in anti-imperial terms vis-à-vis a London or Westminster ‘other’, as noted above. The SNP frequently referred to common bonds with other ‘Celtic’ nations and communities in Wales, Ireland, and Cornwall but, as Mycock argues, rarely portrayed the Union and the UK-as-London in a positive light. He argues that “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’.”[[84]](#endnote-84) Gallagher notes a ‘victim mentality’ based on a long struggle against an unequal and oppressive union that has fostered hostility towards England and Westminster.[[85]](#endnote-85) Indeed, 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.”[[86]](#endnote-86) This anti-imperial narrative 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.”[[87]](#endnote-87)

This anti-imperial sentiment extends to nuclear weapons and a narrative of Westminster foisting unwanted nuclear weapons on Scotland akin to the manner in which Thatcher’s poll tax was trialled in Scotland.[[88]](#endnote-88) This narrative was deployed when Ministry of Defence plans to designate Faslane a UK sovereign base area in the event of a ‘yes’ vote for independence were leaked in July 2013. Downing Street quickly disowned the plan as neither credible nor sensible but it reinforced the SNP’s narrative, which compared it to Iraq’s annexation of Kuwait in 1990.[[89]](#endnote-89) Scottish novelist and commentator A. L. Kennedy writing in *The* *Guardian* described MoD’s 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”.[[90]](#endnote-90) This is part of a broader narrative of Westminster imposing undemocratic policies on Scotland within the Union, independence advocates argued. It framed an SNP Scotland as internationalist, “progressive”, and peaceful on the one hand compared to an imperial, nuclear, and militarist Westminster on the other. Moreover, it associated Trident with imposed, undemocratic, Tory ‘imperialism’ in which New Labour had been complicit; immoral and illegitimate threats of nuclear violence; the pathologies of the US ‘special relationship’ evidenced by Iraq; and an outmoded symbol of a bygone era of ‘great powers’ defined by military assets that was at odds with the requirements of an interdependent community of states and societies grappling with global security challenges. This anti-imperial framing was a powerful political trope constituting the SNP’s national identity conception for an independent Scotland and a democratic right to decide on issues such as Trident and Iraq.[[91]](#endnote-91)

An interesting comparison can be drawn with Kazakhstan’s post-Soviet experience detailed by Aida Abzhaparova. She examines the construction of post-Soviet national identity in Kazakhstan for which retention of Soviet nuclear weapons was antithetical. Here, a ‘new’ identity of Kazakhstan was constructed in binary opposition 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’.”[[92]](#endnote-92) Becoming non-nuclear became essential to the performance of a new post-Soviet national identity. Through the practices and process of what she calls ‘de-Sovietisation’, nuclear weapons were framed as a danger to the material and ontological security of Kazakhstan as a newly sovereign state rather than valuable assets and a guarantor of security. Scotland’s experience within the UK is orders of magnitude less extreme with no recent history of the sort of violent repression of dissent from the centre experienced by many Soviet republics, as Whatley notes.[[93]](#endnote-93) Nevertheless, the binary opposition of Scotland/Westminster and non-nuclear/nuclear was an important part of the SNP’s construction of an independent Scotland’s identity.

***The NPT and ‘responsible’ sovereignty***

The third form of the SNP’s representation of an independent Scotland was more structural. The SNP and the wider independence movement’s commitment to denuclearisation is not just explained by SNP’s construction of a particular independent Scottish self against a Westminster unionist other, but also by the construction of sovereignty as non-nuclear statehood in an international normative context. The SNP as a party and as the Scottish Government has long accepted and internalised the NPT’s twin norms of nuclear non-proliferation and progress towards nuclear disarmament.[[94]](#endnote-94) Being sovereign, or ‘doing’ sovereignty, for the SNP meant embracing and being defined by the established international nuclear normative environment embodied by the NPT. This was not a case of reluctant social conformity, however, because the SNP was one of Rublee’s ‘persuaded’ within the international 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 conviction – that is, to put effort into having their beliefs realized”.[[95]](#endnote-95) This neatly captures the SNP’s determined anti-nuclear disposition that was in part constituted and validated by the normative international structure of nuclear abstinence.

