

The Politics of Trident

*Jeremy Corbyn MP
Julian Lewis MP*

The Agreement between the UK and the USA for Co-operation in the Uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defence Purposes, also known as the Mutual Defence Agreement (MDA), was signed in 1958. It allows the United States and the UK to exchange nuclear materials, technology and information. After many years, on 6 November 2014, the UK Parliament finally debated the Agreement, although not its renewal, which fell due at the end of 2014. Few Members of Parliament attended this landmark debate, which revealed some of the politics of Trident nuclear weapons. The debate was secured by Jeremy Corbyn and Julian Lewis, who are on opposite sides of the discussion about upgrading Trident nuclear missiles for another generation.

* * *

Jeremy Corbyn

(Islington North) (Labour): ...

Why do we have to debate something as fundamental as a mutual defence agreement with the United States in time allocated by the Backbench Business Committee? The answer is that Governments of all hues – this applies to my party, as well as the coalition Government and previous Conservative Governments – have been reluctant to have parliamentary debates on this subject ... It is interesting that parliamentary scrutiny of the mutual defence agreement and nuclear weapons has been in short supply going back to the end of the second world war. The National Archives in Kew has a document, ‘Extracts from a memorandum on the Atomic Bomb from Prime Minister Clement Attlee, 28th August 1945’, which states:

‘The only course which seems to me to be feasible and to offer a reasonable hope of staving off imminent disaster for the world is joint action by the USA, UK and Russia based upon stark reality. We should declare that this invention has made it essential to end wars. The New World Order must start now. All nations must give up their dreams of realising some historic expansion at the expense of their neighbours. They must look to a peaceful future instead of to a warlike past. This sort of thing has in the past been considered a utopian dream. It has become today the essential condition of the survival of civilisation and possibly of life on this planet.’

That was Prime Minister Attlee’s view in August 1945, just after the first nuclear weapons had been exploded at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Seven years later, there was an explosion in Australia by Britain when its first H-bomb was detonated ... The then Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, made a statement to the House of Commons on the detonation of that weapon on 3 October 1952. He explained that the temperature at the centre of it was nearly 1 million degrees and the damage it caused, and said that the Government were grateful to the Australian Government for allowing the test. He concluded:

‘All those concerned in the production of the first British atomic bomb are to be warmly congratulated on the successful outcome of an historic episode and I should no doubt pay my compliments to the Leader of the Opposition and the party opposite for initiating it.’ – [*Official Report*, 23 October 1952; Vol. 505, c. 1269.]

That was the same Clement Attlee. I am a great admirer of Clement Attlee’s domestic record, but not of a large part of his international record. During questions, Samuel Silverman asked the Prime Minister to explain ‘the total cost of this experimental explosion’ ... Prime Minister Churchill – this is fascinating – then said:

‘As to the cost, I have said before, as an old Parliamentarian, that I was rather astonished that well over £100 million should be disbursed without Parliament being made aware of it. I was a bit astonished. However, there is the story, and we now have a result which on the whole, I think, will be beneficial to public safety. As for the future, I think we must be guided by the precedents established under the last régime as to detailed accounts and the way in which the expenditure is recorded.’ – [*Official Report*, 23 October 1952; Vol. 505, c. 1271.]

It is astonishing that, with all the austerity at the end of the second world war, the then Prime Minister managed to spend £100 million of public money without telling Parliament, and apparently without discussing it with

his Cabinet, which resulted in the entirely secret development of a British nuclear weapon, the first of which was exploded in 1952. We still had for some time the pretence that Britain had an independent nuclear deterrent.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (Scottish National Party): ... Does the hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) agree that it is unacceptable for a UK Government of any party to wish to spend £100 billion on through-life costs for Trident renewal, and to do so in a way that is not open and transparent, maintaining the historical tradition of being secretive, and not being prepared to face the consequences of their decisions? ...

Jeremy Corbyn: ... I agree with his points. The secrecy surrounding anything to do with nuclear weapons is completely unacceptable. The fact that the British Parliament has barely debated the mutual defence agreement – I will come to that in a moment – since its existence is serious. The huge expenditure on Trident, at £100 billion, is enormous by any stretch of the imagination ...

