

Minister for Europe speech at the Aurora Forum

26.3.2026 - | Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs

On 25 March 2026, the Minister of State for Europe, North America and Overseas Territories, Stephen Doughty, addressed the Aurora Forum in London.

Thank you, David, and Carl, and all of you here at Aurora Forum and sponsors and your excellencies, fellow ministers and guests.

It is a genuine pleasure to be here.

As you'll know from my remarks last year at Goodwood, I have a huge affection for the Nordic-Baltic region, not just in a professional capacity, but also a personal capacity.

I have visited and spent time in, both personally and professionally, every single country in this room and have many abiding personal community and other ties towards you.

I think I spoke last year about my learning of Finnish folk music right through to my brother attending school in Norway, and these ties are deep and abiding, including in my own constituency in Wales which has connections with many of you too.

I really appreciate the warm welcome and that you're all here in London again.

Thank you to the Royal Over-Seas League for hosting us and having us here; a great location for this sort of event.

And, genuinely, one of the things I value about this forum and the conversations that we have around it, the bilateral conversations I've been having already today, and I know that we will enjoy tomorrow as well, is the range of perspectives and interests it brings.

Your ideas and experiences and energy are very crucial, particularly as we grapple with some of the challenges which are obvious to all of us in the room.

And that joined-up approach is absolutely crucial because no one country, no one government can tackle these challenges alone.

With all of you we have a great degree of like-mindedness - I know we reflect on this often - but that is all the more crucial in difficult times.

I also like to think we have a calm, measured, responsible approach to some very difficult and challenging topics.

That is all the more important and it's certainly the approach that we're taking here in the UK.

The Prime Minister has been exemplified over recent weeks with some very challenging topics.

It goes without saying that the context has become even more challenging since we met last year.

We've of course seen renewed violence in the Middle East, with consequences not just for the people of that region, but for all of our people too.

Whether that's in the immediate impacts on the cost of living, on security and stability, on shipping routes.

The new technologies we've seen so devastatingly used in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine and the threats that we all face...

but also affecting civilians, businesses and others across the entire region.

We have been standing alongside and supporting our government partners across the Mediterranean and beyond to ensure their safety and security.

And of course, in Ukraine, the brutal war grinds on, with Russia continuing to bombard civilians and energy infrastructure.

I've been in Kyiv like many of you have under attack.

I've seen the bunkers where Ukrainian children are having to do their lessons.

I've visited Bucha and heard first-hand about the atrocities that Russia carried out there.

I've met children who have thankfully been returned from being stolen and deported and attempted indoctrination in Russia.

And we have just seen brutal attacks in the last 24 hours in other parts of Ukraine, as we've seen so often.

Lviv, a city I know very well and I taught English in many years ago, brutal attacks in daylight against again key locations and civilians.

So, I am very glad always to be among friends who share our determination to stand resolutely against Russia's brutal war, and to keep up our support until there is a just, comprehensive and lasting peace.

And, of course, it is not just in Ukraine. We all know in this room that Russia's threat remains and continues from the High North, to NATO's eastern flank, to the north Atlantic, to the Baltic.

And we know that the range of tactics and techniques they use is wide and broad.

And for many of you, and indeed for us too, we have seen the reality of Russia's hybrid activities and the everyday impacts those have and the kind of persistent disruption that has become sadly routine.

Whether that's the risk to our critical national infrastructure, whether it's GPS jamming, whether it's balloons, whether it's drones, whether it's the shadow fleet, whether it's the information warfare that we see and I use that phrase deliberately.

I spoke to our Foreign Affairs Committee just a couple of weeks ago; Russia overtly has admitted it is spending €1.5 billion in just one year on information and propaganda - that's €30 million a week.

I say that just to challenge all of us in this room about the challenge that we face not only in conventional terms, but in those new hybrid activities that are disrupting and destabilising and dividing our societies and economies.

Indeed on my recent visit to Vilnius, we were having dinner when an alert came through about balloons being sent across the border from Belarus and disrupting civilian airspace.

We were delayed for three hours and this is of course the kind of pressure that many of you are living with and dealing with all the time.

And we are also seeing growing pressures in the High North and the Arctic driven by hostile Russian activity.

With new interest in maritime routes and infrastructure, and indeed sharper competition including around Greenland, but in many locations in the High North and across the north Atlantic.

This is, of course, a shared context, and we are all dealing with the pressures it brings.

I know that leaders will be discussing many of these important issues at the Joint Expeditionary Force, including on issues such as the shadow fleet.

And of course our cooperation through JEF is not only crucial for all of us, but also crucial for our support for Ukraine.

Indeed, you will all know that defence ministers formalised the enhanced partnership with Ukraine last November, and that work is now moving ahead...

complementing everything we are doing bilaterally and through NATO to support Ukraine's defence.

That absolutely must continue.

We are also standing together in that effort as members of the coalition of the willing.

I want to thank you for all that you and your countries are doing in that regard.

I have also seen the value of our cooperation for Ukraine and indeed for our collective security in my recent visits, including in Stockholm, Riga and Vilnius.

In Latvia, for example, I saw genuinely hugely impressive and reassuring work that we are doing with partners through the drone coalition - developing new technologies in air, on land, and indeed in the maritime domain, and building capability that strengthens our security and our economies, and learning from what Ukraine has experienced on the battlefield.

Not only in our support to them, but also for us too.

And, of course, we are strengthening our position together in the High North, tightening coordination on sanctions and the shadow fleet, and building resilience in our societies.

Something that so many of you in this room have led on for many decades and that we need to learn from even more deeply here in this country.

We're also crucially investing in joint capability.

Whether that's in platforms - I think particularly the fantastic arrangements we've come to with Norway in relation to frigates and indeed the work I saw at SAAB in Stockholm,

I was there recently, and also many SMEs coordinating, particularly around some of those new technologies.

We are also stepping up in so many other ways.

We're doubling the number of troops we have in Norway and scaling up our joint exercises with NATO allies...

and of course our enduring commitment particularly in Estonia where I'm proud that Welsh troops have served on many occasions through Operation Cabrit.

This builds on the biggest commitment, the biggest investment we're making here in the United Kingdom since the end of the Cold War.

But we know, and we all know this in this room, that we need to go further and faster to keep pace with the threats ahead.

This month, you'll be aware that allies trained together in Exercise Cold Response across Norway, Finland and Sweden.

Having spent some time in the past with our Royal Marines, and the Norwegian marines up in the High North, I've seen the incredible training that goes on at our centres up there.

Later this year, the JEF will run Exercise Lion Protector, sharpening how we operate together.

I cannot reflect on our own relationships without reflecting on the importance of the transatlantic relationship.

The US is, and remains, the UK's principal defence and security partner, and we work extremely closely together in NATO as we do with many in this room.

We also recognise, as a whole, that Europe has to do more.

Whether that's in capacity, industry, coordination, training, capability, we need to carry more of the load and we need to strengthen NATO as a whole.

So I'm proud that the UK will, and is, stepping up alongside allies, including all of you in this room to meet the strength of NATO commitment on defence.

And we are working with all of you in this room as some of our most like-minded, and indeed, capable allies.

But we've got to work better, we need to work faster together in Europe and indeed across the Atlantic.

And that also includes the important relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union...

For those members in the room through our new Defence and Security Partnership and in many aspects of our cooperation which I was discussing just in Brussels last week.

And also with other partners, with Canada, with Australia, New Zealand, Japan and so many others out there who share our goals for stability and security globally...

and of course the freedom of navigation on the seas, strengthening the defence of our supply chains globally and we've all got to invest in our defence industries.

But doing so also to strengthen resilience against hybrid and non-traditional threats and to protect the infrastructure we all depend on and our citizens depend on.

We've got to rise to that challenge and I really want to encourage all of my ministerial colleagues, and others as well, to continue to challenge within NATO...

within the European Union,

in the EU-UK relationship...

and to stand as you do so often with us in other fora, including at the United Nations.

I was proud to be there with many of you on the UN Security Council session on Ukraine just a few weeks ago in New York.

And I would say this is not a time for business as usual, and I say that as a challenge to everybody in this room.

We have to think differently, more quickly, more responsively, and not to operate in some of the ways perhaps we have in the past.

Because our adversaries are certainly thinking in very different ways and we need to keep up with that in so many different respects.

That requires bold and new thinking...

production in response to changed battlefields,

our response to hybrid threats,

to multiple crises at once,

to societal resilience,

to what's happening in space,

to what's happening under the sea,

to what's happening in cyberspace,

to what's happening in our energy infrastructure,

just to mention a few.

It's a genuine pleasure to be here with you all

I feel constantly reassured and inspired every time I visit every single one of the countries in this room...

and not just meeting with governmental colleagues, but also with businesses and with ordinary citizens because I think we share so much.

So thank you, I look forward to working with you all over the days ahead.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/minister-for-europe-speech-at-the-aurora-forum>