SNP parliamentarians routinely invoked the importance of the NPT and its norm of progress towards nuclear disarmament and aligned it with its broader internationalist narrative of a country committed to peace and justice. For example, in a 2014 debate on Trident in the Scottish Parliament, Cabinet Secretary for Justice Kenny MacAskill said “Nuclear 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 nuclear­weapon states to fully embrace the NPT’s principles and to work towards the abolition of nuclear weapons.”[[96]](#endnote-96) In 2013 Minster for Transport and Veterans Keith Brown said “The international community has signaled 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.”[[97]](#endnote-97) The party’s 2011 manifesto said “We want Scotland to be seen as a voice for peace and justice in the world. We will continue to support the work of the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and his efforts through the Nuclear Weapons Convention to eradicate nuclear, chemical and biological weapons across the planet. Our opposition to the Trident nuclear missile system and its planned replacement remains firm – there is no place for these weapons in Scotland and we will continue to press the UK government to scrap Trident and cancel its replacement”.[[98]](#endnote-98) This has now extended to full support for the so-called ‘humanitarian initiative’ that seeks to stigmatise and prohibit nuclear weapons because of the unacceptable and unmanageable humanitarian and environmental impact of their use.[[99]](#endnote-99) In December 2014 SNP MP Angus Robertson attended the third international conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons hosted by the Austrian government in Vienna and attended by 158 states. He subsequently declared “it 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”.[[100]](#endnote-100)

In April 2014 a few months before the referendum Sturgeon summed up the role of denuclearisation in her representation of an independent Scotland: “There are less than six months to go until Scotland decides what kind of country we want to be. One of the biggest choices we face is whether Scotland remains home to weapons of mass destruction, or whether we take this opportunity to remove them once and for all. 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* (emphasis added).”[[101]](#endnote-101)

The norms of non-proliferation and disarmament were routinely ‘activated’, using Rublee’s terminology, by civil society organisations in Scotland in ways that normalised opposition to Trident and the SNP’s policy of denuclearisation. We can see Rublee’s linking process at work here in the connection a norm (of denuclearisation in Scotland) to well-established values (in the wider independence movement) themselves activated by the independence process launched by the SNP after its victory in the 2011 Scottish elections.[[102]](#endnote-102) Benford and Snow describe this as frame bridging: “the linking of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular interest or problem.”[[103]](#endnote-103) The SNP historically bridged its core policy frame of independence to a secondary policy frame of nuclear disarmament. Indeed, Hill argues that anti-nuclearism in Scotland was not so much a symptom of nationalism but active in its making.[[104]](#endnote-104) This expanded during the referendum campaign as civil society groups (NGOs, churches, unions, activists, etc.) and the SNP successfully embedded denuclearisation into the wider grassroots independence movement beginning in 2012. This involved bridging to a third policy frame of social justice. This linked ethical and moral concerns about nuclear weapons and military interventions 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”.[[105]](#endnote-105) Frame-bridging was an important process of constituting Scottish sovereignty by linking different discourses of independence, denuclearisation, and social justice, in particular the case for sovereign authority to reallocate resources spent on wars and nuclear weapons to social programmes. It reflected what Maxwell calls the SNP’s “strongest impulses”: independence, economic strength, “opposition to the nuclearisation of Scotland”, and social justice, in that order.[[106]](#endnote-106)

