
SPEECH

BY

The Rt. Hon. HAROLD HOLT, M.P.,

ON

PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT TO SOUTH EAST ASIA
Ministerial Statement

[From the "Parliamentary Debates," 5th May 1966]

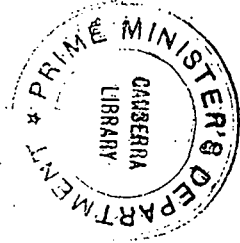
Mr. HAROLD HOLT (Higgins—Prime Minister).—by leave—Southern Asia today demands and receives world wide attention and concern. In this ancient complex, densely-populated region the habits and practices of centuries are bending, breaking or yielding under the impact of twentieth century technology and new concepts are challenging the old. The revolution takes many forms, most of them unsettling, some of them violent and dangerous. Conflicting ideologies compete there for the hearts and minds of hundreds of millions of human beings and these millions may have doubled by the end of this century. The Communist power seekers in Asia are trying to make this revolution the vehicle of disruption and instability enabling them to overturn established authority and shackle whole communities to their philosophy. They exploit grievances, aggravate divisive factors, undermine stability in order to bring about political and administrative chaos. Behind the Communists in South East Asia, wherever their structures are to be found, is the driving force of China.

China, with a population upwards of 700 million, is governed by a Communist regime implacably committed to its goal of a

Communist-dominated world. The Chinese Communists scornfully reject the concept of peaceful co-existence which has brought some respite in the cold war and an easing of tensions in Europe. Subversion and guerrilla warfare, as spelled out in the writings of Mao Tse-tung, have been directed with planned thoroughness to the villages and paddy fields of South East Asia. These tactics have been eagerly adopted and ruthlessly waged in South Vietnam by General Giap, the leading military theoretician of North Vietnam, and by the Vietcong, the self-styled Liberation Front, who have learned their lessons well from him.

South East Asia has become a critical battleground for free peoples everywhere. South Vietnam has become a testing point of the determination to prevent Communist aggression and check its cancerous spread.

Australia is standing today with the people of South Vietnam, our close ally the United States of America, and the forces of other friendly countries in resisting the Communist threat. We see more than the need merely to preserve the independence and integrity of South Vietnam, important though that task may be of itself. To us, the threat is, as I have said, to free peoples everywhere. If South East Asia is to fall



under Communist control we face a future in which the security of Australia is in jeopardy.

While at this time South Vietnam is the most heavily embattled, other countries of the area are alert to the threat also. It is noteworthy that Korea, which so recently was itself a battleground of Communist aggression, has supplied more military forces, in proportion to its population, to aid South Vietnam than any other country. Three successive Presidents of the United States have clearly recognised the threat, leading to the provision by that country of a massive and decisive contribution of forces and material. Australia, in company with the free countries of South East Asia, has cause for gratitude for this contribution made to security in South East Asia by American firmness and military strength. We have admired the resolution and strength of purpose that President Johnson has brought to this issue.

The Communists have deliberately chosen to carry out aggression by covert means on the basis of long and careful underground preparation extending over more than a decade, in the training for guerrilla warfare, the establishment of secret bases and stockpiles for a protracted campaign, the securing of routes of infiltration, the introduction of specially trained cadres, the application of methods of indoctrination and terrorism against defenceless village people. These are all elements in the infra-structure. This is the pattern of Communist aggression in the conditions of South East Asia. By these means, the aggressor seeks to escape the full censure of the free world which would flow from an open declaration of war in the sense that we have known it in the past. The enemy does not openly deploy his forces in the manner of conventional warfare where their aggressive actions are readily identifiable internationally. Even today, when North Vietnam has at least nine regular regiments of the P.A.V.N. operating in South Vietnam, they will make no admission of this. Nor, of course, do they admit the earlier build up of Vietcong guerrilla forces and infiltration to which I have just referred. This is a war largely of attrition, in which there are no front lines and hostile activity is planned to occur, and does occur, in many widely separated places simultaneously.

I have said that Australia stands militarily with South Vietnam, the United States and other allies, but it is also an important part of our thinking that we are able to play a useful part in the building of a better world order in South East Asia. Wherever we have been involved in a military role in this area over the post-war years, our servicemen, acting along the lines their Government has approved, have made a positive contribution to the wellbeing of the people of the country in which they found themselves. I was glad to find that programmes of military civic action—as they are called—and rural rehabilitation and development are now accepted as an important part of the tasks of the military forces of all the allied participants. There is, in addition, an extensive programme of civilian cadre training for service in the villages, which I shall refer to again later. Through the Colombo Plan, and in other ways, Australia has made a useful contribution by civilians also.