On scrutiny, the US is a major military and industrial power; that is obvious. It is a very wealthy country – that is equally obvious. The President must send a message to Congress to ask it to approve and renew the amended treaty, and it must debate, vote on and approve the matter. We have no such transparency in the British Parliament. The Prime Minister or any other Minister still has the ability to use the royal prerogative to override Parliament in this respect, and to approve the treaty, if that is what they want to do. That is why I was so determined that we should have this debate and why I have raised the issue on so many occasions.

Mr John Leech (Manchester, Withington) (Liberal Democrat): ... He is talking as though he is surprised about the lack of scrutiny. I am not surprised in the slightest, because if we had any decent level of scrutiny, it would be very clear that replacing Trident is a complete waste of money.

Jeremy Corbyn: ... I am optimistic that every Government wants to consult Parliament and wants Parliament to approve of things, but we have to face the reality that the lack of a written constitution and of a clear delineation of power, particularly on foreign affairs and treaty matters, means that the Government of the day, whatever party it is, does not have to consult Parliament on agreeing a treaty – or, indeed, on going to war – unless we change the relevant legislation. As the hon. Gentleman knows, there is a war powers Bill before Parliament, but I do not have much hope

of it getting through Parliament, despite my inevitable optimism on all these matters.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Might my hon. Friend not want to question why the Liberal Democrats, who seem to be exerting some influence – undesirable, I would say – over the Trident renewal programme, do not seem to have managed, or even tried, to exert that influence to get this issue debated? ...

Jeremy Corbyn: ... My purpose today is to debate the mutual defence agreement and that, of course, is central to Britain's nuclear relationship with the United States. I turn to the history of the agreement. The USA had the McMahon Act, which did not allow the sharing of its nuclear or defence information with any other state, notwithstanding the provisions of the NATO treaty of 1948. Britain, which had a very close relationship with the USA throughout the 1940s and '50s, could not legally share a relationship of nuclear information with the USA. The McMahon Act was then amended, and straight after the amendment was agreed, the mutual defence agreement came into being, by which information and technology is shared between Britain and the USA.

An interesting legal point relates to the use of testing facilities at the Atomic Weapons Establishment Aldermaston and plutonium, which it would be completely illegal to use or test in the USA. I would be grateful if the Minister said whether there is any testing involving plutonium or potential uses of plutonium at AWE Aldermaston, because it is a significant part of the issue.

The mutual defence agreement has been amended a number of times in its history and was most recently renewed, on a regular 10-year cycle, to allow arrangements for the transfer of special nuclear materials and non-nuclear components. The treaty was last extended in 2004 and will be extended a further 10 years from this year. As I have explained, the US Congress debated it earlier; we were not able to debate it.

The next issue relates to what I have just said about the use of AWE Aldermaston, but also to the legality of nuclear weapons and the relationship of the agreement to the non-proliferation treaty, which is the result of an initiative by a previous Labour Government to try to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The treaty has two central themes. One is that all states that do not possess nuclear weapons and that sign the non-proliferation treaty agree not to possess them, take them on board or develop them. The other is that the five declared nuclear weapon states –

Britain, France, China, Russia and the USA – agree both to take steps towards disarmament and not to allow the proliferation of nuclear weapons. So it would be interesting to know how Israel managed to get hold of its nuclear weapons and nuclear facilities.

It would also be interesting to know how this Government or any other Government can justify nuclear rearmament within the terms of the articles of the non-proliferation treaty. In a legal opinion released in July 2004 for Peacerights, BASIC – the British American Security Information Council – and the Acronym Institute, Rabinder Singh, QC, and Professor Christine Chinkin of Matrix Chambers concluded that

‘it is strongly arguable that the renewal of the Mutual Defence Agreement is in breach of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty’.

I would therefore be grateful if the Minister said in his reply to the debate what the legal process is in the evaluation of the mutual defence agreement and how he believes that it is compatible with our obligations under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, which is coming up for its five-year review in May 2015 ...

Will he explain exactly what power and what finance have been used, in advance of the Trident replacement programme, to ensure that the British Government have that money available, even though there has been no main-gate decision, which is due to be taken in 2016?

I shall quote from written evidence given to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs by Nick Ritchie of the Bradford disarmament research centre:

‘The UK is entirely dependent upon the United States for supply and refurbishment of its Trident II (D5) submarine-launched ballistic missiles ... The missiles themselves are produced and serviced in the United States by Lockheed Martin. The UK does not actually own any individual missiles, but purchased the rights to 58 missiles from a common pool held at the US Strategic Weapons facility at the Kings Bay Submarine Base, Georgia. British Trident submarines also conduct their missile test firings at the US Eastern Test Range, off the coast of Florida.’