**NATO and nuclear social structures**

What is intriguing about the Scottish nuclear case is that the SNP’s identity conception of a nuclear weapons-free state committed to an agenda of conflict resolution is on the one hand considered ‘normal’ behaviour for a ‘responsible’ member of the international and European community. Comparison with Ukraine’s experience is instructive here. Ukraine’s decision to relinquish its inherited nuclear arsenal was based on identification with the West, its desire to integrate into its political and economic institutions, and a prevailing international (or at least Western) social structure that actively *encouraged* a post-Soviet identity as a non-nuclear weapon state under the NPT. 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.[[107]](#endnote-107) The SNP similarly identified an independent Scotland as a Western, European, internationalist, non-nuclear sovereign based on ‘independence in Europe’.[[108]](#endnote-108) Yet rather than being actively encouraged by members of that community, it met resistance because of the potential impact on the more powerful and influential UK. Specifically, its commitment to denuclearise was framed as deeply problematic and dangerously irresponsible because it could precipitate the UK’s nuclear disarmament creating difficulties for the US, France and NATO just as the security relationship with Russia was deteriorating. For Scotland, European isolation could stem from a decision to *relinquish* rather than retain nuclear weapons. This conflict between competing conceptions of nuclear identity erupted over the issue of NATO membership for a denuclearised independent Scotland. It highlighted the existence of contradictory international normative structures of abstinence and deterrence in which nuclear weapons are embedded.[[109]](#endnote-109)

The United Kingdom remains committed to the long term retention of nuclear weapons. Successive governments in Westminster assign positive values to UK nuclear weapons in Westminster that enjoy public support, in contrast to the SNP position.[[110]](#endnote-110) Many in the UK associate Trident with national strength and prestige and identify nuclear weapons with a UK role as a ‘pivotal’ power and ‘force for good’ in global politics. Nuclear weapons are routinely framed by political leaders as a necessary and legitimate means of protection or an “ultimate insurance” against strategic threats.[[111]](#endnote-111) The previous Labour government, the current Conservative government, and many in the Parliamentary Labour Party remain committed to nuclear deterrence and replacing the Trident nuclear weapon system. This was seriously threatened by Scottish independence and the SNP’s commitment to repatriate UK nuclear weapons as quickly as safety would allow.[[112]](#endnote-112)The impact on the UK’s ability to retain a nuclear arsenal would be severe. London would have to build new facilities somewhere in the UK to replicate the functions of Faslane and Coulport with few, if any, other viable sites.[[113]](#endnote-113) 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 timescale in the region of 20 years.[[114]](#endnote-114) Other solutions floated included 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 Ile Longue (home to its Triomphant-class SSBNs) or the US at Kings Bay (home to its Atlantic fleet of Ohio-class SSBNs). These, too, presented major challenges.[[115]](#endnote-115) On the former, the SNP flatly ruled it out as an option and the coalition government at the time was dubious.[[116]](#endnote-116) The latter was rejected by UK defence minister Phillip Dunne in February 2014, saying “It would be ridiculous to conceive of storing nuclear warheads not on sovereign UK soil.”[[117]](#endnote-117) London would therefore be forced to reconsider the value of remaining a nuclear weapon state given the cost and timescale of replicating Faslane and Coulport south of the border with lethargic public support and a shrinking residual UK tax base after secession. It could therefore lead to the involuntary nuclear disarmament of the remainder of the UK according to former Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral Lord West, former Conservative chairman of the House of Commons Defence Committee James Arbuthnot, and others.[[118]](#endnote-118)

The effect of forced disarmament on UK security was framed as severe. This reflected a wider Labour and Conservative narrative of the political and economic dangers of independence. Former Labour Defence Secretary and NATO Secretary General George Robertson, for example, alarmingly claimed that Scottish independence would leave the UK “a 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 force of darkness would simply love it”.[[119]](#endnote-119) Vice Admiral John McAnally insisted in March 2014 “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”.[[120]](#endnote-120) Conservative mayor of London, Boris Johnson, later argued that if Trident were relinquished at the SNP’s insistence “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”.[[121]](#endnote-121)

The SNP’s opposition to nuclear weapons previously extended to NATO as a nuclear alliance committed to nuclear deterrence and to which UK nuclear weapons are formally assigned.[[122]](#endnote-122) In 2012 the SNP leadership reversed this position and narrowly passed a motion to its annual conference that an independent Scotland would remain in NATO with certain caveats, including removal of UK nuclear weapons and a right to only participate in UN sanctioned military operations.[[123]](#endnote-123) The decision was a high profile and controversial feature of the independence campaign. A commitment to NATO membership was accepted by the SNP leadership as important to its future security, representative of its commitment to European political and security institutions, and to reassuring voters that independence would not mean international isolation.[[124]](#endnote-124) In doing so the SNP aligned membership of NATO with its internationalist national identity for an independent Scotland as a ‘responsible’ and ‘civilised’ Western European state.[[125]](#endnote-125) It framed NATO as an essential vehicle for the cooperative regional security relationships upon which defence of an independent Scottish would invariably rely.[[126]](#endnote-126) The policy reversal reflected polling that found the Scottish people firmly in support of an independent Scotland remaining in NATO.[[127]](#endnote-127) Salmond rationalised the position by claiming an independent Scotland would remain part of five ‘Unions’ (European Union, NATO defence union, sterling currency union, Union of the Crowns, and ‘social union’ between British peoples) but leave the sixth ‘political union’, ostensibly to ‘de-risk’ independence in voters’ minds.[[128]](#endnote-128)

The SNP’s position was derided as hypocritical by professing new found support for a nuclear-armed alliance whilst decrying the existence of alliance nuclear weapons on its soil.[[129]](#endnote-129) 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?”[[130]](#endnote-130) George Robertson warned that an independent Scotland would have to keep nuclear weapons to remain part of the military alliance.[[131]](#endnote-131) In April 2013 it was reported that senior NATO officials would not allow an independent Scotland to join NATO if it forced the removal of Trident.[[132]](#endnote-132) 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”.[[133]](#endnote-133) The UK government’s report on “Scotland Analysis: Defence” warned that The SNP’s policy position, to seek membership of NATO for an independent Scottish state while being unwilling to subscribe to the nuclear aspects of NATO’s Strategic Concept, risks undermining the collective defence and deterrence of NATO Allies, and would represent a significant complication to its membership.”[[134]](#endnote-134) Former First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Sir Mark Stanhope, reportedly “sent a letter to Mr Salmond, which was co­signed by former heads of the Army, Navy, Air Force and intelligence units, warning that the SNP’s proposed constitutional ban on nuclear weapons ‘would be unacceptable for Nato’.”[[135]](#endnote-135) As a result it looked like the SNP would face a challenging dilemma between NATO membership and retention of Trident in the event of independence given staunch UK opposition, US misgivings about the effect of independence on the UK’s nuclear capability, and the requirement of unanimous agreement by NATO allies on new members.[[136]](#endnote-136)

The SNP saw value in NATO as a set of conventional military security relationships to facilitate cooperation, particularly on the High North and Arctic region. The party observed that the majority of NATO members do not host nuclear weapons and that a number have strong anti-nuclear histories. Spain, for example, negotiated the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons on its territory prior to its accession to NATO in 1982 and does not participate in NATO nuclear sharing.[[137]](#endnote-137) Nevertheless, the SNP found itself in a difficult political position. It faced an odd choice of being a post-modern, liberal sovereign constituted in part by an international social structure of norms, shared meanings, and institutions that generally reject nuclear weapons whilst seeking to participate in collective security norms and institutions through NATO that required it to accept the value and legitimacy of nuclear weapons, the security logic of nuclear deterrence, and even to host what would be foreign nuclear weapons on its territory in order to preclude the dissolution of a nuclear force formally committed to NATO.

This reflects a particular European normative nuclear structure in which to be an active member of the preeminent European collective security institution a state must accept and be socialised into the logic of nuclear deterrence and a culture of nuclear security restated most recently in NATO’s 2012 Defence and Deterrence Posture Review. The SNP’s alternative was to connect a commitment to internationalism and collective security with the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy, OSCE and the UN following the examples of Ireland and Austria. But electoral expediency and a public desire to “fulfil its responsibilities to neighbours and allies” took it through NATO.[[138]](#endnote-138) Here, a normative social structure that legitimises nuclear weapons clashed with the NPT’s normative structure internalised by the SNP that delegitimises nuclear weapons. A number of SNP members and supporters recognised the NATO move as a challenge to the core identity of the party, not least through the prospect of long-term if reluctant retention of UK nuclear weapons.[[139]](#endnote-139) Scottish CND, for example, argued that the NATO policy u-turn confused the SNP’s national identity conception by compromising on key principles and miring Scotland in the internal politics of the alliance.[[140]](#endnote-140)

