ANDREW MARR:
Ed Miliband told the Commons he did not rule out military action over Syria, and yet that was the effect of the Government’s defeat. A Number Ten source was quoted describing the Labour Leader as an “f******” something or other, and a “copper-bottomed” something else. They were in a white hot rage with Labour. And Labour, victorious in the Commons, does face questions about whether it was simply playing politics and exactly what Labour would do next if, God forbid, there are more atrocities in Syria - which frankly seems likely. I’m joined now by the Foreign Secretary. Douglas Alexander, welcome.

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Good morning. It’s good to have you back.

ANDREW MARR:
That’s kind of you. Can I start by asking when you changed your minds collectively because certainly the Tories had the impression at the first meeting that you had worries but you were broadly sympathetic to the Prime Minister’s position, and then somewhere over that afternoon things dramatically, didn’t they?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well there are varying accounts. The position I set out on public record on the Today programme on Tuesday morning was reflected in the amendment that we tabled on Thursday evening, and that set down a series of tests and conditions that would require to be met.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) So there was no change of tone, there was no sort of betrayal as they see it?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
(over) No in the course of the week inevitably, and appropriately, there were discussions with the Government on an issue of great seriousness - not just for the United Kingdom, but frankly most importantly for people in Syria - in which we asked a series of questions, raised a series of concerns. But there was a fundamental issue of principle here, which is should evidence precede decision in the British Parliament before the commitment of force or not?

ANDREW MARR:
Now does that mean that the thing is open again? I mean, God forbid, on Wednesday let’s say there is another horrific gas attack, Assad feels emboldened and even more people are killed - there’s more videos, there’s more horror - what does Labour do? Do you return to the Commons? Do you change your mind?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
(over) Well those who have alrea… Well the conditions that we set down on Thursday apply on Sunday morning, but since then of course, as you said in your introductory remarks, the Prime Minister has given his word to the British people that the UK will not participate in military action in Syria. But in terms of what actually happens on the ground in Syria, even those people who have already decided military action was necessary and will be necessary don’t argue that it will remove the chemical weapon stocks from Assad. The strongest case that can be made is that it would have a deterrence effect because, according to the …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) And deterrence is not now going to happen, of course, unless …
DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
(over) Well it may well happen if the Americans decide to do it, and that’s a matter ultimately for the President of the United States.

ANDREW MARR:
But if that is the right, if that is the right thing to happen, shouldn’t we be alongside them? Haven’t you broken a historic link with American foreign policy and particularly with the Democrats which your party will pay for?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well the relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States is strong, deep, and I believe will endure. In terms of the decision that President Obama made yesterday to go to the Congress, ultimately that’s a matter for the American President - how to secure consent within the United States. The day before the vote in the House of Commons on Thursday, a hundred and forty congressional representatives had written to Barack Obama …

ANDREW MARR:
Yes indeed.

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
… congressional authorisation for the use of force. So ultimately their processes are appropriate to the United States. But it’s equally important that here in the United Kingdom, learning the lessons from the past, we base our approach on due process and are seen to base our approach on due process. And that for Labour does involve making sure the evidence precedes the decision - for example the weapons inspectors being able to complete their work …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) But of course if what happens …

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
(over) … a vote being taken at the United Nations - and those criteria still apply.
ANDREW MARR:
But if what happens in Congress is the same as what happened in the House of Commons, then the West will be standing back for the first time for a very long time from a huge international humanitarian crisis, and a lot of people see this as a historic moment - that the West has wobbled and that Labour has led the wobble.

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well I don’t think that you can reach that judgement in terms of what happens in Congress. I mean we’ve already seen, for example, what John Kerry did. I think he gave a very strong …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) So you think Congress will say yes to military action?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well it’s ultimately for Congress to decide …

ANDREW MARR:
Of course.

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
… but I think already President Obama has taken some steps that frankly David Cameron here in the United Kingdom did not. For example, the weight of evidence that was not available to the House of Commons on Thursday was subsequently reduced …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) If you had, do you think it would have gone the same way, do you think? If you had seen the evidence that John Kerry produced and then the evidence that was produced by President Obama, would you have voted the same way?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well that evidence was one of the steps. But the issue on Thursday evening was, what is the basis on which a decision should be taken? And it does remain the case that we are of the view, for example, that that evidence does need to be in front of the
decision makers; that the Security Council should have that evidence in front of them and then subsequently vote …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) So your position is absolutely not that there should not be a tomahawk missile strike on Syria. It’s that you need more evidence before that happens?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
That’s the position I set out on Thursday evening and it remains the position on Sunday morning.

ANDREW MARR:
Right. And so if at some point David Cameron decided that he wanted to try to get Britain involved again and brought it back to the House of Commons, how would Labour react?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well the Prime Minister has now placed his own personal authority behind the statements that he made, both at the despatch box and the following day, that Britain won’t participate in military action …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Yes, but he can say …

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
(over) Forgive me, let me finish the point because this is very important. If he was now to return to the Commons and say well actually because the President of the United States has decided to go to the Congress, I’ve changed my mind about what Parliament was saying and what the British people were saying, I think that would weigh very heavily on the ability for him to convince the public or Parliament that his judgement was sound. Ultimately …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) You’d stop him again, in effect?
DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well it was his judgement to both declare at the despatch box after the vote that force was now ruled out permanently for the United Kingdom in Syria, and ultimately then to repeat that assertion the next morning. But he did make that claim very straightforwardly both to Parliament, and I don’t think that frankly the basis on which the British Prime Minister should reach his decisions …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) But if he comes back … Sorry, if he comes back …

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
(over) … or a decision in terms of endorsing force within the United States.

ANDREW MARR:
Right, but if he comes back, Douglas Alexander, and says “Listen, the facts have changed, there’s been another attack. I think things are different again and we really should go ahead this time”, would Labour be open-minded to that?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well there’s a couple …

ANDREW MARR:
Because, after all, you know facts do change, people do change their minds honourably and reasonably and respectfully.

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Well I was intrigued by the statement that the Prime Minister made on Thursday evening because if you were in a scenario for example where al-Qaeda or their affiliates got possession of very large stocks of chemical weapons, that would strike me, for example, as a very significant change. But the Prime Minister’s given his word now to the British people that the UK will not be participating.

ANDREW MARR:
Ahead of the polls, this has been a miserable time for your leader. Are you going to re-launch the party’s election campaign process with a new Shadow Cabinet and so on before the conference, or during the conference or after the conference?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Ultimately I don’t know. I haven’t really been thinking about it, to be perfectly honest.

ANDREW MARR:
Right.

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
We’ve been focused on …

ANDREW MARR:
On this.

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
… on the events of recent days. And I think there is a point here. If you read the newspapers and read some of the comments, this is far beyond party politics. Now I don’t deny that there will be coverage and commentary from sketch writers and journalists, but the truth is the basis of this decision that Parliament reached was a principled one reflecting the experience …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) And you feel comfortable with it?

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
I don’t think anybody can be proud of how the international community has failed Syria over the last two and a half years …

ANDREW MARR:
Alright, okay.
DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
… but I think the principal basis on which Parliament said these decisions should be based is an important one.

ANDREW MARR:
Douglas Alexander, thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning.

DOUGLAS ALEXANDER:
Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS