

Foreign Secretary James Cleverly makes first visit to East Asia

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- The Foreign Secretary will meet President Yoon Suk-yeol of the Republic of South Korea, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong of Singapore and deliver a keynote speech at the Milken Asia Summit.

Focused on strengthening bilateral ties and enhancing trade and security links, Foreign Secretary James Cleverly will begin a three-day visit to Japan, Republic of Korea and Singapore this week (26 September).

It is one of his first international visits as Foreign Secretary – following the United Nations General Assembly in New York – demonstrating the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific Tilt, and the UK's ambition to become the European partner of choice with the greatest presence in the region.

The UK and Japan are the closest of friends and partners. Cleverly's visit comes after Prime Minister Liz Truss met Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at the UN General Assembly in New York, where the leaders looked forward to expanding the UK-Japan relationship. Both countries are working together to further shared goals on security, defence and trade through programmes like the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) and the UK's application to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

During the visit in Japan, Cleverly will attend the State Funeral of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and meet Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi. While in the Republic of Korea he will meet President Yoon Suk-yeol and visit the Joint Security Area of the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). Finally in Singapore, Cleverly will meet Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and deliver a keynote speech at the Milken Asia Summit.

Speaking ahead of the visit, Foreign Secretary, James Cleverly, said:

As I start my visit to the region in Japan, my thoughts are with the Japanese people as we remember the legacy of former Prime Minister Abe – their longest serving prime minister who brought our two countries closer together.

The UK has a long-term commitment to the Indo-Pacific region, as we look to establish a greater and more persistent presence than any other European country. This in turn will boost economic development, strengthen trade ties and enhance security.

While in Japan, the Foreign Secretary will offer condolences at the State Funeral of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. In a meeting with Foreign Minister Hayashi, Cleverly will reaffirm the UK's ongoing commitment to its relationship with Japan, its closest security partner in Asia, and the two countries' strong people-to-people links.

Cleverly will then travel to the Republic of Korea to highlight closer cooperation on security, trade and energy and meet President Yoon Suk-yeol. He will visit the Joint Security Area of the Demilitarised Zone with the United Nations Command. With Foreign Minister Park Jin, he will discuss UK-RoK cooperation on global security and economic issues including Ukraine, Russia and China as part of the existing bilateral framework.

The visit will conclude in Singapore, with a keynote speech at the Milken Asia Summit setting out the Foreign Secretary's foreign policy vision for the Indo-Pacific region, and a bilateral meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong.

In recognition of Singapore's role as an important regional finance centre, he will launch the new British Investment International Office, boosting investment in green infrastructure and establishing a significant economic hub. The Foreign Secretary will meet Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to discuss regional security and trade, and later have dinner with Minister for Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan.

UK Armed Forces kick off major series of exercises in the Indo-Pacific

The RAF has started a series of exercises that will see the UK Armed Forces training with Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea and other Indo-Pacific nations, until December.

Four Typhoon fighters and one Voyager air-to-air refuelling aircraft from the RAF joined Exercise Pitch Black in Darwin, Australia. It was the first time the RAF had taken part in the exercise since the pandemic, with around 100 aircraft and 2,500 personnel from 17 countries participating in large-scale, complex training missions.

The RAF Typhoons flew by day and night as part of large multi-national formations of aircraft over one of the largest air training areas in the world. Pilots operated in both the air-air and air-ground role, often in the same sorties, both as attacking and defending forces. Each exercise mission was supported by a Voyager air-air refuelling tanker which provided fuel to jets from a number of participating nations.

The RAF's contribution to Exercise Pitch Black is a tangible demonstration of

UK air power and highlights the UK's ability to deploy rapidly at long range. It also illustrates the UK's desire to enhance international military relationships for the safe and effective conduct of air operations with partner nations. As part of this aim, the Typhoon fighters flew back to the UK via Malaysia and India to conduct further defence engagement activity.

The Royal Navy, meanwhile, celebrates one year of permanent presence in the Pacific, following the departure of HMS Spey and HMS Tamar from Portsmouth. In the year since they left, the vessels have sailed 40,000 nautical miles each and collectively visited 17 nations and British Overseas Territories.

The two UK warships are deployed to the Indo-Asia-Pacific as part of the UK's tilt towards the region. HMS Spey has just completed participation in the largest military exercise in northern Australia this year, Kakadu 22, while HMS Tamar will host teams from the US Navy and Royal New Zealand Navy for a large-scale mine warfare exercise off the Republic of Korea. These teams will operate Remus autonomous underwater vehicles from the ship.

UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said:

Security and stability throughout the Indo-Pacific remains paramount, and with the Pitch Black exercises and the persistent presence of the Royal Navy in the Pacific, we are able to demonstrate our commitment and shared responsibility across the region and further strengthen our close ties with friends and allies.

