This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in *International Politics*. The final authenticated version is available online at: https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-023-00463-7

Between role adaptation and contestation: the UK's status as a nuclear weapon state after Brexit

Abstract

The UK's status as a nuclear weapon-state has been an integral part of the UK's role in international affairs. This article traces several role conceptions associated with the UK's nuclear status, and analyses role adaptation and contestation before and after Brexit. While EU membership (and then Brexit) had little direct impact on the UK as a nuclear-weapon state, we can observe a growing tension between the UK's role conceptions of a 'responsible nuclear weapon state' and 'nuclear-armed power with a global reach' since around the time of the 2016 Brexit referendum. The 2021 *Integrated Review* indicates that the UK's role conception has shifted towards the latter. At the same time, domestic role contestation, also exacerbated by Brexit, has further challenged the UK's nuclear status, deepening divisions between the UK and Scottish governments, and placing the UK's reputation, as well as its future as a Union, on the line.

Key words

nuclear weapons; status; role adaptation; role contestation; nuclear responsibility; Integrated Review

Introduction

Nuclear weapons have been an integral part of the UK's security and defence posture since the first British nuclear test in 1952. Historically, nuclear weapons have been a fundamental material capability that has allowed the UK to claim great power status despite its relative decline after the Second World War (Baylis and Stoddart, 2015). The UK's status as a nuclear weapon state has, and continues to be, both materially and ideationally foundational to Britain's role orientation, or 'overarching role,' as a *leading global actor* (see Gaskarth, 2014: 47) imbued with special responsibilities to preserve international order and security (Ritchie 2007). As Prime Minister Harold Macmillan (cited in Freedman and Michaels, 2019) noted in 1958, possession of an independent nuclear deterrent 'puts us where we ought to be, in the position of a Great Power'. Although the term 'great power' has become something of a rarity in official statements, the UK Government's first major strategic document released the year after the UK formally withdrew from the European Union (EU), the *Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy,* still refers to the UK as a 'nuclear-armed power with global reach' (HM Government, 2021: 7).

Underpinning the UK's role orientation are multiple related role conceptions enacted through its role performances (see Webber in this special issue). In this regard, role conceptions 'refer to an actor's perception of his or her position vis-à-vis others', while role performance refers to enactment – that is, how an actor performs a given role (Harnisch, 2011: 8-9). Most notably, the UK has often positioned itself, 'as the most responsible of all nuclear-armed states' (Walker, 2010: 450), taking seriously its special responsibilities in the practice of nuclear deterrence. Further, the UK's status as a nuclear weapon state, while invariably linked to its 'special relationship' with the United States, has also been closely connected to its regional self-identity as 'a responsible and leading defender of Europe' (Ritchie, 2007). The UK also regularly seeks to enact 'practical' or 'pragmatic' diplomacy to uphold stability and order

(Egeland, 2021: 216). In sum, this article will show that the UK has three major role conceptions in the nuclear sphere: being a *responsible nuclear weapon state*, a *nuclear-armed power with global reach*, and a *pragmatic diplomatic power*. However, the relative weight and relevance of these role conceptions is not static and has shifted over time.

This article considers to what extent the UK's role conceptions as a nuclear weapon state have been adapted and contested in the years since the Brexit referendum. While controversy attended the nuclear weapons' section of the *Integrated Review* (Plant and Harries, 2021), comparatively little attention has yet been paid to the UK's role in the nuclear sphere after Brexit. Drawing on systematic in-depth documentary analysis of the UK's Defence Reviews and White Papers between 1990 and 2021, alongside UK statements and reports to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, the UN First Committee, and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as well as UK parliamentary debates during the same period,[1] we examine the UK's role performance in this area and argue that it is possible to observe in the nuclear domain important processes of adaptation. While these pre-date the 2016 referendum on UK membership of the EU, they do have important and ongoing implications for the status of the UK as a nuclear weapon state after Brexit.

The remainder of the article provides, first, an overview of the evolution of the UK's role orientation in the nuclear sphere. This is followed by an examination of how the three relevant UK role conceptions have been adapted since the Brexit referendum (and have, in consequence, found themselves in contradiction). We then analyse how these role adaptations have led to domestic role contestation and show how the domestic politics of Brexit and nuclear weapons overlap. The article concludes with some reflections on the impact of nuclear issues for the UK's role orientation after Brexit.