The obvious point is that the claim that Britain has an independent nuclear deterrent must be treated with the utmost caution, if not derision, when what is quite clear is where the technology comes from, the relationship with the mutual defence agreement, the expenditure involved and the testing facilities that are available for Britain to use in the USA.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Conservative): There is a question of independence in terms not of manufacture, but of control. Does the hon.

Gentleman accept that it is entirely a matter for the United Kingdom Government whether the deterrent would be fired, as opposed to used – fired in response to a nuclear attack on this country – and that the United States could do nothing to prevent that from happening?

Jeremy Corbyn: That is indeed a very good question. I hope that the Minister can assist the hon. Gentleman with the answer, because it is fundamental. We have been told all my life that we have an independent nuclear deterrent in Britain and that we can operate independently. The mutual defence agreement should not have been necessary in 1958 if that was the case. It clearly was the case before 1958. Whether it was after that, I doubt, and it certainly was not the case at all after Polaris came in during the 1960s. That was a US import, as is the current technology. Could Britain fire off a nuclear weapon independently of the United States? No, I do not believe that it could. I believe that it would require the active participation of the US military and US Administration to undertake that. I simply do not believe that it is an independent nuclear weapon. I hope that this debate begins to raise more of those extremely important questions.

I was referring a few moments ago to the activities at AWE Aldermaston. Stanley Orman, a former deputy director of the AWE, said in 2008 that

‘we also devised a technique ... of imploding a non-fissile plutonium isotope. Now because it was plutonium the laws in the States would not allow you to implode this even though it was non-fissile, because it was plutonium. So again the American scientists would come across and use our laboratories because they couldn’t use theirs.’

If that is the case, one has to ask this question. Why is this treaty so one-sided that the USA is unable to do some testing in its own jurisdiction and therefore does it in ours, when the mutual defence agreement has received very limited parliamentary scrutiny, apart from today? ...

I met the Foreign Minister of the Marshall Islands in New York at the NPT review conference in May. He witnessed a nuclear explosion as a child, and his community has been devastated by successive testing. The community are now taking out an International Court of Justice action against the nuclear weapons states, Britain included, because of the damage that has been done to the community and the islands. Surely, if supporters of nuclear weapons are so confident that those weapons are safe, reliable, usable and so on, they will not be afraid to attend a conference to discuss the humanitarian effects of those weapons on the environment, pollution and the welfare of the entire planet ...

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): ... There is no earthly reason why Parliament should be shy of debating such an important matter. The hon. Gentleman may find it a trifle more disappointing than I do that if we took a trip down memory lane to a similar debate in the 1980s, the Chamber would be full of people wishing to contribute. He and I have, to put it mildly, struggled a little to get people to come along and take part in this debate, for the simple reason that the issue is not nearly as contentious now as it was two or three decades ago. I venture to suggest that that is because the British public have spoken on the matter, over and over again. They spoke decisively on it in the general elections of 1983 and 1987, when the question of Britain one-sidedly abandoning its nuclear deterrent was central to campaigning. They have spoken time and again in public opinion polls. Of course, it is possible to vary the answers that we receive in such polls according to the questions we ask. However, when we ask what I regard as the fundamental question: 'Do you think that Britain should continue to possess a nuclear deterrent or nuclear weapons while other countries have them?', invariably, about two-thirds of the respondents say yes, about a quarter say no and a small, single-figure fraction are undecided. The issue is divisive, because fundamentally it is an article of faith. Are we more likely to keep the peace by getting rid of such weapons unconditionally or by showing a potential enemy that it would be too dangerous to attack us with their nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction? ... Why is it important to have a debate on the matter, even though public opinion is fairly settled and parliamentary opinion is fairly relaxed? There are two reasons ...

Mr Spellar: The hon. Gentleman says that parliamentary opinion is fairly relaxed, and that may be a proper assessment of the arithmetic. In that case, why does his Prime Minister not put the issue of Trident renewal to a vote of Parliament?

