

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

SPEECH

BY

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

ON

PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT TO ASIA

Ministerial Statement

[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 12 April 1967]

Mr HAROLD HOLT (Higgins—Prime Minister)—by leave—Mr Speaker, this Australia of ours is a vast island continent inhabited largely by people of British or other European stock and with a heritage of national freedom, personal liberty and the institutions of a British parliamentary democracy. But geographically we are part of Asia, and increasingly we have become aware of our involvement in the affairs of Asia. Our greatest dangers and our highest hopes are centred in Asia's tomorrows. Already one Asian country has become established as the largest purchaser, in terms of money value, of Australian exports. The only military operations in which we are now engaged or in which we have been engaged since the Second World War are located in Asia.

It is a basic tenet of our national policy to live in friendship and understanding with our Asian neighbours, but the very word 'Asia', while a convenient general description, is itself misleading. There are greater diversities of race, religion, tradition, appearance and national economic development to be found in Asia than in any other region on earth. These differences establish the importance of better knowledge of those amongst whom we live and the value of our friendship with them.

It was with these thoughts in mind that I set out recently to see at first hand more of the friendly nations I had not visited before, to meet their leaders and their people, to remind them where Australia stood in her friendships and to learn something of their own attitudes. I visited, in that order, Cambodia, Laos, Taiwan and South Korea in the course of a thirteen days tour. The circumstances of travel enabled me to have useful talks also in Singapore, Hong Kong and Manila, and at a fuelling stop-over in Okinawa, an island of strategic importance in the Second World War, I was able to see the considerable defence base which is still maintained there. I returned heartened by the reception which I and my official party received. I was greatly encouraged by the warm and kindly spirit in which Australia has been accepted as a good neighbour and a good friend.

Our place in Asia is no new discovery, but its significance has become heightened for us over recent years. The nations which I visited are ancient lands with rich and colourful histories. Some of them trace their histories back 4,000 to 5,000 years. For some time I have felt that great benefits were to be won by a more personal demonstration of our nearness and our interest. In recent months my colleague, the

Minister for External Affairs (Mr Hasluck), has visited the same countries. In the last two years joint parliamentary delegations also have travelled to them. The sum of our knowledge as a people is growing and is assisted by the reporting in the Australian Press and on radio and television around visits such as that which I have just accomplished. So is our knowledge as members of this Parliament. My own visit was part of the pattern we are developing and as head of the Australian Government I sought to underline the warm and genuine interest we have in the security, progress and prosperity of the countries of the Asian and Pacific area.

It was, incidentally, the first visit of an Australian Prime Minister to each of these four countries and my third journey as Prime Minister to the area. I hope that there can be two-way traffic in personal exchanges, and my Government will welcome visits to Australia, as opportunity offers, of leading public personalities from these and other countries of the region. Our interest in Asia is deep. It must be developed and it must be permanent, for my Government and I believe that Asia is now the crucial area of the struggle to preserve the values of independence, liberty and social justice for which we have previously fought in two global wars. I believe also that it offers bright prospects, if peace can be secured and maintained, for spectacular economic progress.

I believe that for all the shift and change in the world, none is more important to us in Australia than the shift of international tensions from Europe to Asia. We have to be active on several fronts—on the armed frontiers where we stand in support of a small country and with a great ally and other friendly forces against aggression; on the frontiers of progress to a better life for the emerging nations of Asia; and on the frontiers of our culture and theirs—for it is by these things, too, that we know each other better and learn, as different people with diverse interests, to live peacefully together.

There is, of course, a continuing pre-occupation with the course of the war in Vietnam. This was a central point in most of the talks I had with the statesmen of these Asian nations. My first person-to-person talks were in neutral Cambodia

with Prince Sihanouk, leader of 6½ million people, whose country is bordered by Thailand, Vietnam and Laos. The long history of the nations of Indo-China has been beset with difficulties. This helps us, I think, to understand Cambodia's determined neutrality. There has been the long struggle to preserve the Khmer race with its own traditions and cultures. The North Vietnamese and the Vietcong at times transgress Cambodian borders for military purposes—to move men and supplies to their forces and, at other times, when they are driven back by the fighting in South Vietnam. But Prince Sihanouk asserts that he resents the intrusion of any foreigners and he insists that he would resist and use force to remove any alien force which continued to occupy Cambodian soil.