The UK Government has identified the Indo-Pacific region as being critical to the UK's economy, its security, and its global ambition to support open societies. The RAF's participation in the exercise is deepening engagement in the region in support of shared prosperity and regional stability.

Meanwhile, the deployment of HMS Tamar and HMS Spey has seen the Royal Navy enforce a UN embargo against North Korea; deliver aid to Tonga in the wake of a tsunami and take part in numerous regional exercises from large-scale military workouts, through to the principal humanitarian support mission, Pacific Partnership, which ended last month. This saw HMS Tamar involved in community projects in Palau and Commando engineers build a school in the Philippines.

October will see the UK commence further exercises with Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and other Indo-Asia-Pacific nations. These will include Exercise Vigilant Isles and Exercise Puk Puk, both land-based exercises. Exercise Vigilant Isles will see personnel from 1 Regiment Royal Horse Artillery deploy to Japan to conduct Ground Based Surveillance training. Meanwhile, Exercise Puk Puk will enable UK Royal Engineers to hone their tactical skills by supporting Australian Army Engineers conducting construction activities in Papua New Guinea.

Deputy Prime Minister of Australia, Richard Marles said:

These exercises demonstrate Australia's longstanding commitment to deepening cooperation in the region. They reflect the high value we place on regional stability, shared security and fostering closer ties throughout the Indo-Pacific. Australia and the United Kingdom share these values and continue to advance their cause.

These exercises follow the recent visit of Australian Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles to Barrow-in-Furness, where he attended the commissioning of the fifth of seven new Astute-Class Royal Navy submarines, HMS Anson, alongside other bilateral engagements.

A hand-up for start-ups: 33,000 new loans for small businesses as £900m Government scheme widened

- Start Up Loans of up to £25,000 now available to start-ups that have been trading for up to three years, up from two years
- New 'second loans' available for businesses that have been trading for up to five years
- Loans to provide much-needed support for the UK's innovators and entrepreneurs

An £884m loan scheme for new businesses is to be greatly expanded, delivering much needed finance to the UK's array of innovative start-ups, the Business Secretary Jacob Rees-Mogg has announced today (Sunday 25 September).

The Start Up Loans programme has provided more than 95,000 loans to start-ups across the UK since its inception in June 2012, offering an average of just over £9000 in support.

With 33,000 new loans available, the programme's eligibility will be expanded to support businesses trading for up to three years, up from two years. Businesses can apply immediately under the new criteria.

Start Up Loans provide a fixed interest rate of 6%, as well as mentoring, support and funding to aspiring business owners across the UK, providing support to those who might find it difficult to secure loans from traditional lenders.

Alongside this, a new second loan will be available to businesses operating

for up to five years, providing eligible businesses between 3 and 5 years old a much-needed Government-backed finance to support their expansion at a crucial juncture.

Business Secretary Jacob Rees-Mogg said:

“This government is relentlessly focused on driving growth to create better jobs, boost wages and fund our vital public services like the NHS.

“Encouraging entrepreneurship and new businesses to thrive is critical to growing the economy and raising living standards.

“From a hair salon in Wales, to a furniture business in Northern Ireland and a cake seller in the Lake District, expanding the Start Up Loans Scheme will support these small businesses through this challenging period and position them to grow – creating jobs and opportunities across the UK.”

The scheme has backed businesses across the United Kingdom, with more than £54m provided to businesses in Scotland, £42m in Wales and over £12m in Northern Ireland.

Expansion of the Start Up Loans scheme follows the 2021/22 Spending Review, at which the government made the commitment to provide 33,000 loans to the programme over the next three years.

The extension provides further government support for businesses grappling with cost pressures and adds to measures announced by the Chancellor earlier this week, including the introduction of the Energy Bills Relief Scheme to help support them with the costs of energy, reforming off payroll working rules and simplification of the alcohol duty system.

It also builds on key measures the Government has announced for small businesses in particular, including extending the £4.5 billion Recovery Loan Scheme and delivering the Help to Grow schemes, which provide mentoring and free software to thousands of businesses across the UK.

Michelle Ovens CBE, founder, Small Business Britain said:

“The expansion of funding opportunities for start-ups and growing businesses will certainly be welcomed by small firms as a positive move to unleash their potential. Access to finance is vital for entrepreneurs to grow, and with rising costs and challenges across the board they need all the help they can get right now to realise their ambitions.”

British Business Bank, Managing Director of Start Up Loans, Richard Bearman, said:

“We are delighted to be able to extend the reach of the Start Up Loans programme to help support businesses who need extra support during a time of continued economic unrest.