Dr Lewis: I wish I knew the answer. I have asked that question many times, and it takes me neatly on to the two reasons why it is important that we have a debate on this subject, even though Parliament seems relatively relaxed about it. There is no doubt that if we look at the arithmetic of the 2007 vote that took us through the first stages of the successor programme to the Vanguard class submarines, it was exactly as the shadow Minister says – virtually every Conservative MP and a substantial majority of Labour MPs voted for continuing the deterrent into the next generation, and a significant minority of Labour unilateralists voted against the

measure. The figure was about 80 or 90, if I remember correctly.

Jeremy Corbyn: One hundred.

Dr Lewis: One hundred exactly. Any advances on 100? No, so let us take that as the figure. There is no doubt that, if there were to be a free vote in the House of Commons, this matter would proceed. One of the reasons why I want to continue having these debates until such a vote happens is that there should already have been a vote. The shadow Minister is right about that. The main-gate contracts were due to be signed during this Parliament, and it was entirely a result of coalition politics and a back-door deal with the Liberal Democrats, who are opposed to renewing Trident, that the vote was not held and that the life of the existing submarines was extended by five years. The key vote has now been put off until 2016.

One of the two main reasons why it is valuable to continue having these debates is that it is important that Front Benchers from both main parties put their respective positions on the record as often as possible. Let us face it, much as Labour and Conservative Members might regret it, there is always the possibility that we may end up with another hung Parliament that is once again dependent on the Liberal Democrats, or conceivably on the UK Independence party or, worst of all, the Scottish National party – I say that without reference to the fact that the party’s parliamentary leader, the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson), has just vacated his place – if Labour suffers as badly in Scotland at the general election as some predict. It is therefore terribly important that the Front Benchers of both main parties have their feet held to the fire as often as possible so that there can be less room for wriggling out of it in the event of another hung Parliament.

Mr Spellar: The hon. Gentleman refers to wriggling out, but that is exactly what he is doing. It was absolutely clear where the parties stood in the debate on 17 July 2013, when the policies were enunciated perfectly clearly. My party’s policies were endorsed by the national policy forum and the recent Labour party conference. I am not aware of any changes in his party’s view. This debate is therefore not about the position of the parties being enunciated or holding people’s feet to the fire. The fact is that he has not managed to persuade his Prime Minister to do anything, and he ought to come clean about that.

Dr Lewis: There is a very good reason why I have not been able to

persuade the Prime Minister to do anything, which is that it was evidently part of the negotiations – albeit that they were not made public at the time – on the formation of the coalition Government.

Mr Spellar: Secret negotiations.

Dr Lewis: Indeed. Evidently as part of the deal an agreement was reached between the Conservative leader and the Liberal Democrat leader that the decisive steps for the renewal of the successor submarines for Trident would be put off until after the next general election ...

Mr Spellar: ... Let us be clear that what he has said is that, for a squalid deal to get office, the Prime Minister was prepared to damage the defence of this country ...

Dr Lewis: What I am saying is quite clear. If we end up with a hung Parliament and the balance of power is held by a small unilateralist party, it will be able to blackmail one or other of the main parties into not doing what should be done, which is to sign the contracts to make the renewal of Trident for another generation a certainty. I am clear that that was part of the pot-pourri of things that were negotiated in private. At the time I described it as a love gift to the Liberal Democrats. I thought it was absolutely wrong. It was a shock and a surprise, and it is not something of which any Conservative should be proud. Having said that, I look to my own party's Front Benchers for an assurance that nothing like that will ever happen again, and I look to the Opposition spokesman for an assurance that no Labour leader will be tempted to conclude such a deal either.

The second reason why it is important to have a debate on this subject at this time is that the terms of trade, as it were, in international relations have changed. When the hon. Member for Islington North and I addressed these matters in January 2013, when we debated the nuclear deterrent, and in June 2013, when we debated the non-proliferation treaty, much of the argument was focused on the fact that the Cold War was over and showed no sign of returning and that the nuclear deterrent was therefore irrelevant to the threats that then confronted us. As some of us stated at the time, it was far from certain that we could ever know significantly in advance whether those circumstances were going to change. We all hoped that Russia, having shed communism and started along a more democratic path, would continue to go in that direction, but there could be no guarantee.

Even now, we cannot tell where our relationship with Russia will be in the next 10, 20 or 30 years. Nobody predicted the crisis that has arisen over Ukraine, and some might argue that if Ukraine were a member of NATO, the Russians would not have done what they have done. Conversely, it could also be argued that if Ukraine were a member of NATO and the Russians had done what they have done, we would possibly now be on the brink of an extremely dangerous east-west confrontation.