Australia and Cambodia, to quote Prince Sihanouk, exercise different options in their foreign policies. His friendly attitude to us is clearly not based on an identity of views on political and other questions. Because he opposes any foreign intervention in the affairs of Cambodia, he opposes any foreign intervention in the affairs of Vietnam or, for that matter, anywhere else. He feels that the people of Vietnam as a whole should resolve their differences, however tragic and bloody the process might be.

We differ on these points. We joined with others in resisting aggression in two world wars. We have long been committed to an intervention in response to an appeal for help against Communist aggression, and we believe also that the Vietnamese should choose in a democratic way how they should live and who their leader should be. We nominate nobody in advance of the event. But these differences, I am happy to say, and as I found, are differences, although important differences, among friends. In simple terms the Prince says that he has had friendship from Australia and he gives friendship in return. This is why he accepted Australia as the channel between Cambodia and the United States of America when diplomatic relations between those two countries were severed, and why we act in the same way for him in South Vietnam.

Prince Sihanouk is a popular leader and takes an enlightened view of Cambodia's domestic needs. He has a vigorous programme of economic development, and his

administration has happily married the practical and the aesthetic with modern buildings having imaginative aspects. At Sihanoukville a modern port and town, largely created as a product of his own inspiration, have been hewn out of the seaboard jungle in a few years and have given Cambodia a strategic water supply route formerly confined to the Mekong, which passes through territory he would regard as hostile with its unsettled surroundings.

I mention these things in passing as a reminder that though this neutral country lives uneasily in the shadow of war, it is concerned, as we are, with programmes to improve the lot of its people. We found there a lively enthusiasm to make a better life. There lie opportunities for Australia to continue to express her friendship in practical ways. It was perhaps significant that, although Cambodia retains a ban on the journalists of many countries, this was waived in the case of the large party of Australian journalists which accompanied me. They, too, found the reception cordial, and said so, through the president of the Press Gallery, Mr John Bennetts, in a special message of thanks to Prince Sihanouk. Each gesture like this adds something to the mainstream of our effort. I carried no brief for other nations in Cambodia, or the other countries I visited, and I hope the sum of all I said in many frank and friendly talks helped to underwrite the independence of our thinking and our policy-making.

In Laos, also neutral and also well disposed, I had significant discussions with the Prime Minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma, and King Sri Savang Vatthana, and other Ministers. I learned that, as on my last visit to Thailand, I was the first Prime Minister or Minister from any country to be invited to attend a meeting of the Cabinet.

This small, land-locked country is struggling to preserve its neutrality. This is threatened only by North Vietnam which maintains more than 20,000 regular combat troops on Laotian soil to guard the supply route to the battle areas in South Vietnam. As Prince Souvanna Phouma himself said at the General Assembly of the United Nations in October 1966: 'It is no longer a

secret to anyone that entire North Vietnamese battalions are operating in our country'. He also said: 'The Ho Chi Minh trail over which foreign troops and weapons pass is in our territory'. The Prince claims that the Pathet Lao has no base of popular support, is not prominent in military operations, and has no substantial political significance. I quote a passage from his talk with me. He said: 'If we kill an enemy soldier, we find he is a North Vietnamese; if we wound one, he is a North Vietnamese; if we take one prisoner, he is a North Vietnamese. But if the North Vietnamese make some military gains, then the Pathet Lao move in like a lot of crows.'

Laos, due not to lack of enlightenment but largely to the aggression it has had to withstand, is poor and underdeveloped. With peace, I am sure Laos could make substantial progress. I assured its leaders that Australia will continue to make its contribution to the economic development of Laos and the stability of its currency through our contribution to the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund. I was assured, not only by the Laotians but by our Ambassador there, that this is the most valuable way in which we can give practical help at present—by helping to stabilise and strengthen the currency. I also assured the Laotian Government that it had our sympathy and support in its resistance to attacks on its sovereignty, its territorial integrity and its neutrality.

This completed the first half of my tour which embraced the non-aligned countries. I went then to Taiwan and South Korea, both aligned with the United States in relation to events in Vietnam.