It is against all this background that my recent visit to several of the countries of South East Asia should be viewed. In each of these countries Australia has serving men and women joining with others in holding in check the Communist threat. The existence of that threat is common to all of these countries. It has varied in degree and as to point of time. We played a part for many years, with Britain and New Zealand, in stamping out Communist terrorist activity in what was then Malaya. We sent military forces to resist Communist aggression in Korea. We have helped in Singapore and Borneo. We have given assistance in various forms to Thailand, and now we are to increase earlier military aid in South Vietnam by providing a task force.

On taking office, I decided to seize the first opportunity I could take to pay a visit to our Australian troops at their various stations. I felt it desirable to have direct personal knowledge of the conditions of their service, and have them feel from my presence with them that they occupy a high place in the regard of their Government. I wanted also to have in my mind that awareness which only personal contact can provide of the nature of our various establishments, their environment and setting. I wanted to make the dots on the map come alive as known places with known people.

A strong team of advisers, who were also to gain much benefit and information as observers, came with me. These advisers included the Chief of the General Staff, Sir John Wilton; the Deputy Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department, Mr. Lawler; a specialist on South East Asian affairs in the Department of External Affairs, Mr. Gordon Jockel; and Mr. Clugston, of the Department of Defence. All those gentlemen, together with the other gentlemen who were with us, were of great assistance. I acknowledge with appreciation the help that they gave me. Facilities were provided, at the expense of their employers, for members of the Press who desired to accompany the party, and about 20 newsmen, photographers and television cameramen, most of them of senior status in their organisations, accompanied us. I express my appreciation to them for what appeared to me to be a consistently high standard of reporting.

In the course of the tour I visited Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, including both West Malaysia and Sarawak, and Singapore. I shall say something about each of these countries.

There were advantages in being able to travel at short intervals between the four countries visited and inspect, over the space of 10 days, activities in more than 20 localities. A head of government, in addition to receiving the courtesies and hospitality considered appropriate to his office, is given means of speedy transport and communication. He is supplied with the most frankly expressed and authoritative information. It is possible in this way to gain in a short time a quick insight into the manner in which each country is tackling its national issues, and, at the same time, have a more vivid awareness of the proximity and significance that one country in the region bears to the other. A valuable gain from my journey has been the development of a more intimate relationship with leaders and senior Ministers in all the countries visited. This facilitates future contact and discussion on matters of mutual interest.

Vietnam, of course, in current circumstances, was the country of most immediate interest to us. It was of great value to confer with the Chief of State, General Thieu, the Prime Minister, Air Vice-Marshal Ky,

the Foreign Minister, Dr. Do, and other members of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam. Theirs is commonly thought of as a military Government, and in a situation of such intensive military activity, under constant threat of Communist attack, one would expect the Government to possess, as it does, a strongly military flavour and influence. There is, however, a greater civilian composition in the senior levels of government than is generally known. The Directory comprises the military leaders and corps commanders, but associated with this is a Ministry of twenty members of whom five are doctors, five are lawyers, four are military officers, using "military" to embrace the three services—the Prime Minister, of course being a senior air force officer—three are engineers, two are economists and one is a trade union official. Some of them have been actively in the fight for national freedom throughout their adult life. Our talks with them were frank and comprehensive. They are determined to see the struggle through until freedom and independence have been secured.

The day to day reporting of events as they occur in various parts of Vietnam can obscure the extent to which economic and community life there have adapted themselves to military operations persisting over many years. Take the situation in Saigon. It is true that terrorist incidents happen there with disturbing frequency. Several incidents occurred during the period of my visit. Sometimes there is loss of life, injury and damage from Vietcong sneak raids. But it must be realised that Saigon is a large city of about two million people. Life goes on with most people unaware at the time that another hostile incident has occurred. The shops are busy; there is plenty of traffic about; people go about their occasions seemingly undeterred.

The scale of United States assistance pouring into Vietnam is enormous. It has to be seen to be believed. Saigon, I was told, has become the busiest airport in the world. The helicopters in service are to be numbered in thousands. They have proved of immense value for rapid mobility of troops into action, and the speed with which they rescue and transport disabled soldiers for medical treatment has cut in half the fatality rate from injuries as compared with that of

Korea and the Second World War. The choppers, as they are familiarly called, are just about the most popular pieces of equipment in the country.

My talks in Saigon and at Bien Hoa included detailed briefings from military and diplomatic representatives of the Government of Vietnam, of the United States including the Ambassador, Mr. Cabot Lodge, and General Westmoreland and, of course, our own Australian advisers. As a result of the information gained from them, supplemented by what one could see of the immensity of the scale of provision of military equipment and logistic requirements, I am confident that the Vietcong cannot win. The military position in South Vietnam has now been secured. The Vietcong have suffered heavy losses and their casualties have been increasing.

Sneak raids by small parties, such as that made recently on Saigon Airport, can still be carried out from time to time by the Vietcong. These raids are part of the military and political tactics of guerrilla warfare. They make dramatic news, but they do not weaken the hold of the South Vietnamese Government on the areas under its control. On the other hand, mobile forces are now available to conduct operations against enemy forces when they are located, and to penetrate into territory previously considered Vietcong strongholds.

There has been a noticeable weakening in the morale of many of the Vietcong. The sustained bombing attacks on supplies and Vietcong held positions and the speed and mobility of helicopter borne troops are having punishing effect. The Vietcong are suffering from lack of medical supplies and treatment. The number of defectors has increased substantially and significantly in recent months, both as a result of military and psychological operations. The Vietcong are now drawing on much less experienced troops, and the regular North Vietnamese regiments have proved themselves less adapted to the guerrilla type of warfare in what is for them unfamiliar terrain. They prefer to fight in formed units. This makes them more liable to detection and air attack. The heavier equipment to which they are accustomed creates a transportation problem for them. More intelligence information is flowing in, while detection methods have improved. Allied forces have been able to strike in critical areas before the enemy was able to move. In a country of

such difficult terrain, and with the tactics and strategy employed by the enemy it may be a long time before the Communist threat can be subdued. But, increasingly, areas will be cleared of Vietcong and a more peaceful pattern of life restored. It must be remembered that while the Vietcong control large tracts of country, they hold none of the major centres—they do not command any one of the 43 provincial capitals.

The protection, rehabilitation, and development of additional areas brought under control is a formidable task and will take a long time. It involves the re-establishment of civil administration, police, civil protection units, and a variety of civil projects to provide medical aid, education, communications and other public utilities. Here again the United States is providing massive support. Military civic action by combat troops will, however, be the initial step towards this ultimate objective.

The Government of Vietnam maintains establishments for the intensive training of cadres, each 59 in number, to be located in the villages, specially trained to help in defence against Vietcong attack and to assist the villagers to build a better life for themselves. Those to be trained are nominated by the village chiefs and become equipped to carry out tasks of medical service, education, construction of homes and school buildings; they learn improved agricultural methods and other activities of benefit to the village dweller. Since March 1964 some 20,000 trainees have already been equipped for service along these lines.

The Australian troops in Vietnam and elsewhere, as I discovered, also regard what they aptly refer to as "hearts and minds" as a necessary part of their activities. They have become well and affectionately known in the villages and the areas they serve. They have helped in this way to improve morale and build friendship for Australia. The warmth of welcome and cordial hospitality shown to us by members of the Government were evidence of the appreciation which they obviously very sincerely feel for Australia's military participation and material help. A bright prospect in the Vietnam situation is the application by all the allied participants to constructive programmes for improvements of standards in the towns and villages.

All those I met in Vietnam were concerned about the political situation and discussed it frankly. In the middle of the pressures and strains of the war, the country is seeking to establish a new system of government. This is a difficult enough process at any time as Australians know from their own history. Constitution-making in any circumstances brings to the forefront the competition among the various political and regional interests. In Vietnam, the process is made more complex by two particular circumstances. In the first place, the country has not been kindly dealt with by history for easy political evolution. Over the centuries, religious, regional and cultural influences have produced a variety of groups and sects and local loyalties. The years of French colonialism and Japanese occupation were followed by a systematic Communist programme to destroy the growth of institutions and the structure of government. In the second place, the wartime situation requires a strong executive government. Rapid and effective action is needed for the conduct of the fighting, for pacification and for vigorous programmes of civic action. Finding the right constitutional expression of the relationship between the military and civilian elements is a complex matter not easily to be resolved. But an awareness of the difficulties should enable us to maintain a steady view, seeing events as they occur in a realistic perspective. As they are checked in the military sphere in Vietnam—and they are being checked—the Communists are likely to intensify their efforts in the political sphere, not only in seeking to promote distractions in Vietnam but in wider political offensives through their agents of influence in the other free countries of the region.

