

Burnham hosts Zelensky, promises deeper UK involvement in war with Russia

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit Monday to the UK was the first by a foreign leader since Prime Minister Andy Burnham took office just a week ago.

They met Monday on board the Queen Elizabeth, one of the two UK aircraft carriers, at the Portsmouth Royal Navy base. More than 200 Ukrainian sailors and soldiers have spent the past three weeks training there as part of Exercise Sea Breeze 26-2.

A US Navy statement said the exercise offered "NATO Allies and partner nations the opportunity to enhance interoperability and warfighting capabilities within the Black Sea region." Alongside Ukraine, the UK and the United States, it involved naval forces from Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, France, Georgia, Greece, Japan, Latvia, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye and NATO Maritime Allied Command (NATOMARCOM).

Burnham said "it was a very warm meeting... We got on very well indeed, and this is going to be a close partnership."

Central to their talks were "anti-ballistic missiles and the supply of them to Ukraine" that they would "follow up with our partners." Burnham would visit Zelensky in Ukraine "soon".

The talks came less than two weeks after Keir Starmer travelled to Kyiv for the final foreign visit of his premiership, underscoring the seamless continuity between the two Labour leaders' commitment to the war. Burnham does so as the *fifth* UK prime minister, Conservative and Labour, to enter Downing Street since Russia's invasion in February 2022—all of whom backed the slaughter taking place in the middle of Europe, with hundreds of thousands of lives lost.

The naval base talks came only days after the Russian Baltic Fleet frigate *Neustrashimy* carried out July 22 a live-fire gunnery exercise in the Channel off England's south coast—the latest in months of escalation between London

and Moscow. In March Starmer upped the ante, authorising British forces to board and seize vessels in Russia's sanctioned "shadow fleet" of oil tankers, actions the *World Socialist Web Site* warned risking direct armed clashes between British and Russian forces.

The centrepiece of Monday's visit was Downing Street's announcement that Britain is handing over the intellectual property for its "Stone Cloak" electronic jamming system to Ukraine, enabling Kyiv to mass-produce the equipment. The Ministry of Defence has already supplied Ukraine with thousands of the tablet-sized devices, which are fitted to attack drones to stop Russian air defences tracking and targeting them.

Officials made clear the arrangement benefits Britain as much as Ukraine, as UK army chiefs will collect battlefield performance data from Ukraine's expanded use of the jammers. Stone Cloak are also set to be built into a new generation of UK weaponry, including the Project Brakestop cruise missile. Announced under Starmer's tenure, the ground-launched strike weapon capable of hitting targets more than 500km away while carrying a powerful 225kg warhead. It is being Stone Cloak tested "in the UK in the coming months, followed by additional trials overseas, including in Ukraine", the Ministry of Defence announced in June.

Burnham said in a statement released ahead of the visit: "Britain stands with Ukraine, shoulder to shoulder, and our support remains unwavering." Stone Cloak, he said "is the best of homegrown British innovation and proven on the frontline, and it will be vital to protecting our security in both our countries."

A Downing Street statement said the Sea Breeze exercise, "builds on the full spectrum of support the UK provides Ukraine, including £3 billion a year to Ukraine for as long as it takes." The announcement came as Downing Street updated the total sum handed to Kyiv's war effort, saying UK support has reached £25 billion

since the 2022 invasion—including £16 billion in military assistance and £5.6 billion in non-military support. The new total is more than £3 billion higher than the £21.8 billion at which UK support stood when Burnham entered office a week ago, promising there would be “absolutely no change in the UK’s approach” to the war.

Speaking to Sky News in Kyiv on the eve of his trip, Zelensky said he would use the visit to press for a significant expansion of joint arms production. “The drone deal is very important—I want to build a large factory in Britain, sharing new technologies with our partners,” he said, adding that Ukraine was ready to “share all our experience with the UK” in exchange.

Zelensky said Ukraine’s own missile programme had progressed, but that Kyiv wanted to produce something to match Britain’s Storm Shadow missiles. Britain in turn wanted access to Ukraine’s drone technology, “including sea drones.”

Asked whether he had spoken with Britain’s new Foreign Secretary Ed Miliband and Defence Secretary Wes Streeting, Zelensky replied that he was already close to John Healey—a warmonger Burnham promoted from Starmer’s defence secretary to the controller of the military’s purse strings as chancellor.

Burnham’s decision to host Zelensky before any other foreign leader within a week of taking office fulfils his only substantive foreign policy statement during the Makerfield by-election that returned him to parliament from which he replaced Starmer as prime minister—an unconditional pledge of backing for Ukraine.

He declared “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”.

This was his pledge of allegiance to a militarist ruling elite demanding a vast uplift in rearmament that Starmer had promised but failed to fully deliver.

During Burnham’s first major broadcast interview as prime minister, recorded last Friday with the BBC’s Laura Kuenssberg, he was pressed on his approach to Donald Trump. Burnham replied that he would “always put Britain’s interest first,” while describing a “warm exchange” in his first telephone call with the US president. Asked whether he would commit to the NATO target of spending 3 percent of national income on the military by 2030—a figure that Healey resigned over as defence secretary when Starmer refused to meet

it—Burnham said he was “absolutely committed to what we’ve promised our NATO partners.”

Starmer also signed Britain up to the main NATO target of 5 percent of GDP on military spending by 2035—3.5 percent on military hardware and personnel and 1.5 percent for related infrastructure upgrades. Demanded by Washington as the price of NATO membership, meeting this requires almost £400 billion in additional military spending, with tens of billions more required for upgrading Britain’s nuclear arsenal. Financing this scale of rearmament demands a savage assault on social spending, the gutting of health care, education, housing and welfare provision.

The *Daily Telegraph* splashed its Monday front page with the headline enthusing “PM to crack down on youth benefits,” with a strapline that a “Reduced welfare bill will help fund defence and social care.” The paper reported that Burnham is “plotting a crackdown on youth sickness benefits as he scrambles to find billions of pounds for spending on social care and defence,” with young people to be “stripped of their benefits unless they agree to do training or voluntary work” as “part of an effort to cut Britain’s £333 billion welfare bill.”

More than 430,000 people aged 16-24 currently claim sickness benefits. Burnham, the *Telegraph* noted approvingly, has insisted he “will not be ‘squeamish’ about tackling the causes of rising benefits spending” and had promised in his first Downing Street address to “bring the welfare bill down” and use the money saved to bolster defence.

In his BBC interview, Burnham trailed the same agenda when pressed by Kuenssberg on his plans. He responded, “Let me just say something more though about... what you’re driving at, which is the welfare bill. I think we’ve got to get really serious as a country at getting the welfare bill down.” Any welfare support should be made “conditional upon people taking opportunities that are presented in front of them” and that “you might increase the conditions required to receive benefits.”



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