

This relationship isn't working

Let's seize this once-in-decade opportunity to open up the UK's nuclear dependency with the US to serious public scrutiny

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Britain must loosen its military ties with the United States. Whatever their value in the past, today the relationship is dragging Britain into operations that are against its interests - while providing Americans with a false sense that they are speaking for what is called the international community. But this year presents a once-in-a-decade opportunity to open up the linchpin of that relationship to public scrutiny. This is the year that parliament and the United States Congress have to renew the treaty governing their cooperation on nuclear weapons.

The understanding is formally known as the 1958 Agreement for Cooperation on the Uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defence Purposes, but is usually called the Mutual Defence Agreement, or the 58 Agreement. It governs the two countries' trade in weapons of mass destruction. Trading in weapons of mass destruction is pretty controversial right now - given all the fuss about Libya, Pakistan, Iran and so on. But the negotiations between London and Washington are going on in secret, and the treaty is likely to be slipped in at the end of the year without anyone noticing.

Without the agreement, Britain would not have its Trident nuclear weapons system, or be a nuclear power at all. Britain has test-fired over 40 hydrogen bombs in Nevada and, in return, supplied the US at times with plutonium. Britain continues to use Nevada for tests that don't involve nuclear explosion. For example, the UK conducted experiment Vito to check that a warhead would explode correctly on Valentine's day 2002.

The Trident nuclear warheads are dependent on the US. They are manufactured in Berkshire according to US designs and under management that includes the US arms producer Lockheed Martin. Specialist joint working groups include nuclear weapons engineering and manufacturing practices.

Neither Tony Blair nor George Bush has made any public statement about what deals are being struck over the renewal of the treaty, but they are likely to involve both specific technologies and political agreements. Tony Blair wants a successor to Trident supplied from the US. In return, the UK will help American WMD manufacturers where it can. For example, by doing some design work if Congress bars American firms from working on new weapons.

The broader political trade-off is likely to include support for Washington's military policies, which include: building new nuclear weapons; starting to test them again "if necessary"; putting non-nuclear weapons in space; and preparing anti-satellite weapons. All these programmes are under way in Washington.

There are more fundamental objections to the nuclear special relationship than signing up for the next round of Star Wars and H-bombs. The Mutual Defence Agreement encourages the British delusion that it is an independent nuclear power and therefore a force to be reckoned with. This self-deceit among British officials has been the greatest obstacle to any sensible discussion about Britain's foreign policy for half a century. And it relies on the full extent of the agreement being kept both from the public and even from almost all officials and politicians.

As with most dependent relationships, its defining characteristic is that nothing must be done to upset the controlling partner, so that partner gets more and more control. The CIA now often sits

UK Nuclear Collaboration with the United States

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One piece of legislation that wasn't mentioned in the Queen's Speech in October 2003, although it will feature in the 2004 Parliamentary timetable at some stage, is the renewal of the 1958 Agreement For Cooperation on the Uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defence Purposes. Often referred to as the 1958 Mutual Defence Agreement, it provides the basis for extensive collaboration between the United States and Britain on all aspects of nuclear weapons development.

The Mutual Defence Agreement enables the US and Britain to "exchange" information and to "transfer materials and equipment" with the objective of improving each other's nuclear weapons "design, development and fabrication capability".

The agreement covers development of nuclear doctrines, intelligence sharing, development of "delivery systems" (such as submarines and missiles), information on nuclear research reactors, transfers of nuclear submarine technologies and fuels, and special nuclear materials such as plutonium and highly enriched uranium. Information is exchanged via Joint Working Groups and through a range of visits and exchanges between nuclear weapons laboratory personnel.

In a 9 July 2003 response to a Parliamentary Question put down by Alan Simpson MP, the Government has informed us that, "discussions are now under way ... on the renewal of the 1958 Agreement For Cooperation on the Uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defence Purposes."

Seemingly, the Government is keen to get the Mutual Defence Agreement renewed as the December 2003 Defence White Paper indicated that a decision on whether to replace the UK's Trident nuclear weapons system will be required during the next Parliament. Although we are informed that there are no plans to replace the UK's nuclear deterrent, the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) Aldermaston has continued to develop its scientific endeavour and enhance its technical capabilities in readiness for an affirmative decision, should it be forthcoming.

British weapons laboratories and shipyards have worked closely with their US counterparts in the research, development and production of Polaris and Trident systems since the 1970s and it is unlikely that a new nuclear weapon system could be produced in the UK without extensive help from the US.

The Bush Administration and the US nuclear weapons laboratories have plans for a new generation of nuclear weapons, including 'bunker busters' and 'mini-nukes'. The proposal is that these weapons could be used in conjunction with US missile defences and high-tech conventional weapons in a strategy of pre-emptive war.

Although the British Government has stated that it has no intention of developing 'mini-nukes', the transatlantic collaboration between the weapons laboratories, provided for under the Mutual Defence Agreement, leave that option open for the future.

The British Prime Minister says that eliminating the threat of weapons of mass destruction is his top priority. The UK has a legal obligation under the Non-Proliferation Treaty to divest itself of its own weapons of mass destruction (WMD) – currently 200 nuclear warheads available for deployment on 4 Trident submarines based at Faslane on the River Clyde in Scotland.