

# Starmer permanently ties UK nuclear arsenal to Washington

Exclusive: Britain's nuclear weapons are now forever reliant on US military scientists after a transatlantic treaty was quietly rewritten.

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Keir Starmer meets Joe Biden in the White House, 10 July 2024. (Photo: Simon Dawson / No 10 Handout)

Labour has reinforced the “special relationship” with Washington by agreeing to make Britain’s nuclear arsenal permanently dependent on the US.

In one of its first, but little-noticed foreign policy moves, Labour has [amended](#) the Eisenhower-era 1958 Mutual Defence Agreement (MDA) that is crucial to Britain’s Trident nuclear missile system.

Officials deleted a long-standing sunset clause that required it be renewed every ten years.

All references to an “expiry date” have been removed “to make the entirety of the MDA enduring, securing continuing cooperation with the US”, according to a memorandum signed by defence secretary John Healey.

Kate Hudson from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) told *Declassified*: “This spells farewell to even the smallest notion of parliamentary responsibility for Britain’s foreign and defence policies.”

She added that at least nominally parliament has had the opportunity, once a decade, to debate and reconsider America’s role in Britain’s nuclear programme.

“This amendment, introduced in the most undemocratic fashion by the government – at a time when it will be lost in the recess and party conference season – will eradicate those opportunities. This must not go unchallenged.”

The change was agreed by senior British and US officials on 25 July, three weeks after Keir Starmer became UK prime minister.

It comes as Starmer [described](#) Britain’s nuclear weapons as the “bedrock” of the country’s defence and amid concern about possible threats to the future of the MDA if Donald Trump wins back the White House.

During a [visit](#) to Washington shortly before the general election, David Lammy, now foreign secretary, told a centre-right think tank that Labour: “will always work with the United States, whatever the weather...”

The MDA enables the US to provide Britain with nuclear weapons materials and know-how without which Trident would not be able to function.

It gives the lie to persistent claims by the Ministry of Defence that Britain's submarine-launched nuclear arsenal is "operationally independent".

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Trident missiles themselves are obtained from America and a cross-party [report concluded](#) that the life expectancy of Britain's nuclear capability without US support could be measured in months.

US presidents have also alluded to this dependency, with George W. Bush saying in 2005 that the US helped Britain maintain a "credible nuclear force".

Barack Obama declared it was in America's interest to continue to help Britain "in maintaining a credible nuclear deterrent" when the MDA was renewed ten years ago.

As *Declassified* recently [reported](#), British military aircraft [regularly](#) cross the Atlantic with highly radioactive ingredients supplied by the US. These ingredients are absolutely vital to the Trident missile system.

The memorandum signed by Healey states: "The MDA provides the necessary requirements for the control and transmission of submarine nuclear propulsion technology, atomic information and material between the UK and US, and the transfer of non-nuclear components to the UK."

It continues: "The MDA underpins the defence nuclear relationship between the UK and US."



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The memo further states that the amendment does not require any change in the law. Although the MDA is incorporated in US law, it has no statutory basis in the UK.

Astonishingly, despite its huge significance, it has never been the subject of a substantial debate in Parliament.

The government [describes](#) the MDA as covering the exchange of information on “sensitive nuclear technology” for developing “defence plans” and “military applications of atomic energy”.

Other aspects involve evaluating “the capabilities of potential enemies in the employment of atomic weapons”.

It also concerns the sale of “naval nuclear propulsion plants” and the transfer of materials like U-235 enriched uranium.

However, governments have long refused to provide information about how much nuclear material for British warheads the US has provided to the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston and the nearby Burghfield warhead factor, and at what cost.

The quantity is likely to be significant. Nearly 1,000 [non-nuclear](#) components for atomic weapons systems were exchanged between the US and UK in 2020-23 under the MDA, according to new research by the Nuclear Information Service.

A Ministry of Defence spokesperson said the removal of the 10-year renewal provision was decided “given the longstanding nature of this agreement”. She added that making the entirety of the MDA “enduring” was “the case with other international agreements.”

Peter Burt of [Nukewatch UK](#) which monitors the UK's nuclear weapons programme commented: “Every UK Prime Minister since the Second World War has been petrified about losing influence with the US, and in a large part this hinges around access to nuclear weapons technology and military intelligence. “This is the main reason the UK government always aligns itself with US foreign policy and allows itself to be drawn into US military adventurism, even when it is clearly not in the interests of this country to follow America.”