Understanding the UK's nuclear status and role orientation in a European context

To understand the implications of the UK's past – and pressingly present – prioritisation of nuclear weapons in its foreign and defence policy, it is necessary to account for both the symbolism and significance of this capability for the UK's status and national identity. Addressing the UK's post-Brexit status, Futter and Bowen (2020: 97) argue that 'a "newly independent" post-Brexit UK Government will see nuclear weapons as central to its global status, identity and perhaps also security' in part because, 'there has always been a feeling that UK nuclear weapons are as much about great power status and ensuring a leading role in global politics (however contested this notion might be) as they are about national security and military threats'. While nuclear weapons should be readily acknowledged as an important *material* capability bolstering the UK's (contested) status as a 'great' power on the world stage, being a possessor of nuclear weapons is also a critical *ideational* force influencing the UK's global role orientation.

The 2021 *Integrated Review* identified the UK's role as a 'nuclear armed state with global reach', thus re-emphasizing that the country's nuclear weapon capability and its quest for major power status in the world remain closely connected. The end of the Cold War might have marked a watershed at which the importance of the UK's nuclear capability for the country's role in the world could have been reviewed (Sabin, 1993). But the UK's 1990 *Options for Change* review (UK Parliament, Hansard, 1990) and the 1994 *Defence Costs Study* (HM Government, 1994) both reiterated the importance of the UK's nuclear deterrent, in particular as a signature contribution the UK could make to the NATO alliance (UK Parliament, Hansard, 1990).

To this major power role conception can be added the view that the UK has emerged as a 'responsible nuclear weapon state'. This position was articulated most clearly under the Blair-Brown Labour governments (1997-2010). Following the 1998 Strategic Defence Review

(HM Government, 1998) and the 2003 White Paper on Defence (HM Government, 2003) that emphasized the need for only a *minimum* deterrent and the possibility of full nuclear disarmament, it found explicit expression in the 2006 White Paper on the nuclear deterrent. That document noted that 'the UK has proved itself a responsible steward of nuclear weapons, reducing our capability as circumstances have allowed. Consistently we have employed our nuclear forces strictly as a means to deter acts of aggression against our vital interests and have never sought to use them to coerce others' (HM Government, 2006: 9). This, in turn, has fed into another, third role conception that goes beyond the nuclear realm, namely that the UK is a 'pragmatic diplomatic power.' Here, the UK is seen a bridge-builder in international nuclear politics and an initiator of pragmatic international policy initiatives.

While Brexit has raised questions over the UK's international reputation, particularly among European Union (EU) countries (Coveney, 2020), the UK's status as a nuclear weapon state was never noticeably influenced or altered by its membership of the EU. On matters concerning security and defence, the UK maintained something of a strained relationship with the EU. The UK was well-known for its lukewarm support of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, and for its clear prioritisation of NATO over EU-framed defence integration. That position has deep roots.

Even before the UK acceded to the then European Communities (EC), Pierre (1972) had noted that British self-identity as a nuclear weapon state was 'injurious' to Britain's interests within Europe, keeping the UK out of the Schuman Plan and European Defence Community in the 1950s. During this post-War period, the creation and continuation of an independent nuclear force was a priority for the UK government, advancing Britain's self-image as an imperial, self-sufficient great power that was, in fact, more than a European power (Pierre 1972). This could be rendered compatible with the transatlantic relationship and the UK's commitments in NATO, but in the early post-War period it reinforced the view that the

UK could somehow remain aloft from European integration. As Baylis and Stoddart (2015:216) suggest, British foreign and defence policy thus possessed something of a 'schizophrenic quality.' Nuclear weapons were held on behalf of Europe (albeit in NATO) but at the same time, reinforced 'the self-identity of the UK as a major "pivotal" power outside Europe with a particular responsibility to help preserve the international order'.

Once the UK joined the EC in 1973, what was to become the EU, did then become an increasingly important – albeit only one of many – venues for the UK's role performance. As an EU Member State, the UK was also a member of the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom), a body largely concerned with nuclear energy issues, but one also with nuclear non-proliferation implications through its safeguards system aimed at preventing nuclear materials being diverted away from civilian use (Södersten, 2019). Further, the evolution of an EU nuclear non-proliferation policy – from humble beginnings as a Working Group in 1981 to a fully-fledged EU strategy against proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in 2003 – offered the UK an opportunity to work with its EU partners in the international nuclear non-proliferation regime including the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); assistance and outreach programmes, especially to Eastern Europe; and international negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme. But it would be going too far to argue that the EU was a central part of the UK nuclear policy. In a European context, the UK's role conceptions have largely been performed through NATO. Tellingly, in UK security reviews, the EU is not mentioned in any nuclear deterrence and policy section. NATO, however, features repeatedly. This does not mean that the UK's nuclear deterrent is irrelevant in the context of Brexit. On the contrary, how the UK adapts its role conceptions in the nuclear sphere is crucial as it strives to reset its broader foreign and security policy.

