

Burnham hosts Macron: Bayeux Tapestry pageantry, a migrant crackdown and an escalation of war in Ukraine

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UK Prime Minister Andy Burnham hosted French President Emmanuel Macron at Downing Street Thursday for their first bilateral meeting. The previous evening the two, alongside King Charles III and Queen Camilla, walked the length of the Bayeux Tapestry at the British Museum. The tapestry was loaned by France for the first time in more than nine centuries.

What was presented as a cultural mission rapidly merged into talks over a more draconian anti-immigration regime in the Channel. The 70-metre embroidery records the Norman Conquest of 1066—an armed invasion of England mounted in ships across the Channel. Within 24 hours, the two governments announced an expanded riot police operation to prevent desperate people fleeing war and poverty from making that same crossing in inflatable boats.

Aside from migration, talks centred on furthering the war against Russia in Ukraine—and proposals as to how the British and European governments could shield their corporations in a mushrooming trade war.

The meeting was the first between the two leaders since they co-chaired the anti-Russian Coalition of the Willing gathering in Kyiv on August 24, marking the 35th anniversary of Ukraine’s independence, and comes amid a ratcheting up of tensions with Moscow.

The Downing Street readout noted that the two “discussed next steps on establishing local assembly lines in Ukraine for the long-range missile, SCALP, which uses British technology.” Burnham used the Kyiv visit—his first foreign trip as prime minister—to pledge the declassification of sensitive military information enabling Ukraine to manufacture components for the missile, known in British service as Storm Shadow.

Macron, speaking at the British Museum, said the UK’s support “mattered, just as our joint action within the

Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine matters,” singling out the transfer of the missile technology. Burnham told French journalists that “we may have had a change of prime minister in Britain but we have not had a change of direction” on Ukraine—underscoring that the removal of his Labour predecessor Keir Starmer altered nothing in the war policy of British imperialism.

The leaders also discussed the widening war against Iran, with the readout citing “the need to ensure de-escalation in the Strait of Hormuz,” where an Anglo-French naval mission is under consideration as American strikes continue.

At Prime Minister’s Questions the previous day, Burnham told MPs that “the loaning of the tapestry is a great example of French-British co-operation, the same co-operation that has helped us reduce summer small boat crossings.”

The Downing Street readout saw the prime minister “thanking President Macron for France’s loan of the Tapestry, which he said symbolised common bonds between the UK and France,” and was a “statement of unity in an increasingly divided world”. The same release celebrated Fortress Europe, with migrants prevented from entering by border fences, razor wire and pushbacks.

Cooperation between the UK and France was “clearly working,” Burnham said, and it was “now vital” that this success “was scaled up across Europe to deter illegal migration.” Emerging from the talks he told reporters: “It shows what collaboration can achieve, just as we are also showing on Ukraine, on small boats, and also on strengthening the UK-EU relationship.”

A press release timed for the visit announced a “surge team” of 45 border officers to be sent to beaches on France’s western coast, nearly tripling resources there. In addition, a specialist French intelligence and judicial unit

has been expanded from 18 to 30 officers; and a further unit of 75 officers is now operating in northern France, bringing the total assigned to the task to nearly 1,050. This follows a 50-strong riot police unit deployed earlier in the summer, trained, in the then Starmer government's words, and "better equipped to respond to hostile crowds and evolving smuggler tactics and stop illegal migrants in their tracks."

As the talks began, Burnham boasted on X that "these are the facts," listing the "lowest number of summer small boat arrivals since 2020," "more than 80,000 people" returned "with no right to be here," annual returns "at their highest level since 2016," and "half the number of asylum seekers in hotels than there were last year." Insisting "we can't be complacent", he pledged to "restore order and control to our borders."

Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood declared the £660 million Anglo-French agreement was "bearing fruit," boasting that over 48,000 crossing attempts had been prevented since the 2024 general election and that removals were "at record levels." Burnham's Labour is competing with the far-right on its own terrain, shifting the political narrative ever further rightwards.

The media across the political spectrum supported this narrative. The BBC reported that "mega dinghies"—"first seen earlier in August with a 15-metre long vessel carrying a record 230 migrants"—were "arguably the most pressing challenge facing the pair."

GB News, Britain's equivalent of *Fox News* in the US, complained that the interception rate has barely move since the deal was signed.

The *Sun* dismissed the 45 officers in France as "do-nothing" police; the *Daily Mail* asked, "is that it?", claiming reports of armed French officers watching boats loaded in knee-deep water with orders not to intervene.

Home Office Minister Anna Turley replied by telling BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme that the 45 officers were "just part of the armoury" of more than 1,000 officers on northern French beaches who are now doing "actual intervention" in the water. She pointed to video footage that "show them going to the boats, slashing them, pushing people back, being bombarded with stones and bricks and coming under a lot of challenge to do that, so they are intervening".

Reuters reported that Burnham and Macron also discussed Britain's "drive to get closer to Europe." This is central to Burnham's pitch to the ruling class: that he can secure access to European markets for British firms denied to his predecessors and repair an economic

position gravely weakened since Britain left the European Union in 2020 following the 2016 Brexit referendum.

But the courtesies concealed a sharpening conflict between British capital and firms operating within the EU—each pursuing its own protectionist agenda. Downing Street's readout conceded that Burnham "set out how the Made in Europe agenda could pose significant challenges for UK industry."

The *Financial Times* reported that he has named steelmaking and farming as the sectors he wants shielded from Brussels' "Made in Europe" procurement plan—itsself directed against Chinese competition—while maintaining Labour's "red lines" against the single market or a customs union.

France has been among the toughest opponents of British participation in the €150 billion Security Action for Europe defence fund and in a €5 billion EU equity fund for technology start-ups.

London is seeking exemption from "buy European" rules under the EU's Industrial Accelerator Act, warning that €12 billion of annual automotive parts imports would be "at risk."

The *Financial Times* noted the response of the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC), who "warned that the terms of the deal, as drafted, threatened the competitiveness of the UK car industry, as well as parts of the chemicals, nuclear fuels and hydrogen sectors." It quoted William Bain, the BCC's head of trade policy who insisted, "Business wants an approach of 'Made with Europe', not 'Made in Europe', and the integral role of the UK in pan-European supply chains to be reflected in that for our mutual benefit."

One EU official replied: "The British are seeking trade-offs with half-baked ideas. I do not think it will fly."



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