Jeremy Corbyn: Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that there was an agreement between Russia and the west at the time of Ukrainian independence that Ukraine would not join NATO and would not be a nuclear power? Indeed, at the time Ukraine itself renounced nuclear weapons and their presence in Ukraine.

Dr Lewis: Indeed, Ukraine did renounce nuclear weapons. I strongly suspect that public opinion in Ukraine might now be divided, to put it mildly, over the wisdom of that decision. Given that they were Soviet nuclear weapons, Ukraine probably had little choice in the matter.

It would be a mistake to put countries on the path to NATO membership – I have said this consistently – if other NATO members would not be prepared to go to war in defence of their borders. It is all well and good to say that everyone would like to be a member of every alliance, but NATO has been so successful for so long because there is no doubt about its security guarantee. That is the importance of deterrence. In order to deter, we must be able not only to threaten an aggressor with an unacceptable level of punishment but to ensure that he is in no doubt that that unacceptable punishment will inevitably follow if he commits himself to an attack using weapons of mass destruction ...

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Labour): ... My hon. Friend and I served together for many years on the London Labour party executive; it was probably around the same time that the hon. Member for New Forest East was a member of the Labour party. I have known my hon. Friend a long time and he has been consistent; it is fair to say that I have consistently disagreed with him during that time. However, he has been extremely patient in constantly ploughing his furrow, as I suppose would be true of any allotment-holder in being patient as they wait for things to come around, but I fear that he will not see fruition on this issue too soon.

Of course, the hon. Member for New Forest East has a very different position from that of my hon. Friend. I almost think that his working with

my hon. Friend is a sort of diversion therapy from his frustration with his own leader. He vented that frustration very strongly back in 2010, when he wrote about the formation of the coalition. He said:

‘It is not in dispute that, when Conservative MPs met at Westminster to endorse the proposed Coalition, we were categorically assured that the Liberals would have to accept the Trident successor programme. As David Cameron gave this guarantee, George Osborne nodded in confirmation. Unfortunately, all these assurances have since been disregarded.’

... However, that situation is also based on a misapprehension that the Liberal Democrats are unilateralist disarmers – the hon. Member for New Forest East said that again today – because the policy that they have been pushing to get the Trident review is not a unilateralist one; it accepts the continuation of a nuclear deterrent. However, to try to provide some differentiation between themselves and others, they went for some rather exotic – as well as more expensive, destabilising and uncertain – alternatives, all of which were appropriately demolished by the review.

Dr Lewis: ... if he really thinks that the undercurrent and the real message of the stance taken by the Liberal Democrats on this matter is that they were really in favour of a nuclear deterrent, he should do what I did, although it might disturb his sleep a bit, and watch the rebroadcasting of the Liberal Democrats’ conference debates on this subject, because – believe me – all they were interested in during those debates was getting rid of Trident. One never heard anything mentioned about the positive case for a nuclear deterrent. It was another indirect way of going for unilateralism, because they knew that overt unilateralism would be too unpopular.

Mr Spellar: I always say that MPs and Ministers must be responsible for their own words, but if the hon. Gentleman rereads the debate from the time of the Trident review he will see clearly that at one stage the Liberal Democrats argued for the use of nuclear-enabled Cruise missiles. Apart from being a much more expensive option, that is – as I have already said – a far riskier option. I do not mean ‘risky’ in terms of whether or not that option is a credible deterrent, although that is true as well, but in terms of being a destabilising factor, which could lead to much greater tension and – equally importantly – considerable risk of error.

Dr Lewis: In the spirit of compromise and convergence, can the two of us

at least agree that, since the review of the Trident alternatives, the Liberal Democrat position – sending submarines to sea with no nuclear warheads on them, then waiting for a crisis to arise before sailing them back to port and arming them with nuclear warheads – has to be the most irresponsible fantasy-land thinking in the age of the nuclear deterrent? Furthermore, is it not a shame that no Liberal Democrats are here in Westminster Hall today to defend their decision, or – indeed – to explain it?