### Conclusion

This article set out to investigate how particular meanings were assigned to the UK’s nuclear weapons by the SNP, how they were constituted through particular representations of an independent Scotland and, latterly, how they were resisted by government in London highlighted by the debate on NATO membership. It has argued that nuclear weapons are constituted by networks of meanings and practices that are deeply political. Specifically, the intersubjective meanings assigned to Trident are produced through representations of the Scottish self as an internationalist civic power, through representations of the Westminster other, and through representations of Scotland as a prospective NPT non-nuclear weapon state committed to disarmament. This was based on the SNP’s representation of an independent Scotland as a centre-left social democracy committed to the European project as a responsible, civilised, contemporary European state with a strong dose of anti-imperialism and anti-Toryism. It presented this as a ‘positive vision’ that could only be realised through full independence to overcome an unacceptable democratic deficit, particularly in areas of war and peace symbolised by Trident and Iraq. The article has also demonstrated how competing identity commitments and electoral politics surfaced a normative clash between a NATO nuclear social structure and an international NPT-based nuclear social structure. This complicated the performance of a sovereign, European, internationalist, non-nuclear identity for the SNP.

The article further demonstrated that 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 scratch beneath the surface of the state to better explain and understand nuclear weapons policies and practices. Nuclear weapons are routinely presented in the UK as an essential insurance for the country against future strategic threats in a complex and unpredictable world. Contemporary Whitehall security narratives declare that the first duty of government is to defend the nation and its people.[[141]](#endnote-141) In the UK’s case, this *requires* nuclear weapons, but for the SNP the reverse is true: material and ontological security require nuclear renunciation. Nuclear weapons are an asset for Westminster, a liability for the SNP. This crystallised in the 2015 general election debate following the independence referendum 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, whilst the SNP led a ‘progressive alliance’ that denounced Trident as a “useless and immoral” status symbol.[[142]](#endnote-142) The argument presented here does not claim exclusive ownership of this anti-nuclear disposition or wider centre left agenda for the SNP; it evidently has political resonance in the UK beyond Scotland, notably within the Labour party rank and file. But it has become constitutive of the SNP as a party of government and had a deep political resonance in Scotland because of the possibility of the SNP realising its anti-nuclear ambitions through independence. At Westminster, in contrast, there is very little prospect of the current or future government opting to relinquish nuclear weapons.

A counter-argument might claim the SNP’s anti-Trident stance was more of a calculated political strategy: a policy deployed instrumentally by the SNP to differentiate it from Westminster and bolster the case for its own acquisition of political power through control of a newly sovereign state. Rather than a representation of deeply held value commitments constitutive of the SNP’s identity as a party and its identity conception for an independent Scotland, it was a convenient or even disingenuous narrative strategically deployed to realise the ultimate prize of independence. Here, foregrounding Trident and disarmament as a high prolife left wing issue “conveniently overshadowed” similarities with Labour’s domestic social and economic agenda.[[143]](#endnote-143) This argument has some merit and political electioneering was certainly important to the framing of Trident in the independence campaign, but the argument here is that identity conceptions are central. An instrumental explanation implies an independent Scotland led by the SNP would come to an accommodation with London to keep Trident at Faslane given the many other very difficult issues that would have to be resolved, not least an agreement on a currency union and an equitable financial settlement covering North Sea oil, pensions, sovereign debt, division of assets, and the like. There would also likely be strong pressure from the US.[[144]](#endnote-144) Yet there is little to suggest the SNP would do anything other than insist on removal of Trident within a negotiated time period *because* anti-nuclearism is constitutive of the SNP’s identity and by extension its national role conception for an independent Scotland.[[145]](#endnote-145) Moreover, reneging on a central, if not totemic, campaign promise of disarmament in the event of independence would carry considerable political risk, undermine the party’s credibility, and create deep internal division given a democratic mandate for denuclearisation in the event of a ‘yes’ vote in 2014.

The argument therefore reinforces critical social constructivist theorising on the relationship between identities and nuclear policies and practices as well as the contingency of particular representations of the self. It supports Rublee’s and Tannenwald’s arguments that nuclear weapons and practices are constituted in a significant way through identities and that these are shaped by international social structures. It provides an additional case of (almost) nuclear renunciation to supplement those of South Africa, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan. It highlights the importance of popular representations of nuclear weapons for elite narratives, such that an SNP discourse of sovereign identity based in part on nuclear renunciation was neither novel nor controversial for a significant part of the Scottish electorate.Finally, it highlights the operation of competing nuclear social structures constituted by specific conceptions of nuclear weapons, values and power. The argument here is not that an ideational account provides exhaustive explanation, but that it is not possible to tell a non-ideational story about Scotland, the SNP and nuclear weapons.[[146]](#endnote-146)

One thing is for certain, should Scotland cede from the UK and relinquish nuclear weapons, the effect on the UK will be profound because possession of nuclear weapons is bound up in UK national identity conceptions.[[147]](#endnote-147) For many in SNP, this is no doubt the intention – that dissolution of the ‘imperial anachronism’ of UK and its political, monarchic, military, and economic structures could precipitate a shift in the UK’s/England’s foreign and defence policy and its abandonment of nuclear weapons.

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2. Mure Dickie, “Anti-Nuclear Stance was Important Driver in Rise of SNP”, *Financial Times,* 5 February 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. A realist argument might argue an independent Scotland would either relinquish nuclear weapons because it was no longer a ‘major power’ and therefore had no obvious requirement for such a capability, particularly if it remains/becomes a member of the NATO alliance, or that it would unproblematically accommodate UK nuclear weapons in a bilateral alliance with London based on shared security threats for which nuclear weapons are a necessary solution. These propositions hold little explanatory weight in the Scottish context. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics’, *International Organization* 46: 2, 1992, pp. 396-97. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
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141. Liam Fox, “Speech on the Strategic Defence and Security Review”, Royal United Services Institute, London, 14 June 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-141)
142. “Barrow Labour Candidate’s ‘I'll Quit’ Trident Pledge’, *North West Evening Mail*, 27 April 2015; Sian Davies, “Conservatives only Party to ‘Keep Britain's Defences Safe” says Home Secretary on Plymouth visit”, *Plymouth Herald*, 18 April 2015; Andrew Grice, “SNP, Greens and Plaid Cymru Join Host of Celebrities in Petition to push Incoming Government to Scrap Trident”, *The Independent,* 24 April 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-142)
143. David Torrance, “The Reinvention of the SNP”, *The Guardian,* 21 May 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-143)
144. In the context of NATO *The Scotsman* reported in 2003 “[former Secretary of State James] Baker said a decision to pull out of NATO would go down poorly in the US”. It should also be remembered that the US responded to New Zealand’s strong anti-nuclear stance that included banning US warships from its ports because US policy was to neither confirm nor deny whether its surface vessels carried nuclear weapons by severing US-Australia-New Zealand (ANZUS) cooperative security arrangements and delaying a free trade agreement. [↑](#endnote-ref-144)
145. Frank Schimmelfenning, “The Community Trap: Liberal Norms, Rhetorical Action, and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union”, *International Organization* 55: 1, 2001, 47-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-145)
146. Price and Tannenwald makes this point in relation to explaining non-use of chemical and nuclear weapons. Richard Price and Nina Tannewald, “Norms and Deterrence: The Nuclear and Chemical Weapons Taboos”, ed. Peter Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 150. [↑](#endnote-ref-146)
147. William Walker, “Trident's Replacement and the Survival of the United Kingdom”, *Survival*, 57: 5, 2015, pp. 7-28. [↑](#endnote-ref-147)