

Foreign Secretary Mansion House address to City of London 2026

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Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper delivered the annual Mansion House address to the City of London on 9 April 2026

Here this evening, we have a chance to talk together at very turbulent times.

And at a time when I've had the privilege of being the Foreign Secretary for seven months now, months that feel as though time has really sped up, and a time when there are conflicts and crises happening all over the world.

A time when these are not just remote events in distant lands, but upheavals that reverberate here at home, impacting directly on the cost of living for families right across the UK.

And so I want to reflect a bit tonight on how UK foreign policy needs to respond to the scale and the pace of the turbulence that affects us all.

But let me start first with the current crisis in the Middle East.

Because the news that, on Tuesday night, that a ceasefire agreement had been reached between the US, Israel and Iran, was very welcome.

A vital step to delivering some security and stability for the region. To get international shipping moving again, the global economy moving again, and to easing the pressures on the cost of living here at home.

But so much work still to do.

We took a very different view from the United States and Israel at the start of this conflict.

When their action got underway, we faced a choice, and we considered those issues carefully.

The need for a clear plan, the risks of escalation, the potential economic consequences, and the lawful basis for any action.

And we made the choice not to provide support for the initial strikes or to get drawn into offensive action.

That was the decision Prime Minister Keir Starmer took - calm and clear and guided by UK interests and UK values.

A different party in power with a different Prime Minister in Downing Street might have taken a different decision.

And governments are judged by the decisions they make and the instincts that guide them in moments of grave crisis.

And so, in those crucial hours on the morning of the 28th of February, when other parties were demanding to know why we were not taking part in the strikes on Iran, this government stayed calm

and held firm.

Because we have learned the lessons from the recent past, especially from Iraq,

And no matter what the pressure from other parties or other countries, we do not believe it is right to outsource our foreign policy to anyone.

And that is what the British public should rightly expect of their leaders.

To take independent decisions according to the UK national interest and UK values.

And so, we have not engaged in offensive action, but what we have done is provide defensive support to our partners in the Gulf who faced reckless Iranian attacks.

And that is why British jets have been in the skies defending countries who played no role in this conflict and where hundreds of thousands of British citizens live and visit.

And I want to pay tribute to our RAF pilots and UK service personnel for all they are doing to keep people safe.

So we provided basing support to the US against the Iranian ballistic missile launchers that were pointed at the Gulf and at international shipping in the Strait

And alongside that international defensive action in our national interest here at home, we've worked to support UK households under pressure, including cuts to energy bills and extending the freeze on fuel duty to provide reassurance and security at a difficult time.

And we have been working internationally, both for a swift resolution of the conflict and also for a plan for what comes after.

Because we were not involved in the start of this conflict, but we will work together to support a sustainable end to it.

So most important of all for us that means the restoration of freedom of navigation, the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz, and getting the global economy moving once more.

Because the attacks on international shipping in the Gulf, the effective closure of the Strait has been deeply damaging for the world - blocking fertilizer for Africa, Liquefied Natural Gas for Asia, and jet fuel for the world.

The trading route for Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Oman, all hijacked by Iran so that they can hold the global economy hostage.

But this is an international shipping route. It's a transit route for the high seas. No country can close those routes, and it goes against the fundamental principles of the Law of the Sea.

And here in Britain, the importance of this runs deep in our history.

Because we're an island nation, a maritime economy

95% of our trade is carried by sea

40% of our food is imported,

and it was Victorian Britain that pioneered the freedom of the seas, the maritime law made piracy a crime of universal jurisdiction.

And today we know, more than ever, that freedom of navigation is the underpinning of global trade, and it matters for every sea, every ocean, every strait, every country has a stake in this.

Every industry is affected by it.

So that is why last week, I convened more than 40 nations from every continent across the globe, all adamant that freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz must be restored.

It's why today I met with the International Maritime Organization to discuss what the first steps should be now the ceasefire is in place,

And it's why we are supporting and promoting their practical proposals to start moving the ships that are stranded in the Strait and the 20,000 stranded seafarers. It's a humanitarian as well as an economic first step.