The people of Vietnam have great toughness, vitality and pride. They are neither apathetic nor dispirited. There is a general will to resist Communist aggression, and to prevent Communist domination. The recent political disturbances appear to have had only minor adverse effect on the military situation. The judgment is that the Vietnamese armed forces with the United States and other allies can resist the aggression and ensure security while South Vietnam develops the basis of an enduring stability.

I have spoken at some length about the situation in Vietnam because of its importance. But I wish to refer also to the general discussions which I had in the other countries I visited, which touched upon regional matters of common concern. Thailand is a country of considerable experience and influence in the South East Asian region. It well exemplifies the rapid economic and social progress which can be made with well directed aid from friendly countries. It is able to play now, and I believe increasingly in the future, a significant part in promoting the security and stability of the region. The fact that I was able to return, so soon after the event, the visit made to Australia by the Prime Minister, Thanom Kittikachorn, enabled us to establish an even warmer and closer relationship which will, I believe, be of enduring benefit to our two countries. I was taken by helicopter on an hour's journey from Bangkok over an interesting stretch of the Thai countryside to an audience with King Bhumiphon at his summer palace at Hua Hin. The King recalled with appreciation the visit of himself and the Queen to Australia. He asked me to convey his greetings to the Australian people.

In Kuala Lumpur, I was able to review with the Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Razak, and some of his colleagues, the latest thinking of the Malaysian Government on the confrontation issue, the expansion of the Malaysian defence effort and problems arising for both those countries from the withdrawal by Singapore from Malaysia.

In Singapore, in addition to having useful talks with the Deputy Prime Minister, Dr. Toh, and other senior Ministers, I paid a visit to the Singapore naval base and had a briefing there from senior officers and visited those Australian Navy units then at the base. Arrangements were made for me to view the whole area by helicopter, and this was certainly a very practical descriptive way of studying this vast establishment. Australia has long held the view that the continued maintenance of the base by British forces is an important contribution to the security and stability of the whole region of southern Asia. My discussions with representatives of the Malaysian and Singapore Governments confirmed that they too share this view. The base has the additional value of representing a considerable factor in the economy of Singapore.

It directly employs more than 30,000 people and, through its requirements, gives indirect employment to many tens of thousands of Singapore citizens. Although I have not previously referred to it specifically in this statement, we fully and gratefully acknowledge the major support which the United Kingdom provides by means of its forces which are spread through the Singapore-Malaysian area—including Borneo—and which collaborate with other Commonwealth forces.

Each of the Governments we met took me frankly into their thinking on their basic problems and national issues. They gave me accounts, in particular, of their plans for economic development and social progress, and of the thinking underlying these plans. I came away with the impression of realistic, modern-minded governments and developing administrative structures.

Purposeful efforts are being made to put national resources into rural development. All are agreed that the benefits of modern life must be progressively spread into the villages and remote rural areas. The central Governments are aware that the resources and facilities at their disposal must be used to break down the traditional feeling of the small landholders that governments bring them no benefit.

I have spoken of the prominence given to civic action programmes in Vietnam. In Thailand, mobile teams are being sent into the remote provinces to survey the problems and provide civic action there; national development programmes give a major place to agriculture and inland transportation. In Malaysia, the experiences of the emergency have been studied and incorporated into national planning. The new villages established during the resettlement programme of the emergency have become permanent communities. We were briefed on these matters in the National Operations Room, which is personally supervised by the Deputy Prime Minister. This centre aims at co-ordination and drive in carrying out the rural development programme. In Sarawak, the twin problems of providing security and development in rural areas are major priority tasks.

The Government of Singapore is energetically grappling with the problems of industrialisation and international trade in order to provide employment for its growing work force.

Australia is playing a part in assisting with these schemes of welfare and development. I was impressed by the work which the surgical team from the Alfred Hospital, Melbourne, is doing in the district hospital at Bien Hoa village. I also met members of the surgical team from St. Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne, which is doing similar valuable work at Long Xuyen. In discussions with Government leaders, I was told of the value they attach to the contributions which our experts are making in various civil fields such as road and bridge building projects in provincial areas, and in attachments to institutions. During my visit to Kuching, the Sarawak association of former Colombo Plan students met me to express their appreciation of Australia's help. They represented a numerous group of young men trained in various professions in Australian universities and other educational institutions.

The major intention prompting this tour, however, was to visit our forces serving in various parts of South East Asia. I have now seen at first hand the splendid job they are doing. I have had opportunities to meet informally with officers and men in their service positions and at their billets. In discussions with Government and military leaders in the various theatres, I have heard unstinted praise for the quality of our forces both as fighting men and as representatives of Australia in their contacts with local populations and in projects of civic action. This has been a heart warming experience. Australia can be very proud of the men and women of our armed forces throughout South East Asia. The great tradition of Australia's fighting men is safe in their hands—with the Navy on patrol duties in Malaysian waters, with the Army in its border posts in Borneo, playing its part in the crucial fight against aggression in South Vietnam, or building airfields in Thailand and roads under the most difficult conditions of terrain and climate in Sabah and with the Air Force on the alert for air defence at Butterworth and Ubon, or providing vital air transport in South Vietnam. The Army cloth cap, battered and faded in service, is to be found worn in every conceivable variety of shaping, but with a jaunty and cheerful pride. These forces may not be large in numbers relative to the total forces engaged in these areas, but they are of the highest quality and they make a significant contribution to the allied effort.

They have an effect and influence out of proportion to their actual numbers. I would like to include in this tribute the armed forces of New Zealand serving in the area. I visited the New Zealand battery alongside our battalion in its encampment at Bien Hoa, and this unit joined together with us on the morning of Anzac Day in the most moving commemoration of that anniversary that I have ever attended.

Our troops have shown themselves able to win the confidence and friendship of village peoples in the areas of operations; good relations have been developed with the local authorities and residents in base areas; and the Governments have made clear to us the value they place on the presence of our forces. Their initial stationing in these countries involved a degree of co-operation and mutuality of interest between us and the Governments concerned. Once established, the continuing presence of our forces has contributed appreciably to the further strengthening of the relationship. They have earned a high reputation for their conduct, their military capacity and their military civic action work. It was clear from what I was told in private discussion, and from what each Government said publicly, that there was much satisfaction in the presence of Australian troops as a direct commitment by Australia to South East Asian security.

I have spoken at some length about a number of aspects of my journey and its background. I have mentioned the Communist inspired instability and disruption in southern Asia, that South East Asia has become a critical battleground for free peoples everywhere, and that the prime manifestation of the struggle now finds itself in Vietnam. I have said something about the reasons for Australia's participation with America and other allies in support of South Vietnamese forces in their defence of their national integrity. Because of their very considerable importance, I have referred also to various matters bearing on the social and economic development of Vietnam and other countries in the region. I have referred also to discussions with Government leaders in each of the countries, and I have spoken in the highest terms, as is their due, of our own forces in the area, of their quality, of their

standing, of the work of military and civil significance which they do, and, I now add, of their understanding of the role which they perform, and the powerful reasons for it.

I now conclude by saying again that the visit was for me, and I would hope for the Australian nation, a most valuable exercise. It has produced a sharpening of our consciousness of military and political situations which are constantly under our examination. I retain a vivid visual picture of many locations and establishments of continuing importance to us. The review has provided a new and rewarding occasion for an up to the minute exchange of views with other Governments. Naturally I cannot reveal the substance of the intimate discussions which took place with these Governments, but the results will be beneficial to our own future internal counsels. The journey brought closer personal relationships. I am glad to report that my visit was very much welcomed in each of the countries concerned. They, I believe, as well as we, felt that each derived value from it. Australia is known among the countries of the area as a good ally, and a reliable friend. We clearly have a not insignificant part to play in the future of a region undergoing a revolution of change—a revolution surely representing one of the historic movements in the story of mankind. I return with a firmly based confidence in the allied capacity to defeat aggression and establish conditions for peace and security. We must keep a clear and calm vision of what we are trying to achieve and a resolute will to do it. My Cabinet colleagues and I have long held the view that Asian countries are prepared to work closely with others in preserving security in the region and in establishing a structure of defence and effective power to deter future aggression. I return strengthened in that conviction. The principles of collective security that we have been following are soundly based. Our defence policies are the right policies for Australia at this time.

I present the following paper—

Prime Minister's Visit to South East Asia—
Ministerial Statement, 5th May 1966—

and move—

That the House take note of the paper.