Analysing UK nuclear role adaptation after Brexit

The outline of the UK's nuclear status and role orientation in a European context has revealed three specific role conceptions associated with its status as a nuclear weapon state: a *responsible nuclear weapon state*, a *nuclear-armed power with global reach*, and a *pragmatic diplomatic power*. Each is unpacked in this section. Our focus is on role adaptation and the strategies and instruments the UK has adopted in performing each role, with a particular focus on the timeframe from 2002 to 2022.

Responsible nuclear weapon state

As previously noted, the UK has long viewed itself as a leading global actor imbued with special responsibilities for preserving international order and security. The UK government's National Report to the 2019 NPT Preparatory Committee refers to the UK as a 'responsible Nuclear Weapon State' (United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, 2019), echoing similar public statements and declarations dating back to the early 2000s. According to Ritchie (2013: 167), the theme of responsibility, 'pervades British nuclear weapons discourse' and shapes also the UK's role conception as a 'force for good' (Ritchie, 2007). Walker (2010: 450) further argues that the UK is a 'responsible nuclear sovereign' that not only has 'an exceptional duty of care over the capabilities [it has] acquired', but which also, 'holds itself up as an exemplar' and the most responsible of the nuclear weapon states. Our examination[2] of UK statements given to the NPT and UN First Committee since 2002 highlights the strong attachment of the UK to this framing of 'responsibility' on issues of nuclear deterrence, multilateral nuclear non-proliferation and arms control (for example, UK Government 2005, 2007, 2013). That discourse continued throughout the Brexit referendum, and transition period (HM Government 2016, 2018; United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, 2019).

As a responsible nuclear weapon state, the UK emphasises its membership, and consistent support, of the various multilateral treaties and bodies that make up the nuclear weapons regime complex, including the IAEA, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization, the UN First Committee, the Conference on Disarmament, and the NPT.[3] The UK has also consistently stated that, '[t]he five Nuclear Weapon States [NWS] recognised by the NPT have a *special responsibility* for the continued strength of the Treaty' (UNODA 2019; *emphasis added*). As a nuclear weapon state, the UK has worked closely with these states – the United States, Russia,[4] China, and France – coordinating together and giving joint statements as the P5 within the NPT going back to the 1998 NPT Preparatory Committee. In 2009, the UK went further by initiating the P5 Process, which was an effort 'to demonstrate the NWS's commitment to their NPT obligations, facilitate confidence-building between them and lay the groundwork for progress on disarmament' (Shetty and Williams, 2020: 8). In initiating and advancing the P5 Process, the UK has not only highlighted its special responsibilities as a nuclear weapon state, but its convening and facilitating power also. In January 2022, for example, Minister of State, Lord Ahmad, stated to the House of Lords that the UK was 'instrumental' in getting a Joint P5 declaration approaching the NPT 2022 Review Conference 'over the line' (UK Parliament, Hansard 2022).

Related, the UK has been at pains to present itself as the most progressive of the P5, with a stockpile that 'is the smallest belonging to any of the five recognised nuclear weapon states' (Liddle, 2021). Such framing is linked to the UK's ongoing emphasis on its 'minimum, assured, credible nuclear deterrent' (HM Government 2021: 76), and the fact that it has only one delivery system – a point that has even seen the UK described by Walker (2010) as a 'disarmament threshold state' courtesy of its 'responsibility to move themselves and others towards nuclear disarmament'.

We have already noted that British membership of the EU has, historically, had only a negligible impact on the UK's role conception as a *responsible nuclear weapon state.* Brexit, however, did shake things up. Exit from the EU meant, simultaneously, an exit from Euratom (even though the latter is, legally-speaking, a separate entity). Concerns were thus raised about the UK leaving Euratom's safeguards and inspection mechanisms, with the UK's civilian nuclear installations remaining, in consequence, only under the IAEA safeguards umbrella. As Södersten (2016) explains

> Euratom's safeguards system is much wider in scope than the IAEA system as it does not differentiate between nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states; the [European] Commission has inspection rights in all EU member states and it safeguards all civil nuclear material. When Brexit takes place, the 'regional' layer of safeguards, that is, the Euratom safeguards, will not be exercised in the UK. Although the international layer at the IAEA level will continue, the result is a significant downscaling of safeguarding activities in the UK.'

