

Burnham plunges UK deeper into war against Russia and Iran

Robert Stevens
22 July 2026

Just two days into his premiership, Prime Minister Andy Burnham has taken British imperialism deeper into the two major geopolitical conflicts.

As he took office, Burnham's bellicose rhetoric against Moscow provoked an incident with a Russian warship in the Channel. Within 24 hours he then agreed to deepen collaboration with the Trump administration in its strikes against Iran.

On Monday, Russian Baltic Fleet frigate warship *Neustrashimy* carried out a live-fire exercise in the Channel, 40 nautical miles off Plymouth on England's south coast. *Neustrashimy* fired its main gun for around 30 minutes between 9am and 10am—roughly two hours before Starmer delivered his farewell speech in Downing Street. Burnham was invited by King Charles to form a government that afternoon.

On Tuesday, *Bloomberg* reported that Burnham had approved the US use of some UK bases with the bogus proviso that they would conduct “defensive” air strikes on Iran. This was a continuation of a policy introduced by his predecessor Keir Starmer. In virtually his final task in office last Friday, Starmer chaired a meeting of his senior ministers agreeing that US bombers could continue using Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean and RAF Fairford in Gloucestershire. *Bloomberg* noted that Burnham, prior to becoming prime minister, was briefed and agreed.

On Tuesday evening, the *Daily Express* reported that US bombers were again leaving Fairford for the Middle East as Washington recklessly threatened Iran's Pickaxe Mountain nuclear facility. The “defensive” designation is a legal fiction concealing Britain's complicity in a war of aggression.

Monday's Russian naval exercise took place in international waters, outside British and French territorial limits, in accordance with maritime law. The

Neustrashimy informed the Royal Navy offshore patrol vessel HMS *Tyne*, which had been shadowing them, of their intention to conduct gunnery activity and requested that it withdraw to a safer distance.

HMS *Tyne* moved from around two nautical miles out to five. A French military aircraft made radio contact requesting the *Neustrashimy* clarify its intentions. No vessel was fired upon by the *Neustrashimy* and nobody was injured.

On Tuesday, a UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) spokesperson stated that the Royal Navy “monitored that exercise throughout, continues to track the vessel's activity closely, and stands ready to protect UK national security.”

A Royal Navy source told the *Times*: “You could speculate that Russia was trying to challenge us. They know where the line is.”

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied any hostile message was intended, insisting that “all exercises and actions of our warships are carried out in strict accordance with international maritime law” and that there was “no need to see any hints here.”

Following this denial, however, Peskov drew attention to the incoming UK prime minister's repeated statements of “unconditional support for Ukraine”, confirming “Britain's intention to keep doing everything for the war to continue.” Asked whether relations with London might improve, he said Russia had “no such hopes”.

Although the *Neustrashimy* is not a leading ship in Russia's navy, it is formidably armed. The 129-metre vessel crewed by around 200 carries a 100mm automated naval cannon able to fire 50 rounds a minute at ranges exceeding 20km, together with anti-ship missiles, torpedoes and close-in weapons systems.

HMS *Tyne* is a patrol vessel based at Portsmouth,

home to two-thirds of the Royal Navy surface fleet, including Britain's two aircraft carriers. The firing took place roughly 120 to 150 miles from the Portsmouth base.

Upon entering Downing Street, and before even finalising his Cabinet, Burnham was flaunting his militarist agenda. His first call to a world leader was to Donald Trump, with talks centred on North Sea oil, trade, the US/UK military alliance and the demining of the Strait of Hormuz. Burnham then spoke to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, with a Downing Street readout recording that Burnham "began by reaffirming his and the UK's resolute commitment to the people of Ukraine and underscored that there would be absolutely no change in the UK's approach, including when it came to bearing down on Russia."

The war against Russia is the one foreign policy commitment Burnham has made without qualification. Under first a Conservative government and then Labour under Starmer, almost £22 billion (£21.8 billion) has been squandered on the NATO-backed war on Russia. Since February 2022, there is also a standing commitment of £3 billion in military aid every year until at least 2030/31 and "for as long as it takes".

Burnham wrote in the *Times* on July 9—nearly two weeks before he took office on July 20—that "my priority will be protecting the UK by boosting defence spending... Our commitment to NATO and the UK's nuclear deterrent will remain absolute. Our relationship with the US will remain critical... And Britain's support for Ukraine will not waver."

On May 27, just a week after he was confirmed as Labour's candidate for the Makerfield by-election—where victory ensured his return to Parliament to take over from Starmer as prime minister—Burnham posted on X "for the record" that he had opposed Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, called on FIFA to strip Russia of the 2018 World Cup, "resolutely supported Ukraine and Ukrainian Mayors since 2022", and believed "the British Right's closeness to Putin is a risk to our national security".

Burnham's newly appointed Foreign Secretary, Ed Miliband, used his first statement to denounce "Russia's illegal war in Ukraine", pledged to "nurture our strong, enduring and essential alliance with the United States" and promised British assistance in reopening the Strait of Hormuz. Defence Secretary Wes

Streeting said following the Russian naval exercise, "Russia should be in no doubt about the resolve of this government and this prime minister."

Monday's exercise follows months of escalation between London and Moscow, with the Starmer government upping the ante with Britain co-leading, with France, the "Coalition of the Willing" backing war in Ukraine. In March, Starmer authorised British forces to board and seize Russia's shadow fleet tankers—a decision the *World Socialist Web Site* warned threatened "shoot-outs" between British and Russian soldiers. That month, Britain helped the French navy seize the Mozambique-flagged *Deyna* in the Mediterranean, sanctioned for shipping Russian oil.

In June, French forces aided by British units intercepted another sanctioned tanker. Days later, Royal Marine commandos and National Crime Agency officers landed by Chinook helicopter and seized the tanker *Smyrtos* in the Channel, 25 miles south of the Isle of Wight; its captain was charged with contravening sanctions. Two days after that, the *Admiral Grigorovich*—the *Neustrashimy*'s predecessor in Channel operations—fired warning shots near a retired British couple sailing a yacht.

A *World Socialist Web Site* perspective warned: "Whatever the exact events, two facts are decisive and irrefutable. Shots would not have been fired if tensions between Russia and Britain had not been brought to a fever pitch. These tensions are the result of a de facto state of war between the European powers and Russia, which threatens to spread the catastrophe already underway in Ukraine across the continent."

That warning has been confirmed, as has our insistence on the day Burnham took office that he "has been installed to do what Starmer failed to do. He will continue and intensify Britain's participation in the US-led NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, as well as the broader global preparations for direct military conflict with Russia and China, at whatever cost to the working class."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact