

REVIEW: UNCHARTED WATERS

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Malcolm Chalmers and William Walker, **Uncharted Waters: the UK, Nuclear Weapons and the Scottish Question**, East Linton: Tuckwell, 2001, 196pp, pb, £14.99, ISBN 1-86232-245-7

Demonstrations at Faslane are a common occurrence, with protesters demanding the removal of nuclear weapons from the Holy Loch, and folk (including MSPs) getting arrested with predictable regularity. Since the decommissioning of the RAF's last nuclear weapons in 1998, the entire UK nuclear force is now based on Trident submarines, operating out of Faslane and Coulport in Scotland. No UK nuclear weapons are deployed in England and Wales. Yet anti-nuclear sentiment is stronger in Scotland than in England. The SNP has traditionally endorsed an anti-nuclear stance and has pledged to remove nuclear weapons should Scotland become independent. Opposition to Trident remains an important symbol for the party, one which distinguishes it from a Labour Party which has made peace with the concept of nuclear weapons. Since the Scottish elections of 2003, the SNP finds its position shared in the Scottish Parliament by the SSP with its six MSPs, and the Greens with their seven – both determined anti-nuclear parties. The other political issue they have in common is, of course, Scottish independence.

Recent survey data has shown that devolution has made Scottish independence neither more nor less likely. It has certainly not killed the nationalists' aspirations 'stone dead'. Taking the possibility of independence as its starting point, **Uncharted Waters** is a major study of the close link between two of the most controversial issues in British politics: the future of the Union, and the future of the UK nuclear deterrent. By thus giving credence to the possibility of independence, the work of Malcolm Chalmers, of Bradford University (Peace Studies), and William Walker, of St Andrews (International Relations) has been welcomed by nationalist commentators. On the other hand, Chalmers and Walker show how complex the nuclear deterrent issue is, and how this could complicate a possible route towards independence.

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Or could the SNP end up running an independent Scotland with the UK's nuclear weapons arsenal still on its ground? Chalmers and Walker show that relocating Trident outside Scotland would be hugely difficult and expensive. It can, they say, be discounted as a realistic option. If an independent Scotland renounced its rights to possess nuclear weapons under international law, it would still be likely that the international community would recognise the rest of the UK (rUK)'s legal right to remain a nuclear weapon state. Trident's deployment in Scotland would thus remain legal, but only if the nuclear weapons were under London's sole control. An independent Scotland, the authors argue, could not impose nuclear disarmament on the rest of the UK, partly because its EU membership could not be gained without rUK's cooperation – assuming that rUK's membership of the EU would not be questioned by the secession of Scotland, but that Scotland would have to apply for and negotiate EU membership (which could be vetoed by rUK).

Trident could thus become a bargaining tool between Edinburgh and London, between an SNP-led Scottish government and the UK government on the terms of independence. The SNP's current policy of forcing Trident's expulsion in the event of independence might, according to **Uncharted Waters**, therefore be unrealistic. On the other hand, rUK could not impose Trident on an independent Scotland, as the safe and reliable operation of the system would require the Scottish Government's full cooperation. Chalmers and Walker foresee only two sustainable options post-independence: a consensual abandonment of the UK's nuclear force; or a nuclear settlement that left Trident in Scotland (under a military basing agreement) in return for London's support for Edinburgh's political and economic objectives.

This is clearly a challenge for the SNP. Roseanna Cunningham MSP (who chairs an SNP working group on NATO and defence issues) said at the book launch at Edinburgh University that the authors had underestimated the strength of Nationalist opposition to nuclear weapons, the cause which motivated many people to join the SNP in the first place. Any renunciation of this 'core policy' would go to the 'heart of the SNP as an anti-nuclear movement.' A phased withdrawal was possible, but 'retention in perpetuity is simply not an option' (Milne 2002). If rUK wanted to remain a nuclear weapon state, it would eventually have to relocate, whatever the difficulties, whatever the costs.

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After the set-back for the SNP in the 2003 elections, independence is, arguably, not an imminent issue. But **Uncharted Waters** does not depend on the strict assumption of independence alone – although thinking through the issues and concerns in the eventuality of independence and the review of options for resolving them constitute the core of the book. Yet, one of the most interesting chapters is the one on ‘Devolution and Trident’. The authors show how much effort went into the pre-devolutionary negotiations to ensure that the devolved bodies would have no influence over Trident. ‘The more we have studied the Scotland Act, the more we have become aware of Whitehall’s deliberate attempt to clad it in a suit of armour that prevents any Scottish intervention in nuclear policy’ (p.62). Which highlights the current situation where the Scottish Executive and Parliament have no say over nuclear weapons policy, but their cooperation – for example, in policing, safety and emergency planning – is essential to its implementation. The modus operandi to address this conundrum is the Concordat signed between Edinburgh ministries and Whitehall. While in most areas, these concordats take up one or two pages, the one on defence and nuclear weapons runs to eleven pages.

During the first parliament, there was no apparent friction between London and Edinburgh over the Faslane base. But these concordats have not yet stood the test of time. What if different political parties are in charge north and south of the Border? Tensions would undoubtedly develop if London did not allow dialogue with Edinburgh on such an important matter as nuclear weapons. The authors also contend that Scotland’s acceptance of Trident after devolution depends heavily on the total absence of serious accidents at or around the nuclear bases.

The easiest solution would of course be to take Trident out of the equation. According to **Uncharted Waters**, a decision to replace Trident by an equivalent submarine system will probably have to be taken between 2010 and 2015. If the UK government decided not to replace Trident and thus to abandon a UK nuclear deterrent, the whole issue would evaporate. On the other hand, a decision to replace could cause tensions between London and a devolved Scotland if the latter felt excluded or insufficiently consulted about the decision.

Uncharted Waters has quickly established itself as a standard text which subsequent studies such as, for example, the Constitution Unit’s research on Scottish Independence (Murkens et al 2002, pp.87-90) ‘draw heavily’ on.

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Meticulously researched, impeccably argued and eminently readable in its presentation, Malcolm Chalmers's and William Walker's book is not assessing the probability of independence, its viability or even desirability, but it flags up one of the real issues of devolution and one of the major potential problems which would have to be dealt with if Scotland opted for independence.

REFERENCES

Kirsty Milne, 'Could the SNP learn to love the Bomb?', **The Scotsman**, 2 January 2002.

Jo Eric Murkens, with Peter Jones and Michael Keating, **Scottish Independence: A Practical Guide**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002.

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