In light of these challenges, the UK has been keen to highlight again its role as a 'responsible nuclear weapon state.' The UK has remained active in the IAEA and has maintained high levels of voluntary funding for the Agency. When the UK signed the necessary agreements with the IAEA to retain an international safeguards system in the UK after Brexit, Sir Alan Duncan, then the UK's representative in the IAEA General Conference, declared specifically that 'we will meet our obligations as a *responsible nuclear state* when we are no longer a member of the EU' (Duncan, 2018).

That insistence notwithstanding, there has been a subtle shift in UK discourse surrounding nuclear responsibilities since 2020. In November 2020, Sarah Price, Head of the UK Government Counter Proliferation and Arms Control Centre (cited in BASIC, 2020), announced that, 'we no longer use the phrase responsible Nuclear Weapon State in our national statements'. She referred instead to the UK, 'taking seriously our responsibilities as a nuclear weapon state'. The UK's 2021 National Report to the postponed NPT review conference noted similarly that, 'the UK is a Nuclear Weapon State (NWS) *that takes its nuclear responsibilities seriously'* (UK Government, 2021: 6 *emphasis added*). A seemingly semantic point, this subtle adjustment can be associated with the work of a Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)-sponsored project addressing Nuclear Responsibilities which set out to, 'encourage possessor states and their allies to discard the language of "responsible nuclear weapon state"' (Brixey-Williams and Wheeler, 2020: 31). According to Brixey-Williams and Wheeler, the more standard framing was grounded in the self-identification of the nuclear weapons' state themselves and so was controversial among non-nuclear weapon states. The discursive shift was then a means of committing the UK 'to deepen its understanding of its own "responsibilities'' while inviting others – governmental and non-governmental – to do the same' (Paul, 2021). The timing of the UK's modified nuclear responsibilities framing may also be viewed, somewhat cynically, as an attempt to allay accusations of the UK being an 'irresponsible' nuclear weapon state with the launch of its *Integrated Review* (@BeaFihn 2022; ICAN, 2021). As Paul (2021) highlights, '[t]he framing also deftly sidesteps the contentious question of whether there can be such a thing as responsible behaviour with nuclear weapons'.

Towards a 'nuclear-armed power with global reach'

A formal commitment to nuclear disarmament has been an important part of the UK's role conception as a 'responsible nuclear weapon state.' That said, there has never been widespread

support in the UK Parliament or the general public for full and swift nuclear disarmament, particularly if taken as a unilateral measure. This became particularly evident in 2007, when the then Labour government had to decide on the renewal of Vanguard-class ballistic missile submarines in order to extend the life-span of the UK's nuclear deterrent. Against significant resistance within the Labour Party, with around 85 Labour MPs voting against their government, but with the support of the Conservative opposition, the House of Commons backed the proposal to initiate the replacement process of the submarines by a large majority (409 to 161).

At the same time, however, the Labour government was careful to not give the impression that maintaining the nuclear deterrent was simply about great power status. The justification focused heavily on the uncertainty of the future strategic environment and the implications for national security. It specifically stated that '[w]e maintain our nuclear forces as a means of deterring acts of aggression against our vital interests and not for reasons of status' (HM Government 2006: 20). In other words, the role conception of a 'great power' was formally rejected. Indeed, the White Paper that outlined the decision to replace the submarines, portrayed the UK as a 'a responsible steward of nuclear weapons', highlighting both the stringent limits of the use of nuclear weapons and major steps directed toward strengthening the UK's nuclear disarmament commitment. Specifically, the stockpile of operationally available warheads was to be reduced to fewer than 160 and the overall stockpile of warheads was to be reduced by twenty per cent to an estimated number of 225 (HM Government, 2006: 9).

When the new Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government entered office in May 2010, it essentially maintained the approach of the 2006 White Paper. The *Strategic Defence and Security Review* (SDSR) published in October thus reaffirmed the decision to go ahead with the replacement of existing nuclear-armed submarines, and to make additional

warhead reductions, while highlighting the UK's role as a 'responsible nuclear weapon state'. In this regard, the SDSR emphasized the UK's international obligations regarding nuclear weapons and its long-term commitment to nuclear disarmament (HM Government, 2010a: 37). Although the SDSR and the 2010 *National Security Strategy*, which was published at the same time as the SDSR, made clear that the UK remained fully committed to the nuclear deterrent, nuclear deterrence did not play a dominant part in the UK's description as a nuclear weapon state. Interestingly, the UK nuclear deterrent figured barely at all in the 2010 *National Security Strategy* and was mentioned in passing on just two occasions (HM Government 2010b).

The next SDSR, published in 2015 under a Conservative majority government, reiterated the disarmament decisions of the 2010 SDSR while still referring to the UK as a 'responsible nuclear weapon state'. However, no new disarmament or transparency measures were introduced. The 2015 SDSR placed greater emphasis on the role of the nuclear deterrent for national security, in the context of what it called '[r]ecent changes in the international security context'. At the same time, the document re-affirmed the government's full commitment to 'replace the Vanguard Class of nuclear-armed submarines with a new class of four submarines' (HM Government, 2015: 34-35). As the SDSR was published a year before the Brexit referendum, it determined the course of the UK's nuclear deterrent beyond Brexit. The point of no return came only weeks after the Brexit referendum, when a decisive vote in the House of Commons in July 2016 confirmed (by 472 to 117) the replacement steps outlined in the 2015 SDSR.

In practice, the 2015 SDSR represents a subtle shift away from a role that emphasized the UK's international obligations and commitment to nuclear disarmament measures towards a greater emphasis on nuclear deterrence in the UK's own national interest. These developments were underpinned by UK participation in a US programme to extend the service life of the Trident II D5 missiles, used on British nuclear-armed submarines, and – more

controversially – a decision to replace the missiles' existing warheads (Mills, 2021). The development of the new warhead in the form of a parallel US-UK programme is particularly telling, being somewhat incompatible with the spirit of the UK's commitment to nuclear disarmament under Article VI of the NPT and an important element of its role conception as a 'responsible nuclear weapon state' (Harries, 2021).

The most significant shifts in terms of role conception followed, however, from the *Integrated Review*. Although the language and structure of the section on the nuclear deterrent is very similar to that in the 2015 SDSR, there are two important changes. First, the 'overall nuclear warhead stockpile ceiling' was raised from the 180 envisioned in the 2010 SDSR, to a projected 260, citing the 'evolving security environment' and unspecified 'technological and doctrinal threats' (HM Government, 2021: 76). Although it was not clear how far the UK would move toward this new limit, it constituted hypothetically a forty per cent increase in its warhead stockpile. Second, the UK reaffirmed a 'long-standing policy of deliberate ambiguity' on what circumstances would give rise to the use of nuclear weapons and extended that position by suggesting it would 'no longer give public figures for [the UK's] operational stockpile, deployed warhead or deployed missile numbers' (HM Government, 2021: 77).

Why the UK decided to go down this route was hotly debated (*The Economist* 2021), but as Plant and Harries (2021) point out, these changes are 'in apparent contrast to the Review's emphasis on UK support for multilateral diplomacy and will do much to negate a self-crafted diplomatic image of the UK as the most progressive of the world's nuclear-armed powers'. In other words, the UK's role conception as a 'responsible nuclear weapon state' that emphasizes its international obligations and nuclear disarmament commitments has taken a backseat in the *Integrated Review*. At the same time, however, the greater assertiveness regarding the UK's nuclear deterrent chimes well with the *Integrated Review's* focus on the

UK as a ‘European country with global interests’ that has a ‘global perspective and global responsibilities’ (HM Government, 2021: 60).

That assertiveness became particularly apparent with AUKUS, the trilateral security agreement between Australia, the UK and the United States announced in September 2021. The agreement focused on the UK and the US helping Australia with the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, but was intended to be, not least from a British perspective, a much broader strategic pact. Although, in practical terms, the agreement is still in its infancy, especially when it comes to the actual construction of nuclear submarines, it has raised important proliferation concerns, as it would involve using highly enriched uranium and sharing with a non-nuclear weapon state, the sensitive nuclear technology possessed by two nuclear weapon states. While it is technically possible to address the proliferation issues through the IAEA (Levite and Dalton, 2021), AUKUS seemed to set an unwelcome precedent for other countries such as China and Russia, and was criticised as contradictory to the principles and goals of the NPT (ICAN Australia, 2021). AUKUS thus showcased how the UK Government has become less concerned with its role as a ‘responsible nuclear weapon state’ associated with its advocacy of multilateral treaties and bodies within the nuclear weapons regime complex outlined in the previous section.