And then we need the full and unconditional reopening of the Strait as a central part, not just of the current ceasefire, but the long term future for the region.

Because the fundamental freedoms of the seas must not be unilaterally withdrawn or sold off to individual bidders.

And nor can there be any place for tolls on an international waterway.

Freedom of navigation means navigation must be free.

And the international consensus that Britain helped build more than 100 years ago in support of maritime freedoms, we will champion again now.

So there is so much more work to do to build a sustainable settlement which delivers security for the region. And let me be clear, it must include Lebanon.

The escalation of airstrikes in Lebanon by Israel yesterday was deeply damaging.

And in the humanitarian consequences of this conflict, with hundreds of 1000s of people displaced, hundreds of people killed

But also, for the security prospects for the region and for the people of Lebanon and the people of Israel too, we will not achieve a durable peace settlement in the Middle East, if in Lebanon, the crisis endures.

Regional stability and security also requires that Iran must not pose a threat to international shipping anymore or to its neighbours.

And we've long been clear Iran cannot be allowed to develop a nuclear weapon.

And we've got no illusion about the nature of the Iranian regime, as we saw earlier this year in its brutal repression of its own people and the threats projected through its proxies around the world, including Hezbollah.

So an Iran that is contained is an Iran that can no longer hurt our interests, allies or prosperity or

people.

So where threats remain, the goal must be to move from conflict to containment with coordinated international action and diplomacy to prevent rearmament supply chains.

And we also won't forget that regional security requires progress on the Gaza ceasefire and the 20-point plan, an end to annexation threats and settler violence in the West Bank, and a realistic political horizon for the two-state solution that is the only way to ensure security for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

Events in the Middle East weigh heavily on us, and it might be tempting or even comforting to think that the Iran crisis is a once in a generation shock.

But this is the third time in six years that international events have sent economic tidal waves around the globe, hitting Britain's shores. The COVID pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine, and now the Iran conflict.

Instability and volatility are becoming increasingly chronic, and turbulence is now the new normal.

National security and economic prosperity increasingly intertwined.

The new reality we face did not begin with the war in Iran, nor will it end with a reopened Strait.

And I think for too long, the UK clung to the prevailing security assumptions of the last two decades.

Our country had planned for a post-Cold War peace dividend. Instead, we have an aggressive expansionist Russia that menaces our continent.

Successive governments hoped that well managed economic globalisation would expand trade, reduce conflict, and a rising tide would lift all boats.

Instead, we've seen instability, inequality and rising protectionism threaten economic security.

We've got rapid technological change creating amazing new opportunities, but also new uncertainties and vulnerabilities.

And undiversified supply chains exploited for economic coercion and the interdependence that has helped make us prosperous being weaponized against us.

We've seen in China's rise, the most consequential economic transformation of the last century.

And all of this amidst the US changing priorities and focus with far reaching implications for European responsibility and for our own defence.

So these assumptions about benign international security, about stable globalisation, about predictable international partnerships, may have been well intentioned, but UK governments were too slow to adapt as the world changed.

Stability and security were taken for granted, and there was too much complacency about the resilience of our alliances, international institutions, and the UK's role within them.

Which meant there were short term decisions taken over the last 15 years that corroded some of our strength and resilience.

An era of complacency in which defence spending was heavily cut. And in the words of a former Conservative Defence Secretary, key capabilities hollowed out.

The energy transition was hobbled and carelessness from previous governments about economic security and capabilities and the state of our partnerships, including Europe and with NATO.

We will not do that any more.

And so that is why, since this Labour Government came to office, our foreign policy is increasingly focused on ensuring that Britain can thrive amidst this scale of upheaval and change.

It's embodied in this Prime Minister's calm and steady approach. Putting security, both national security and economic security, much more centrally at the heart of our approach.

Guided by our values and our national interests, but not outsourcing foreign policy decisions to anyone else.

And in place of complacency, a new determined diplomacy, renewing and adapting existing partnerships and building agile alliances too.

Because it is the work that we build, the work that we do abroad, the partnerships that we build across the world, that make us stronger here at home.

