Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary's speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet

2012-03-29

When I spoke here a year ago, the Arab Spring was in its early stages.

The death of Osama Bin Laden had struck a blow at the heart of Al Qaeda. Egypt and Tunisia were at the beginning of their great changes, and Bashar Al Assad had just unleashed the killing machine that has claimed nearly 10,000 victims. In Libya, we were enforcing a no-fly zone with our allies, averting a massacre in Benghazi and helping the Libyan people to take charge of their own future.

What I said then holds true today: the Arab Spring is the most significant development so far of the early 21st century. This change was led by the people of the region and we salute them for their courage as they build the new politics of their countries.

We have a stake in their success as well as in peaceful reform in places such as Jordan and Morocco.

A Middle East of open and prosperous societies would transform the security of the world and brighten the prospects of millions of people.

It would unlock the immense economic and social potential of their young populations.

And in the very idea of Arab democracy there is the seed of Al Qaeda’s long-term defeat and irrelevance.

We remain firmly on the optimistic side of the Arab Spring. It shows that there is no part of the world where people are too cowed or crushed to care about their human rights.

As Tunisia’s Foreign Minister said to me yesterday, it has destroyed the idea of Arab exceptionalism. Wherever we are born, we all have within us a common desire for dignity, liberty and justice.

The demand for political and economic freedom burns like a fuse that will race across undemocratic regions over time. It may sputter, but it cannot be snuffed out.

In Burma this Sunday millions can vote in by-elections in which Aung San Suu Kyi herself is standing as a Parliamentary candidate.

If these elections are free and fair, it will mark a new epoch in Burma's history and relations with the world.

As Burma proves, it is not possible for human rights to be suppressed indefinitely.

Even attempting to do so against the wishes of a people leads to forfeited opportunity and to stolen lives: to the isolation and hunger of North Korea, or the bloody purges and blockaded cities of Syria.

That is why the behaviour of the Assad regime so far is as futile as it is morally indefensible.

They have now said they will accept Kofi Annan's plan to end the violence and start a political transition.

If that is truly meant and strictly implemented, it would be a significant step. But they have broken their commitments in the past, and they will need to convince a sceptical world and a wounded Syrian people.

At the Friends of Syria meeting in Istanbul on Sunday we expect to adopt new measures to increase pressure on the regime, to boost Kofi Annan's diplomatic mission and to support Syria's opposition.

Syria's history stretches back for millennia. It lays claim to the world's first alphabet. Long before it became a byword for suffering, the city of Homs gave the world a Pope. We will not tell the people of Syria which leaders to choose, but we will not abandon them either. So we will increase our support to these oppressed people. Today I have agreed to provide a further half a million pounds of British support to Syria's political opposition. It includes agreement in

principle for practical non-lethal support to them inside Syria. It will help hard-pressed opposition groups and brave civil society organisations inside and outside the country to document the regime's violations and gain the skills and resources they need to help build a democratic future for Syria. At Istanbul I will also send a clear warning:

President Assad and his allies may look at the rubble of Homs, the abandoned streets of Idlib and Syria's overflowing prisons and they may entertain hopes of political survival.

But they cannot avoid ever greater numbers of Syrians wanting a better future, and rejecting the bloodshed, insecurity and economic disarray their leaders have brought upon them.

They must be left in no doubt that if there is not a political transition that reflects the will of the Syrian people, then they will be shunned by the international community and we will close every door to them. They will face still more sanctions. Their assets will remain frozen. Their travel to Europe and many other nations will always be banned, as will the travel of their families. And they will be pursued by mechanisms of justice.

We are equally resolved to support political and economic freedom in the Middle East.

This includes support for a viable and sovereign Palestinian State living alongside a secure Israel; achieved through negotiations, but concluded with urgency.

We will continue to foster democratic and economic reform in more than a dozen countries through our Arab Partnership Initiative, and our joint efforts in the G8 and European Union.

And we will engage with new political parties in the region - including those drawing their inspiration from Islam - while standing firm on non-violence and human rights.

The Arab Spring will be the work of a generation, but helping it to succeed is in our vital national interest.

So too is our diplomacy over Iran's nuclear programme.

Next month the E3+3 will resume talks with Iran, representing Britain but also the United States, France, Germany, China and Russia.

We approach these talks with sincerity and a genuine desire for a breakthrough. This can only come if Iran enters the talks in a new spirit.

We are not seeking regime change in Iran. We look to the Iranian government to prove to the world that their nuclear programme is for peaceful energy, not for nuclear weapons, and to give up any plans to acquire them.

Iran's isolation is not in the interests of the Iranian people. Iran faces unprecedented sanctions and from 1 July, will no longer be able to export crude oil into the European Union.

It is in the Iranian government's power to end this isolation, and if they negotiate seriously on the concerns over its nuclear programme we will respond.

But if they do not seize this opportunity, they should not doubt our resolve to prevent nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.

This year is also a critical period for Afghanistan. The Chicago Summit in May will be a milestone in transition to Afghan control by the end of 2014, when British troops will no longer be in a combat role or in anything like the numbers they are now.

Anyone whose loved ones have served in Afghanistan or who has visited our troops knows the grit, courage and sheer endurance it has taken to reach this point.

Our partnership with Afghanistan will endure. Every step we have made to build a viable Afghan state, to train their Armed Forces and to drive out Al Qaeda has been a brick in the wall of our common security.

It was our national security which took us into Afghanistan. Now that Al Qaeda is on the retreat and on the defensive there and in Pakistan, we and our allies will not let it emerge in strength elsewhere in the world.

These issues - the Arab Spring, Iran, Afghanistan and counter-terrorism - are at the very top of our priorities in Government.

But we did not come into Government only to react to events; we have embarked on nothing less than the reinvigoration and revitalisation of the foreign policy of the United Kingdom. We are determined that in the coming years Britain's global reach will be enlarged, not reduced.

This Government's task is to equip Britain to succeed in the 21st century.

By paying down the national debt and bringing public finances under control; by creating a tax system that fosters growth and is attractive to business; by reducing corporation tax to among the lowest in the G20 and lifting two million people out of tax altogether; and by introducing a welfare system that encourages people into work and an education system that gives people the skills they need to succeed, we are turning around the fortunes of our economy for the long term.

Foreign policy has to support this; just as our economic success underwrites everything we can do in world affairs.

So we are building the networks, alliances, and connections that our country needs for the future.

This must include expanding trade, for sustainable growth in our economy will only come this from this.

Foreign Office Ministers are passionately committed to creating jobs and opportunities for Britain and to meeting the Chancellor's target to double exports to £1 trillion a year by 2020. We have already made more than 250 separate visits to 119 countries, making Britain's presence felt across the world. On each and every visit we focus on opportunities for Britain as well as vital international issues.

Last year, the FCO and UKTI helped over 20,000 small and medium-sized enterprises to break into new high growth markets worldwide, including India, China, Brazil and Turkey. British exports of goods were up by £50bn, including significant increases to China, to Brazil, to Russia, to India and to South Africa.

I pay tribute to the Lord Mayor and his predecessors for their tireless efforts as Ambassadors for the City of London, the world's greatest centre of finance, and for British business as a whole.

Trade is one of many reasons why Britain must retain and expand its worldwide presence.

Britain is a transatlantic nation and a European nation. But our role and our interests go beyond that to be global.

We have to forge new partnerships beyond our traditional alliances in Europe and North America, and widen the group of nations with whom our foreign policy is crafted, with new partners in the Gulf, in Latin America, in Asia, and in Africa.

This in no way means we are moving away from our indispensable alliance with the United States and our deep partnership with the European Union.

On the contrary we are developing these to a new extent and at the same time extending our global reach and influence.

We will never have a stronger ally than the United States of America. There is no other country in the world with whom we are more strongly aligned in our values, our economy and our defence. Every day British and American soldiers carry out dangerous duties together; and a million people go to work on each side of the Atlantic in businesses owned on the other side. In the words of President Obama, the relationship is the strongest it has ever been.

Our ties within Europe are also vitally important. Despite Europe's current economic troubles, the extension of European democracy is a success few dared to hope for thirty years ago.

We do not share the belief of some in ever closer political union and our decision not to join the Euro has been proved correct, but we will always play a leading role in Europe.

We can use our weight in the EU to prise open markets in other parts of the world, and attract investment to the UK because of our central role in the Single Market.

And we are strong in foreign policy when the 27 nations of the European Union agree. From climate change to free trade and stability in our neighbourhood, particularly in the Western Balkans, we will always want Europe to use its collective weight in the world for our common interests.

France will remain our closest military partner after the United States, and we are determined to continue the intensification of this relationship we have already begun.

Equally, Germany is a crucial partner for us as we strive to open up markets to our exporters, with new free trade deals, or take the lead in Europe in arguing for a low carbon future.

But those who think that Britain has to choose between Europe and America; or between these two relationships and the rest of the world, are missing the bigger picture.

Our membership of NATO, the EU and the Commonwealth; our permanent seat on the UN Security Council; and our rich tapestry of social ties to the Caribbean, to South East Asia, to Africa, to North America and to the Middle East, all give us our own unique web of partnerships and connections.

We have all the advantages of the English language, making it easier for us to connect and do business around the world and to be open to the ideas of others. We are one of the world's great homes of science, innovation, learning, culture and trade.

Along with our Armed Forces, the strength of our diplomacy and our aid programmes, these are all part of our national advantages and assets.

So while maintaining our close ties with the US and the European Union, we are tapping into these other networks as never before.

We are reversing the steady shrinking of Britain's diplomatic footprint overseas under the last Government.

We are expanding Britain's network once again.

We have opened or are opening new British Embassies in South Sudan, Madagascar, Kyrgyzstan, Cote D'Ivoire, Liberia, and as security improves, in Somalia.

We have opened two new consulates in Canada and Brazil and plan to open six more new consulates in the emerging and fast advancing economies.

We are reversing Britain's decline in Latin America, where we are opening a new Embassy in El Salvador.

This determination to deepen our relations with Latin America is coupled with our steadfast commitment to the right of self determination of the people of the Falkland Islands.

And this year we will be looking at further steps to strengthen our diplomatic network.

Behind the scenes, we are engaged in the biggest drive to build up the skills, capabilities and strength of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office it has ever seen.

With our Diplomatic Excellence programme we have restored the central importance of traditional diplomatic skills of negotiation, and the in-depth understanding of other countries, their history and dynamics. We are strengthening economic skills and expertise, and giving greater emphasis to the commercial knowledge and activity of our diplomats.

We are opening a new language centre, which will train up to 500 members of staff a year. And we will have 40% more speakers of Arabic and Mandarin in our posts overseas than only

two years ago, while the numbers of speakers of Spanish and Portuguese in our Latin American posts will have increased by 20%.

We are combining this with a more expeditionary approach to foreign policy; responding to challenges before they become crises.

That is why we singled out security threats and freedom in cyberspace as one of the great issues of our time, and held a ground-breaking Conference to begin to agree how to ensure freedom and security online.

It is why we held the London Conference on Somalia last month, bringing together many nations to seize the opportunity to turn around a failed state.

And it is why we can be deeply proud of our international development work; of the good it does and the example we set to others by sticking to our pledges even at a time of economic difficulty.

Few nations in the world can do these things and we believe it is in our interests and the interests of our friends and allies to do more of them.

Some people have argued for a long time and may even believe today that Britain's global role will shrink, that British Embassies are bound to close and that one day we will give up our UN Security Council seat or look to others to provide consular services for our nationals.

But in a fast-changing world and as one of the few countries with a global reach we need to dispel this pessimism;

In a more competitive world, we need more connections to prosper;

And in a more multi-polar world, we need to be present in more places.

Under this government, Britain is going to retain and develop its global role. This reinvigorated and expanded approach will be built on our strong alliances in Europe and with America, building new ones without sacrificing the old.

In twenty years time we will be a nation with far closer ties in the emerging economies of the world than today.

Our diplomatic network will have expanded.

We will have more British companies with a foothold overseas, and exports, manufacturing and investment will make a bigger contribution to our economic growth.

We will be in a position to use skilful diplomacy to work with the new groupings of the 21st century as effectively as we do with Washington and Brussels today.

We will be more accustomed to working with new partners in foreign policy alongside our traditional allies to address the shared problems of our time.

We will be a nation with an enhanced capability to lead; and I believe with the best and most effective diplomatic service in the world: playing a central role in averting conflict, addressing crises and advancing our values of human rights and democracy.

This is the right course for our country, and we will pursue it with vigour each and every day of this Government.

To those who say Britain’s reach must diminish I say no, we are working to extend it.

To those who say we must become more cautious in our foreign policy I say no, we will always be ready to take a lead.

To those who say we cannot intensify our relations with many parts of the world simultaneously I say no, that is what we are doing.

And to those who say that this means any drift away from our European and American allies I say no, this is not a zero sum game.

It is the networked world in which our global reach and engagement is vital and must not only be maintained but deliberately and determinedly advanced.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretarys-speech-to-the-lord-mayors-banquet