Mr Spellar: We can draw a veil now over the incoherence and absence of the Liberal Democrats, and get down to the serious and proper debate ... about Britain's nuclear posture. It is a debate that my party has engaged in for a considerable number of years, in fact ever since the great post-war Attlee and Bevin Government commissioned Britain's independent nuclear deterrent ... Having said that, none of us should underestimate the weighty issues – both the hon. Members who have already spoken stressed this point – that should weigh heavily on all those who have to make these decisions or arguments. I say that because it is very clear that there are huge issues. In reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Islington North, nobody underestimates the impact of nuclear weapons nor the potential devastation that they could cause. Nevertheless, nuclear weapons are a fact in our world. I partly differ from my hon. Friend in this regard. He made passing reference to the non-proliferation treaty conference that is due to take place next year. Clearly, it will be resolved by – we could say by the nuclear weapon states, but frankly the key discussions that need to take place are between the USA and Russia. If agreement can be reached by them, we should rightly be part of the subsequent discussions. However, as I say, the key initial discussions must be between the USA and Russia ...

In the meantime, notwithstanding that, it is also important that the UK plays its part ... in reducing the proportion of our nuclear armoury. Significantly, that took place under the defence team that I was a member of in 1997 to 2001, but, to be fair I should say that it has been continued by our successors not only in the Labour Government, but in this Conservative Government as well ...

We have reduced the explosive power of our British deterrent by some 75% since that time. That gives us good credentials and bona fides in those discussions. I return to the point I made about the NPT. The crucial discussions have to be between the two major nuclear powers, which are still the United States and Russia. That needs to be re-emphasised.

The policy of the Labour party was made clear, as I made clear in previous interventions, by my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham

(Mr Jones) in a debate in the main Chamber on 17 July last year. He was explicit about our commitment to continuous at-sea deterrence – in the most cost-effective way possible, of course ...

An argument about cost is sometimes made regarding the more general Trident discussion, and we have mainly had that discussion here, rather than discussing the debate subject of the UK-US mutual defence agreement ... However, one argument is that this programme costs too much. It therefore seems rather strange, if not perverse, to then argue against an agreement that substantially and significantly reduces the cost of the programme in a number of ways. For example, it reduces the cost of delivering the deterrent, even the design and development costs. It is reckoned that the common design has saved the UK in the region of £500 million and precludes the need to design, develop, manufacture and test our own missile system.

The Trident alternatives review estimated that a new warhead alone would cost £8 billion to £10 billion. I have already mentioned the extra cost of moving to cruise missiles ... There was a cross-debate on the independence of the system. The fact that we are buying F-35s, made in the US but with substantial elements made in the UK, does not mean that we do not have an independent Air Force. It is the control of the system, not the sourcing of the weaponry, that is the important test of independence. Therefore we ought to be clear that this is Britain's independent deterrent, but in a NATO nuclear alliance, as was reaffirmed at the NATO summit ... Labour has said that

‘we are committed to a minimum, credible independent nuclear deterrent, delivered through a Continuous At-Sea Deterrent ... Labour recognises the importance of Britain leading international efforts for multilateral nuclear disarmament – and non-proliferation. Following the action we took when in government, Labour would actively work to enhance momentum on global multilateral disarmament efforts and negotiations.’

The NPT conference in 2015 will be a key moment for a Labour Government to show leadership in achieving progress on global disarmament and anti-proliferation measures. For all those reasons, we will support the reaffirmation of the agreement and the policy initiated by that great Labour Government of Attlee and Bevin.

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): ... I take the view ... that there remains a need for a United Kingdom nuclear deterrent. Although the Cold War has ended, significant nuclear capabilities and risks remain. Nuclear weapons cannot be disinvented. Substantial nuclear

arsenals still exist. The number of nuclear armed states in the world has increased, and there is a significant risk of new nuclear armed states emerging. Moreover, several of the countries that have nuclear weapons, or are trying to acquire them, are in tense and unstable regions. There is the potential for a new nuclear threat to emerge or re-emerge.

This country's strategic deterrent is therefore as relevant today as it has ever been. It remains the ultimate guarantee of our security and sovereignty, and a necessary insurance in an uncertain world. I want to be clear, as successive Governments of this country have been, that the United Kingdom's nuclear weapons are not designed or intended for military use during conflicts. Their objective is to deter and prevent nuclear blackmail, and acts of aggression against our vital interests that could not be countered by any other means. Successive Governments have been clear that the circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might be contemplated are of the most extreme kind.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Minister mentioned the non-proliferation treaty. It is specifically designed to prevent, as the name suggests, nuclear armed proliferation. Is he content about, or has he had legal advice on, provision for nuclear information to be shared by the USA with Britain? That is extrajudicial for both countries and therefore appears to be at odds with the terms of the non-proliferation treaty, which is designed to stop proliferation, rather than encourage it.