However, AUKUS is fully compatible with the UK’s role conception of a ‘nuclear-armed power with global reach.’ The agreement’s strategic objective is to counter and balance Chinese ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region and, as such, offers the UK an opportunity to reinforce its long-term commitment to what the *Integrated Review* calls a region ‘at the centre of intensifying geopolitical competition’ (HM Government, 2021: 66). Defending AUKUS in Parliament, Prime Minister Boris Johnson emphasized that the agreement is ‘what global Britain’s tilt towards the Indo-Pacific would mean in reality’ and highlighted the UK’s privileged membership in a ‘tiny circle’ of what are effectively six great powers with the ability

to build nuclear submarines (UK Parliament, Hansard, 2021). In sum, the *Integrated Review* and AUKUS – respectively the UK's first major strategic document and international strategic agreement since Brexit – de-emphasized the UK's role conception as a 'responsible nuclear weapon state' and pointed to a shift towards the historical role conception of a 'great power.'

Pragmatic diplomatic power

A third role conception associated with the UK's status as a nuclear weapon state is that of *pragmatic diplomatic power*. According to the *Integrated Review*, the Prime Minister's vision for the UK in 2030 was that of a 'problem-solving and burden-sharing nation with a global perspective', citing in particular the UK's strengths as a 'Global Leader in Diplomacy and Development' (HM Government, 2021: 6-7) and its possession of the fourth largest diplomatic network in the world. The UK has long-standing multilateral credentials as a convening power, evident (as noted previously) in the role it has played in the P5 Process. The UK perceives itself as a diplomatic power first and foremost and this, as the *Integrated Review* suggests, is 'underwritten by the credibility of our deterrent and our ability to project power' (HM Government, 2021: 7). In nuclear diplomacy, the UK positions itself as something of a middle-ranking state being both the smallest but also the most willing of the P5 powers to work with non-nuclear weapon states. Lord Ahmad (cited in Hansard, 2022 *emphasis added*) in the build up to the 10th NPT review conference suggested that 'the United Kingdom recognises its responsibilities as a *bridge builder* among nuclear weapon and non-nuclear weapon states', a point which accords with UK diplomatic efforts aimed at building consensus (these include the Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) and Stepping Stones initiatives) (UK Government, 2021).

As Schrafstetter and Twigge (2004: 213) note, the UK typically pursues 'pragmatic policies' concerning nuclear weapons. UK nuclear diplomacy has been geared to the pursuit of

what a 2021 position paper defined as ‘practical, effective initiatives’ (UK Government 2021: 17). Such policies have their limits. According to Egeland (2021: 216) nuclear weapon states often champion ‘practical’ or ‘pragmatic’ diplomatic approaches’ but ‘since the 1960s or earlier’ these have met ‘with limited or no success.’ Nonetheless, there seems to be a genuine commitment on the part of the UK. London has been at the forefront of nuclear verification efforts for over two decades, including through initiatives such as the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification, and the Quad Nuclear Verification Partnership with Norway, Sweden, and the US (UK Government, 2021: 12). Within the NPT, moreover, the UK has submitted working papers addressing nuclear disarmament verification in every review cycle back to 2000. In the 2015-2020 NPT review cycle, the UK also advanced proposals on transparency and confidence-building measures through dialogue with civil society, as well as with and between nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states (UK Government, 2021: 13-14; @France-Désarmement 2021; European Leadership Network, 2020; US Department of State, 2019; Wilton Park, 2021). The UK government has also sought to advance efforts around strategic risk reduction (HM Government 2021: 78).

