AM: Can I start by asking you whether you want Britain to stay as a tier one military power?
NG: Well, absolutely. And the whole point is that what Jeremy is saying is that we need to be out there showing really positive leadership in the world, and that means taking a full part in the UN, and that includes the UN Security Council. But we need to use that as a force for good.

AM: The reason I asked that is that is that the Prime Minister has asked the question as to whether we should stay as a tier one military power, which for people watching means that we are able to deploy at sea, on land and in the air, and nuclear forces, anywhere in the world at any time. But Labour would like that to continue?
NG: Well, absolutely. And I think that the whole issue about the Prime Minister questioning that of course is linked into the whole question about defence spending under the Tory government. And we can see the tantrums that we’re having now from the Defence Secretary about that, and yet not a penny extra has actually been given to our armed forces. So we have armed forces personnel – we’re celebrating Armed Forces Personnel Week this week and yet they’ve not seen a penny more in their pay packets in spite of all the promises.

AM: To be clear, do you think that we have enough aircraft, enough tanks, enough warships to protect ourselves properly as we leave the EU?
NG: Well, we’re in the middle of a modernising defence programme review. We shall look at that very carefully, see what threats they identify and see how the government plans to deal with those threats. But the fact of the matter is that this
government has cut ten billion off the defence budget since 2010 and they are scarcely making the two per cent. Now, we in Labour are fully committed to the two per cent of GDP which is the NATO commitment which is expected of us. And if you look at our record in government, Andrew, all the time we consistently spent more than two per cent of our GDP on defence.

AM: If you talk to people now, including on the Defence Select Committee, voices in the Conservative Party, voices in the military and voices in the opposition parties too, a lot of people say two per cent is no longer enough, we need to go nearer three per cent. Would Labour commit to doing more than two per cent?

NG: I think the point is that the government at the moment is –

AM: Ah, but I’m asking about you.

NG: Well, I – let me just explain. Barely scraping 1.9 per cent of GDP. And that’s by the Treasury’s own figures, and we also –

AM: NATO says that we’ve hit two per cent.

NG: Well, the point being that you are allowed by NATO rules to include things like MOD pensions. But we never did include things like that, which don’t actually contribute to the defence of this country. So what we’ve been saying, and this was in our manifesto last year very clearly, was that we would have a proper two per cent, and that we’d fully match the government’s current spending plans for defence.

AM: So Gavin Williamson says he needs an extra two billion pounds a year. Would Labour commit to that kind of sum or not?

NG: Well, I think the point is we want to see the results, that we don’t know for one minute whether he’s actually going to get that money. We’re also, as I say, we’re in the middle of this modernising defence programme review. What I can tell you is that when we make promises about money we know where we’re going to fund them from and we –

AM: Oh good.
NG: - stick to our manifesto commitments. Not like the stuff we’ve seen this week about NHS funding, and now this mythical funding. We don’t know where it would come from.

AM: But you can’t tell me now that you would match what Gavin Williamson says that he needs to protect this country?
NG: Well, what I can tell is that we consistently spent more than two per cent, that’s our record in government, and that when we talked about a pay rise for the armed forces in our manifesto last summer we fully showed where that would come from, which stream of taxation that would actually come from. So any defence spending that we commit to will be fully funded, and I’m going to talk about some today, if I may.

AM: We’ll come onto that in a minute. Jeremy Corbyn, your leader, had a good election. There was one moment when he seemed to be a little bit on the defensive and in some trouble, which was when he was asked to defend the policy of carrying on with the Trident submarine fleet, which he doesn’t believe in. He doesn’t believe in using nuclear weapons to threaten other countries. You do. If he came to you and said, ‘look, Nia, I can find the money for the extra tanks, I can find the money for the extra aircraft carriers and aircraft to go on them and all of that, but let’s do a deal, just drop your support for Trident,’ what would you say to him?

NG: Well, I say that it’s Labour Party policy that we keep Trident. The decisions have been taken, the work is being undertaken, and that that is not a decision we’re going back on. We are very, very clear that having the nuclear deterrent is a very important part of our defence policy. It’s also an important part of being a tier one nation and being in the UN Security Council.

AM: But very, very recently, back in 2015, you said, ‘up and down the country, even in some military circles, people are questioning
the enormous expenditure on Trident, whether it really provides value for money or offers the protection we need.’ And you said, ‘you cannot combat horrific terrorist groups living amongst innocent civilians with a nuclear missile.’ You were against Trident back then. What’s changed your mind?

NG: Well, I think if you look at the world today it’s a more uncertain place than it’s ever been. And I think if you look at the way that the United States is not stepping up to the mark, I don’t think this is the right time to be getting rid our nuclear deterrent. Of course we need to keep an eye on costs, of course we need to make sure we get value for money, and it is a challenging situation when it’s a single source purchase, much more difficult than when you have competition. But at the end of the day this is not the time to be de-scaling our nuclear deterrent.

AM: Let’s ask about some specific issues confronting the country at the moment. President Trump wants us to send more troops to Afghanistan because the Taliban are again on the rise. Would Labour support that?

NG: I think the important thing is that we work through the UN –

AM: No, would Labour support that or not?

NG: Well, what I’m saying is we work through the UN and we work with our NATO allies and we base the decisions on the intelligence that’s coming back.

AM: All of those are true but they’re not an answer to my question. Would Labour support putting more troops into Afghanistan?

NG: We certainly support the idea that you cannot abandon – give me half a minute – you cannot abandon a process halfway through. Now, we know that it’s not going to take just one year or two years, it’s going to be 20-30 years for the government of Afghanistan to become a stable and, you know, as democratic and stable as we would like. So it will take longer, and if we have the
expertise that we can offer then certainly we’re willing to put that in.

AM: So you would support putting more British troops into Afghanistan, you would?
NG: Absolutely.

AM: Okay, can I talk about the Syrian border? Your leader, Jeremy Corbyn’s been in Syria recently, on the border, and he’s suggested that we should no longer stand shoulder to shoulder with the Americans, and we should pull back from that part of the world, where so many other countries are intervening. Does that mean that Labour is against any further RAF bombing in Syria?
NG: What we’ve said very, very clearly is that we need to restart a peace process, and Jeremy’s been very clear about this. That you have to keep on and keep on and keep on, no matter how many setbacks you have in the diplomatic process, in order to actually broker a peace. Because whilst we have a situation where at any moment violence can erupt and conflicts can escalate, it doesn’t help the situation if you do not restart that peace process, and that’s what we need to be doing.

AM: Okay. A lot of people wonder who is really in charge of Labour’s defence policy, you or Jeremy Corbyn. Jeremy Corbyn has been highly critical of NATO for a very long time. Donald Trump is against NATO in some respects, certainly in terms of its spending. Are you completely committed to Britain’s continuing membership of NATO?
NG: Well, absolutely, and it was a Labour government who actually were the founding part of NATO. And the important point is that we need to be a much more positive voice in NATO, a much more positive voice in the UN, so that we’re actually shaping policy. And I mean, that’s the issue, it’s about taking that leadership role forward and actually shaping the way those organisations work.
AM: Now, in terms of positive voices and listening and all of that, a huge march in London yesterday, 100,000 people chanting, ‘where’s Jeremy Corbyn?’ No really big Labour people on the platform addressing that march. Is the Labour Party prepared to listen to that many people who want what they would call a people’s vote, a second choice on the European Brexit matter, or are you closed to that?

NG: Well, first and foremost, as you know, Jeremy Corbyn was out in Jordan speaking about very, very important international issues. And the fact of the matter is, of course people in a democratic country can do what they like and have marches, and that’s good and they should express their opinions. But the important point is that we had a vote two years ago, the vote was for Brexit. So what we have said all along, absolutely consistently, is that we accept the result of that vote, but what we want is a Brexit that works the best way possible for the economy and for jobs. And what we’re not getting from this government is any certainty. That’s why you’ve got the likes of Airbus getting very upset.

AM: So no chance for people to change their minds. Okay. Nia Griffith, for now, thanks very much indeed for talking to us.

(ends)