So first, that means renewing our focus on national security and overseeing the biggest increase in defence spending since the end of the Cold War.

Because hard power is so important.

And Europe is long overdue in taking on greater responsibility from its own defence.

And that's why we've made the historic commitment to spend 5% of our GDP on national security by 2035, honouring our commitment to be a leader in NATO, and our commitment to stand with Ukraine and push back against Russia, our defence of Gulf allies under attack, modernising our approach to hybrid threats.

And second, just as the Chancellor has put economic stability at the heart of our domestic policy, I'm strengthening the focus on economic resilience alongside trade in our foreign policy.

Because economic security is the underpinning of prosperity in turbulent times.

So yes, we're strengthening national capabilities like tech, R&D, and finance, sustaining strengthening our steel industry with a landmark strategy and a goal that 50% of steel used in the UK is made in the UK.

And internationally, working to secure the critical minerals that the UK needs.

And most ambitiously, working alongside allies to transform our long-term economic security, unleashing new nuclear and turbo-charging renewables.

Because for a century, global energy has been based on concentrated resources production cartels and geographic choke points

But renewable energy cannot get stuck in the Strait of Hormuz.

It cannot be controlled by one or two countries.

So this is a historic opportunity to reduce our dependence on volatile fossil fuels, but to seize the opportunities to lead and drive that transition that transition globally, so no choke point can hold us back.

But thirdly, it means being confident about the values that guide us.

Now be that our humanitarian values that mean we're providing £15m extra during this Middle East crisis to support displaced civilians in Lebanon, or supporting energy infrastructure renewal in Ukraine.

Or our respect for the rule of law, for the values that underpin the United Nations Charter, for the friendships and alliances we build and the commitments we make in the volatile global context with rising challenges from great power politics, it might be tempting to think that international law and the role of international frameworks are out of date.

And that in championing them, we somehow cherish rules over national interests.

Well, I reject that view, because we're not just defending the status quo.

Frameworks of international rules have to be able to adapt to a fast changing world, just as we've argued for changes to the way that the European Convention on Human Rights is interpreted to address challenges on migration,

But the role that rules-based frameworks play is vital, and respect for the rule of law is a core British value that supports our national interest too.

Underpins our economic stability, makes us a reliable place for international investment while the whole world spins around us

And underpins our security and prosperity too.

And it's in Britain's interests to be a dependable power, a country that keeps its word, a stable base for investment and a partner of choice.

And in order to deliver on our security, our prosperity and our values.

In place of complacency, that means we need determined diplomacy that pursues those diverse partnerships and agile alliances,

Continuing to recognize the vital role NATO plays, but also that Europe needs to contribute more.

Strengthening our partnership with European neighbours: a landmark bilateral treaty with Germany, deeper nuclear security cooperation with France, stronger migration cooperation with Italy, stronger naval cooperation with Norway, and with the EU, a closer relationship, not just on security and defence, but on better trade terms too.

And all this while sustaining our deep and indispensable US alliance. A strong alliance that goes back many decades, embedded through the strong security and defence partnerships, including through the Five Eyes that keep people on both sides of the Atlantic safe.

And because strong allies are honest with each other, that includes being able at times to disagree.

But as part of that, it means to moving forward to find new forms of multilateralism. New flexible groups of countries where our interests are aligned, the Joint Expeditionary Force on defence, the Calais group on migration, working with major European players through the E3 or E4 groups, the Coalition of the Willing to support Ukraine, or the work we're doing with the US and the Quad countries to secure a ceasefire in Sudan - the worst humanitarian crisis of the 21st Century.

So more than ever before, these fast-moving events across the world are continually and directly affecting our lives, our prosperity and our security at home.

And our foreign policy needs to keep up with the change, with the upheaval.

But also to keep calm in that fast-changing world.

To be confident in our values.

Purposeful in our interests.

Strong in our focus on security, as the bedrock on which all else is built.

And agile in the alliances we build and renew for the future.

Those partnerships we build abroad make us stronger at home.

That's my mission as Foreign Secretary, and I look forward to working with all of you to deliver it.

Thank you.

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