Mr Lidington: If the hon. Gentleman bears with me, I will address the issue of the non-proliferation treaty and the bearing it has on the MDA later ... While the international security environment continues to require the UK to maintain a nuclear deterrent, we have an obvious responsibility to maintain the safety, security and reliability of all its elements, including through the replacement and updating of parts of the system as they reach the end of their operational life. The mutual defence agreement has enabled us to collaborate with the United States to ensure that we are able to do that to the highest possible technical standards. The MDA underpins all nuclear defence co-operation between the UK and the US. That co-operation has been of considerable mutual benefit, allowing the United Kingdom to reduce costs significantly while maintaining an operationally independent deterrent. It is in the national defence and security interests of the UK and the US, as well as in this country's economic interests, for the MDA to continue.

Questions have been posed about the independence of the United

Kingdom's nuclear deterrent and whether that independence is in practice meaningful, given the MDA and our close collaboration on defence matters with the United States. I want to be absolutely clear that this country's nuclear deterrent is and always has been operationally independent. The command and control systems involved are UK-owned and controlled. Decision making and use of the Trident system remain entirely sovereign to the United Kingdom. Only the Prime Minister can authorise the employment of the United Kingdom's nuclear deterrent, and there are no technical means by which the United States could negate or override a prime ministerial instruction.

It is true that through the MDA we have been able to take advantage of some American know-how, and of a certain amount of American material. We would have been able to provide that for ourselves, but creating an entirely indigenous source of such material, equipment and know-how would have given rise to significant additional expense. It has seemed to Labour and Conservative Governments alike over the years to be common sense to work with the United States to take advantage of its capacity in those areas of nuclear expertise to our mutual advantage, rather than incurring the extra costs ourselves when that was not necessary for the independence and capability of our nuclear deterrent. **We have some procurement dependence on the US for certain non-nuclear aspects of the system**, but we choose not to manufacture those indigenously because of the economic benefits of working with our closest ally.

On the important question of the relationship between the mutual defence agreement and the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, there have been claims in this debate and at other times that the MDA is at odds with our commitment to a world without nuclear weapons, and incompatible with the commitments we have made under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, particularly those in articles 1 and 6. The United Kingdom is a leading nation in securing progress in nuclear disarmament, and we should be proud of our record. We have steadily reduced the size of our nuclear forces by well over half since our Cold War peak. Our nuclear arsenal is almost certainly the smallest of any of the five states recognised as nuclear weapons states under the NPT.

Our forces peaked in the late 1970s with a total of some 460 warheads of various types and delivery systems. In May 2010, the Prime Minister announced that the figure would continue to be reduced to no more than 120 operationally available warheads, with an entire stockpile of no more than 180 warheads by the mid-2020s. That reduction is already under way. The Government have also announced that we will cut the maximum number of nuclear warheads onboard each deployed submarine from 48 to

40, while reducing the number of operational Trident missiles on each submarine to eight. Those changes have already been completed on at least one of the vessels.

Jeremy Corbyn: May I take the Minister back to my question about the compatibility of the MDA, which is now amended and includes the observation of dangers of proliferation elsewhere in the world, with the original and current objective of the NPT, which is the non-proliferation of nuclear know-how or technology between states? Britain and the USA are not one state. As the Minister reminded us, they are both sovereign, independent nations, so the transfer of nuclear technology from one to the other is surely in breach of the NPT.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman takes me straight to the point that I was about to make about article I of the NPT, which touches on the transfer of nuclear weapons and devices between countries. The Government regard the MDA as compliant with our obligations under article I for three reasons.

First, nuclear devices or weapons are not transferred to the United Kingdom under the terms of the MDA. As I described earlier, what we receive under the MDA is a certain amount of nuclear technological know-how and some non-lethal elements, such as propulsion systems, that are not prohibited under article I. Secondly, article V of the original mutual defence agreement – not including the amendments – quite explicitly states that the transfer of nuclear weapons is not permitted. Thirdly, article I of the NPT refers in particular to transfers from the recognised nuclear weapons states to non-nuclear weapons states. However, the MDA refers to transfers of things other than nuclear weapons or devices from one nuclear weapons state to another, both of which are party to the NPT. I think that that answers the challenge that the MDA is in some way incompatible with article I of the NPT.

