

We must stand together for freedom and democracy

We believe in freedom and democracy. Freedom loving societies are not just the best places to live, they are the most successful.

When the Berlin Wall fell and the Iron Curtain came crashing down three decades ago, renewed democracies were established across Eastern Europe. People have become freer, living better lives and their children have better futures. But these hard-won gains are now at risk with malign, autocratic regimes seeking to take away people's freedom.

Look at what's happening in Belarus. The escalating standoff at the Polish border marks the latest step by the Lukashenko regime to undermine regional security. He is using desperate migrants as pawns in his bid to create instability and cling onto power, regardless of the human cost.

The United Kingdom will not look away. We will stand with our allies in the region, who are on the frontier of freedom. That's why we are proud to be the first European country to assist Poland by agreeing to send a small team of personnel to provide engineering support to ease pressure at the border.

In the same way, we were the first European country to put sanctions on the Lukashenko regime, targeting over 100 individuals and organisations with measures including asset freezes and travel bans. This shows we are ready to take the lead in standing up for freedom and democracy, acting robustly, decisively and relentlessly to take on malign actors wherever they are in the world.

We are not just standing side by side with Poland as they bear the brunt of this shameful manufactured migrant crisis, but also others in the Visegrad Four – Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic – and our friends in the Baltics and Ukraine.

In Belarus, this carefully crafted crisis is an attempt to divert attention away from the litany of abhorrent acts and human rights violations that the regime has already committed. Since the fraudulent election in August 2020 we have seen members of the opposition, journalists and activists beaten, jailed and killed, while others have been forced into exile.

In contrast to their tyrannical leaders, the people of Belarus are true democrats. Time and again we have seen ordinary citizens risking everything to stand up for their rights and keep the flame of freedom alive. As the chair of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, Andrei Bastunets, said: "Today, the law does not defend us. Today, we defend the law."

Russia has a clear responsibility here. They must press the Belarusian authorities to end the crisis and enter into dialogue.

We need to fight for the rule of law, freedom and democracy, and we must take

that fight to the where that ideological battle is. Security is no longer solely about military hardware. The battle is now taking place in cyber space, the economy, and in the appalling use of people as collateral.

We will join forces with our partners to advance our shared interests. At the NATO foreign ministers' summit in Riga in a few weeks' time, we will put forward new proposals to challenge the 21st century methods of aggression being used by those who threaten our freedoms, economies and democracies.

The world is changing and modern threats are more multifaceted and complex. That idea lies at the heart of the Integrated Review of security, defence, development and foreign policy the government published earlier this year. We need to work with allies who believe we must have a world where freedom loving democracies don't just survive – they thrive.

That is why we remain the largest European spender on defence in NATO – the world's greatest defence alliance. It is why we are working with friends and allies in South East Asia where we are deepening our defence, maritime and security ties. This week in Indonesia, the world's third largest democracy, I agreed new ties in cyber. I also visited Thailand and Malaysia, where our cooperation includes the Five Power Defence Arrangements. We are also increasing our defence collaboration with India, Israel and many others around the world. Through AUKUS we are collaborating with the US and Australia on the next generation of technologies.

I want our friends across Europe to join us. That means standing together for example in opposing the construction of the Nord Stream 2 Pipeline. It risks undermining European security by allowing Russia to tighten its grip on those nations who rely on its gas, despite the pandemic reminding us about the importance of having diverse supply chains to avoid being strategically dependent on unreliable partners.

At this critical time, we should be deepening our investment and trade ties with countries that follow the rules and allow free market economies to thrive. We cannot, and will not, ever give succour to those who want to undermine freedom and democracy.

Together with our friends and allies, we can build a network of liberty, working to repel these malign actors to ensure freedom loving people can live in peace.