

By Lauren Williamson, Great North News correspondent

A British newspaper incorrectly reported that wikileaks diplomatic cables revealed the US was set to exploit the UK in its renewed arms reduction treaty with Russia. The February 5 article in The Telegraph called into question the UK-US "special relationship," reporting that the US would share secret UK Trident missile data with Russia as part of the New START treaty which went into effect earlier this month. The allegations were quickly echoed by news entities around the world from the Daily Mail to Iran's PressTV.

US Assistant Secretary of State PJ Crowley immediately dismissed the report. "There was no secret agreement and no compromise of the UK's independent nuclear deterrent," Crowley told the press.

UK officials substantiate this.

Though the Foreign Office would not comment on the specifics of the treaty, in an official statement to Great North News, UK Foreign Secretary William Hague expressed support for the New START deal and its work "towards our long-term goal of a world without nuclear weapons."

But regarding The Telegraph report, Dr. Julian Lewis, New Forest East MP and expert on defence and disarmament, said he found the article's content surprising.

"The idea that this was a clandestine deal is utter nonsense," said Dr. Lewis, calling the story "sensationalised" and emphasising that the US "never has, never will" provide external entities information on missile performance.

By and large, the New START deal is a straightforward extension of the original START, or Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, which was an historic bilateral agreement between the US and USSR to drawdown strategic arms, including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). The old START, which expired in 2009, effectively limited the number of warheads allowed on US and Russian missiles, while allowing for an information exchange and inspection-verification process between them. Part of the deal required each nation to share information about weapons transfers to third parties.

The Arms Control Association explains that Britain uses only one ballistic missile system for issuing nuclear warheads, the Trident II SLBM, which is provided by the US. An example of a third party missile transaction governed by START would be the return of UK missiles to the US for service checks and reconditions, followed by missile replacements.

The New START deal continues most of the old treaty's provisions, further limiting deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1,550, deployed and non-deployed strategic launchers and heavy bombers to 800, and deployed strategic launchers and heavy bombers to 700. The main differences in the new agreement, according to Dr. Lewis, is that the US and Russia are now allowed five days to provide third party transaction information, as opposed to 48 hours, and

that part of the data provided includes the unique identifier of the missiles exchanged.

Some analysts are concerned that this gives Russia too much detail on the size of the UK's arsenal. While Dr. Lewis agrees that this information will, over time, provide Russia a clearer picture of the number of missiles the UK possesses, the UK's overall security strategy is not compromised, since providing Russia the unique identifier numbers to UK missiles falls far short of full disclosure.

"The truth is that it is rather irrelevant information," Dr. Lewis said.

The number of warheads mounted on each missile supplied by the US still remains unknown to outside nations, and Britain's minimum strategic nuclear deterrent remains intact, as does its relationship with the US.

"The important thing is that we are always at liberty to vary the number of warheads on a missile," said Dr. Lewis.