Brexit’s impact on all of this, however, appears to have been limited. Its main effect has been the UK’s exclusion from EU coordinated action (detailed in Portela, 2020). As a member of the EU, the UK held a seat on the Non-Proliferation (CONOP) and Disarmament (CODUN) working groups within the Council of the EU and had a voice in shaping the EU’s common decision in preparation for NPT review conferences and the work of the UN First Committee. But the UK had, in any case, long recognised the limitations of any EU common position on nuclear issues, due to Member State divisions on nuclear disarmament and nuclear energy. Since Brexit, the UK has been relieved of having to dedicate significant time and energy to help construct EU policy. In practical terms, the UK has continued to maintain its own diplomatic networks with individual EU Member States through NATO and other bilateral

and plurilateral initiatives such as the Quad Partnership, CEND Initiative and coordination between the P5 and the Stepping Stones Initiative. The UK also remains an active member of the E3/EU+3 format in the negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme. As Billon Galland et al (2021) point out, '[t]he E3 format has so far been successfully insulated from the complexity and politics of the Brexit process. If anything, the pace, and intensity of E3 cooperation appears to have increased since at least 2018.' In other words, despite Brexit, the negotiations with Iran has offered the UK the opportunity to play its role as a 'pragmatic diplomatic power' in the nuclear sphere.

Role contestation in the UK's nuclear status post-Brexit

While role theory assumes that states possess multiple – and even potentially competing - role conceptions, socially constructed and enacted through multiple agent-based material and ideological properties (Beasley et al., 2021: 2), role theoretical approaches in International Relations have also been critiqued for 'black-boxing' the state and neglecting those domestic political processes that generate role contestation and selection (Brummer and Thies, 2015). As Webber highlights in the introduction to this special issue, Brexit was no 'external shock' but was driven by domestic political processes within the UK. To understand the effects of Brexit on the UK's nuclear status, therefore, domestic role contestation must also be addressed. Recent work on role theory has sought to connect domestic contestation with foreign policy role-playing, highlighting domestic role contestation as, the 'social process among individuals, groups, and organizations within states and societies regarding the selection of a role among the menu of available choices' (Walker et al., 2016: 123). Domestic disagreement over role conceptions occurs both *vertically* – between elite and masses – and/or *horizontally* – between elite groups (McCourt, 2020: 174).

Brexit has reaffirmed the UK's role conception as a nuclear-armed power with global reach, but it has also been behind brewing discontent and contestation between the regions over the UK's very status as a nuclear power and its future as a union state. Horizontal role contestation is most evident between the UK and Scottish governments. In its 2021 manifesto, the Scottish National Party (SNP) stated that it maintains a

> firm and unequivocal opposition to nuclear weapons – both in principle and to their location in Scotland. This includes opposition to replacement of the Trident nuclear missile system and to the UK Government plans to increase the number of nuclear warheads. We want to see a world free from nuclear weapons, and an independent Scotland will be a strong and principled advocate for nuclear disarmament on the global stage (Scottish National Party, 2021: 74).

With 62 per cent of Scottish electorate voting Remain in the Brexit referendum, the SNP has also made re-joining the EU a manifesto commitment (Scottish National Party, 2021: 72) and has championed a second Scottish independence referendum (following that held in 2014). With an anti-nuclear stance 'constitutive of the [SNP's] identity and its very conception of an independent Scotland' (Ritchie, 2016: 669), the more Westminster pushes for a modernised Trident with a revamped global reach, the more divisions with the Scottish government will deepen and widen.

Such role contestation between elite groups is further amplified by vertical role contestation between domestic elites and masses. While UK-wide public opinion tends to support the UK retaining a nuclear missile system (YouGov, 2022), Scottish domestic support for Trident has been far more limited.[5] This contestation in regional public opinion can also be

observed through the lenses of Scottish nationalism and independence. As Ritchie (2016: 662) suggests, advocates of Scottish independence articulate a narrative of Westminster 'imposing undemocratic policies upon Scotland within the Union', and framing Scotland, by contrast, as 'internationalist, progressive, peaceful compared to an imperial, nuclear, militarist Westminster'. Contestation particularly serves to highlight the 'Englishness' of the UK's status as a nuclear weapon state, and the role conceptions associated with it. As a study by Clements and Thomson (2021: 3) has highlighted, 'support [for] retaining Britain's nuclear deterrent is associated with supporting the Conservative Party, favouring Brexit, endorsing keeping superior military power worldwide as an important foreign policy goal, wanting to protect the 'special relationship' with the US, and with being male'. While their results do not offer a breakdown of regional differentiation, Scotland both rejected Brexit, and has historically low support for the Conservative Party. Scotland also has a thriving civil society campaign for nuclear disarmament, and several Scottish local authorities, including East Ayrshire, Edinburgh, Fife, Glasgow, and Renfrewshire Councils, have publicly backed the International Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) Cities Appeal. While Scots themselves remain heavily divided over Scottish independence – with a January 2022 poll showing 46 per cent yes, 46 per cent no, and 8 per cent undecided (Reuters 2022) – there is little doubt that any second independence referendum would include nuclear disarmament and the future of Trident as a prominent campaign issue. Domestic role contestation towards the UK's role conception as a nuclear-armed state with global reach can therefore be found that calls the UK's nuclear status into even greater question, not only placing the UK's reputation on the line, but it's very future as a Union.