The other criticism made is that the mutual defence agreement is at odds with the obligation that we and the other four recognised nuclear-weapons states have under article VI of the non-proliferation treaty to work towards multilateral disarmament. I have already described how the United Kingdom has significantly brought down its nuclear arsenal as a contribution to multilateral nuclear disarmament, but we have also been active and continue to be active in a range of multilateral disarmament initiatives.

We remain a strong supporter of the NPT. We signed and ratified the comprehensive test ban treaty as long ago as the 1990s and remain a strong

supporter of the treaty both financially and technically, operating our own voluntary moratorium on testing pending the treaty coming into effect. We actively urge the remaining states that have not yet ratified the treaty to do so. We want an early start of negotiations in Geneva on the fissile material cut-off treaty and are an active member of the group of governmental experts that is working on those negotiations, which are currently blocked not by the United Kingdom or any of the recognised nuclear-weapons states, but by Pakistan for national reasons.

In addition, we currently chair the forum of the permanent five nuclear weapons states and will be hosting the next annual conference in London in February next year. The purpose of the P5 process is to build transparency and mutual confidence to make it possible for all nuclear weapons states to engage in further rounds of multilateral disarmament. At the same time, we lead an informal working group at the United Nations, discussing the UN's role in future nuclear security work. This country therefore has a good record of active work on multilateral disarmament that sits perfectly well alongside the arrangements that we have with the United States under the MDA.

Mr Spellar: ... To what extent can we support, encourage or stimulate the key discussions between the United States and Russia on their agreement, to which the agreements of the other nuclear states are secondary, although important?

Mr Lidington: ... I agree completely with the right hon. Gentleman that the prime responsibility for leadership in multilateral nuclear disarmament must lie with the two biggest nuclear powers: the United States and Russia. We encouraged the talks that led towards the second strategic arms reduction treaty, which will impose limits for each party of 1,550 deployed strategic warheads from February 2018. We need to see that target fulfilled and would welcome and support its implementation.

One could make a similar point about the talks on an intermediate nuclear forces treaty. There was a bilateral US-Russia treaty back in 1988, but each side now accuses the other of breaching it. For reasons relating to Russia's conduct in Ukraine, there has been a significant erosion of trust between the US and Russia. It will therefore not be easy to get talks between Washington and Moscow back on course, but I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that it is in the interests of all of us that Russia and the United States are able to rebuild a sufficient degree of trust for meaningful negotiations towards multilateral nuclear disarmament to take place.

I want it to be clear that the United Kingdom is not using the amendments to the mutual defence agreement to upgrade its system's capabilities. There is no move to produce more usable weapons or change our nuclear posture or doctrine. The amendments to the MDA that we are technically debating this afternoon do not in any way provide for an upgrading of the capabilities of the Trident system. That is a decision for 2016.

The hon. Member for Islington North asked a couple of detailed questions about plutonium tests at Aldermaston and the relationship between the mutual defence agreement and the planned replacement of the Vanguard-class submarine fleet. The Atomic Weapons Establishment has conducted sealed hydrodynamic plutonium experiments, which are sub-critical, do not produce nuclear yield and are fully compliant with the non-proliferation treaty. The experiments were described in a published article in the journal *Nature* in February 2002. Aldermaston and its experiments are also, of course, fully in line with the commitments we have undertaken in agreeing and ratifying the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty. I am therefore advised that what has happened at Aldermaston is fully compliant with our international legal obligations.

Jeremy Corbyn: Two points come from that. First, was the plutonium from the UK, or was it imported from the USA? Secondly, were the results shared with US scientists and military personnel, either at the time or after the experiments took place?

Mr Lidington: I hope the hon. Gentleman will understand if I say I will write to him after the debate to provide him with such detail as I can.

On the relationship between the renewal of the MDA and the 2016 main-gate decision, no submarines or reactors are being built before that decision. However, it is vital, as with any major programme of such complexity, to order certain items where there would be a delay in the programme if we were to wait until after main gate. Some of those transfers will take place under the MDA, but as I said earlier, transfers under the MDA do not include nuclear weapons or nuclear devices.

* * *