“This extension of the programme will enable us to work with those businesses that had perhaps just got going when the pandemic hit, or are ready to scale

up now that they are back on their feet. We want to ensure that these businesses do not get left behind.”

Joint statement on the situation in Yemen

On 20 September 2022, ministers and representatives of the Governments of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, United States of America and United Kingdom, hereafter referred to as the Quad, met to discuss the situation in Yemen.

The Quad reaffirmed its strong commitment to the unity, sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Yemen, and its commitment to stand by the people of Yemen through efforts to reach an end to the conflict and the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

The Quad welcomed the tangible benefits delivered by the truce for the Yemeni people since it commenced on 2 April 2022. They welcomed the continuing implementation of agreed confidence building measures and leadership of the Government of Yemen, including facilitating the flow of fuel into Hudaydah Port despite the Houthis' order that delayed the established process for clearing ships, and the resumption of flights in and out of Sana'a airport. They called for the implementation of the outstanding measures, including the opening by the Houthis of the main roads around Taiz and an agreement on a joint mechanism for the payment of civil servant salaries. They condemned the Houthis' large scale military reinforcement and all attacks that threatened to derail the truce including, inter alia, the recent Houthi attacks on Taiz. They also condemned the recent Houthi military parade in Hudaydah, in violation of the Hudaydah Agreement.

They emphasised the need to consolidate and build on this progress, which requires compromise by all parties. The Quad therefore fully supported the efforts of the UN Special Envoy, Hans Grundberg, to extend and expand the truce on 2 October 2022, in addition to the full implementation of all terms of the truce. The Quad agreed that a permanent ceasefire and a durable political settlement must be the ultimate objectives of the Yemeni-led and Yemeni-owned political process, under UN auspices, and that such a settlement must be based on the agreed references and relevant UN Security Council resolutions.

The Quad reaffirmed their support to the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), stressed the importance of PLC cohesion, and welcomed the PLC's commitment to improving basic services and economic stability.

The Quad agreed to meet regularly, to discuss both Yemen and broader regional security issues.

New support for victims of county lines exploitation

Hundreds of victims of county lines exploitation will be helped to escape drug gangs following the expansion of support services in four priority locations – London, West Midlands, Merseyside and Greater Manchester – where young people are often targeted.

The Home Office has today (24 September) allocated up to £5 million to better support young people and their families for the next three years, and help free them from the grasp of vicious county lines gangs.

A one-to-one specialist support service for young people under 25, delivered by not-for-profit organisation Catch22, will safely make contact with young people who have been referred by safeguarding partners, such as the police and children's services, and work with them to exit their involvement in county lines activity.

If under 25s are identified outside of their hometowns, a rescue service will be deployed to bring them home safely, offering a pivotal moment for them to engage with caseworkers and protect their futures.

The service will also offer mental health support and counselling to the young people and their families, to help deal with the trauma of their experiences.

They will operate across the four largest exporting areas for county lines activity, aligning with the police forces that are part of the government's county lines programme.

Home Office Minister, Jeremy Quin, said:

I want victims of exploitation to know that we are on their side – and that there is a way out, a brighter future available.

Since 2019, the government's county lines programme has shut down 2,400 lines, made over 8,000 arrests and engaged more than 9,500 individuals through safeguarding interventions.

These services will be relentless in their focus to carve out safe routes home for young people in danger and tear them away from the grip of these merciless county lines gangs, opening up their futures once more.

As part of the package of support, funding will also be allocated to continue the delivery of the national confidential and anonymous helpline 'SafeCall',

delivered across England and Wales by Missing People – including bespoke support for parents and carers. Since it was established in late 2017, the helpline has supported 480 young victims of county lines exploitation and their families.

Chief Executive Officer at Catch22, Naomi Hulston, said:

For children and young people who are victims of county lines activity, the impact on their lives – and the lives of those around them – is devastating. We know that grooming techniques are becoming more advanced and that escaping the clutches of these perpetrators can be incredibly difficult. That's why as part of this service we'll not only be bringing young people home safely, we'll be supporting them to make sure they can process their experiences and are protected from any future harm.

Director of Policy and Development at Missing People, Susannah Drury, said:

SafeCall provides confidential, anonymous support to young victims of county lines exploitation and their families – helping them get safe, stay safe and deal with the challenges they face. Our expert team is available 9am to 11pm, 7 days a week to provide support via our free helpline – text or call 116000. Missing People is proud to be providing the SafeCall service across England and Wales to help young victims and their families through crisis and trauma.

County lines activity refers to drug trafficking operations which often sees children or vulnerable adults groomed to run drugs from one city to other parts of the country, usually coupled with extreme violence and coercive behaviour.