Conclusion

Since the 2016 Brexit referendum, the UK's role conception in the nuclear sphere has changed in significant ways. After the Cold War, the UK began to adopt a role as a self-declared 'responsible nuclear weapon state' emphasizing its small, minimum nuclear arsenal, its commitment to non-proliferation and, most importantly, its steps towards nuclear disarmament. More recently, the official discourse has shifted somewhat – from the UK being a responsible nuclear weapon state to the UK having special responsibilities, but the main elements of the UK's role performance regarding 'responsibility' have remained similar. Yet, more significantly, these elements have given ground to other acts of role performance that challenge, if not openly contradict, the role conception of a 'responsible nuclear weapon state.' Most notably, since 2015 the UK has put increasing emphasis on the importance of its nuclear deterrent and the need to replace, renew and improve it in a timeline that runs into the 2030s. To this end, the UK is committed to acquiring a new generation of nuclear-armed submarines, as well as new warhead and new missile systems. The *Integrated Review*, published just a year after the UK had formally left the EU, embodied these changes. It emphasized the UK's position as a sovereign actor on the world stage, exemplified by the role conception of a 'nuclear-armed power with global reach.' Subsequently, AUKUS offered the UK the opportunity to put this new role conception into practice and perform a role that emphasized its sovereign nuclear capability, its global reach beyond Europe and its special relationship with the United States.

Brexit itself has had very little direct impact on these developments. In the few areas, where the UK worked closely with the EU on nuclear matters (Euratom safeguards or the nuclear negotiations with Iran), the repercussions of Brexit have been minor. Unlike NATO, the EU has played only a subordinate part in the UK's nuclear policies. In principle, all developments in the nuclear sphere since 2015 could have happened even without Brexit. As a

matter of fact, these developments can be traced back to at least 2007, when the UK Parliament decided to initiate the replacement of Trident.

What we do find however, is that Brexit has contributed to a growing tension between the UK's role conception as a 'responsible nuclear weapon state' and its revived role as a 'nuclear weapon state with global reach'. In a sense, the UK as a nuclear actor has always been characterized by an inherent tension between its status as a nuclear power and its role conception as a 'responsible nuclear weapon state.' While the emphasis during the first 25 years after the Cold War was on the latter, the pendulum seems to be swinging towards the former, with pragmatic diplomatic actions such as the UK's E3/EU+3 involvement over Iran's nuclear programme offering a complementary act of role performance. How far the pendulum will swing is unclear. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the return of major war to the centre of Europe is likely to provide significant momentum to the strengthening of the UK nuclear deterrent as a sovereign capability. However, this article has also highlighted substantial role contestation domestically. The more the UK government enacts its role conception as a 'nuclear-armed power with global reach' the more divisions will deepen between Westminster and Holyrood, further strengthening the movement for Scottish independence.

Notes

[1] The full list of documents is listed in the bibliography. For an in-depth methodological discussion, see Tight 2019.

[2] Document analysis of UK statements and working papers from 2002 to 2019, drawing from https://ploughshares.ca/pl_publications/states-parties-npt-reports-united-kingdom | https://reachingcriticalwill.org/disarmament-fora | https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/

[3] Important to note that the nuclear weapons regime complex also comprises the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). The UK rejected the TPNW arguing that nuclear deterrence is necessary due to the 'unpredictable international security environment' and that the TPNW both 'undermines' and 'weakens' the NPT (see HM Government 2017).

[4] Although the 2022 Russo-Ukraine war has impacted the UK's relations with Russia, including through the P5. France coordinated the P5 Process in 2021, however the UK government often takes on pen-holder responsibilities within the P5 to facilitate progress on certain issues, for example on risk reduction.

[5] In April 2021 44 per cent of Scots polled by YouGov said that Britain should give up nuclear weapons completely, compared to just 18 per cent of those polled in England (YouGov 2022). It is worth noting however, that polling from March 2022 indicated a shift in Scottish public opinion, with support for Trident's replacement seeing an increase from 20 per cent to 38 per cent since September 2021, likely attributed to the effects of 2022 Russo-Ukraine war.

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