In the Republic of China I had frank discussions with President Chiang Kai-shek, as well as with the Vice-President, Prime Minister Yen and other Chinese Government leaders. The island under its present Government is stable and prosperous. There is an air of vitality in what is being done and obvious evidence of economic progress. It is a going concern and is no longer receiving American aid. I was also glad to find the Republic of China strengthening its position internationally by its active participation in the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, the Asian Development Bank and the Asian and Pacific Council. Members of the Government see good prospects of a substantial growth in trade

between our two countries. President Chiang expressed his admiration and that of his Government and people for the stand we had taken over Vietnam and for the significant military aid we were giving.

I was impressed by the lead the Republic of China is giving in the field of overseas aid, especially in a number of African countries. Technical advisers as well as persons to work in the fields with the Africans have been successful in a number of African countries in demonstrating how agricultural productivity, particularly in rice growing, can be increased. I was told that in some instances production had actually increased tenfold as a result of this technical assistance.

I also had opportunities for frank and informative discussion on internal developments on the mainland of China. Living so close to mainland China, receiving refugees and defectors from the mainland, the Government on Taiwan has access to useful information and intelligence on the present complex situation on the mainland. The establishment of an Australian mission in Taipei last September, which was warmly welcomed by the Republic of China, should help the Government in its quest to acquire more information about developments in mainland China.

Despite some predictions to the contrary, neither our trade with mainland China nor our recent decision to accord diplomatic recognition to Outer Mongolia were raised in official discussions. I did, however, have occasion to refer to the latter question when asked at a Press conference in Taipei. I explained at that Press conference that this was an Australian decision and that it was of value to the Republic of China to have a country like Australia, making its own decisions on the merits it saw in particular circumstances, generally supporting the position of the Republic of China in other areas.

In Korea there was much I found impressive. The Republic has strength, is democratic, stable and going ahead. It has made a good recovery from the ravages of war in the early 1950s when it was a victim of Communist aggression. Australian assistance in resisting that aggression is gratefully remembered and has laid an enduring foundation for the warm friendship

which undoubtedly exists between our two countries. On the evening I arrived in Seoul I drove through what was estimated as half a million welcoming and obviously friendly people lining the streets. The size and warmth of the welcome were exemplified by one Australian flag I saw which hung the full length of seven storeys on one building. This amazing welcome was a measure of the regard in which Australia is held in Korea. When I visited the industrial centres of Pusan and Ulsan in the south it was moving to see thousands of people in total standing in heavy rain in small groups in the villages en route to wave a friendly welcome as our party passed.

At the United Nations cemetery at Pusan where one grave in six is that of an Australian the thought was deeply with me that those who had given their lives in this country had done so for a good cause. The present free and progressive society in South Korea is the outcome of that sacrifice. Members from this Parliament who have been to this country, no matter on what side of this House they sit, will confirm the friendliness of the people and the progress that they are making. A 20-minute helicopter flight from Seoul took me to an observation post on the border of the Han River where the demilitarised zone begins.

Across the river literally a few minutes jet flying time from Seoul, the capital of the country, Communist strongpoints were established and could be seen. The people of the Republic of Korea have this ever-present reminder of the continuing Communist threat to their national independence and their separation from a significant part of their former territory and their kinsmen. It is not surprising in the circumstances that their armed forces totalling more than 600,000 should rank amongst the bravest, the toughest and the best trained in the world. On this border a marine group gave a demonstration of their methods of unarmed combat. Tae kwon do they call it. It is the forerunner of karate adopted in Japan. I saw men with their bare hands smash building bricks and thick wooden pieces. I tested the objects myself and there was no doubt that they were genuine. They were able to achieve these feats with their bare hands. One fellow did it with his forehead; others did it with their elbows.

Mr Whitlam—The Prime Minister should have tried his forehead.

Mr HAROLD HOLT—I think that the thickest heads in the Parliament are on the Opposition side, but even they would have had some difficulty in accomplishing this feat of toughness and endurance.

While in Korea I had profitable exchanges with President Park and Prime Minister Chung. As comrades in arms in Vietnam we reaffirmed our resolve, proclaimed at the Manila Summit Conference in October 1966, to continue our efforts until aggression ceased and an enduring settlement had been reached which respected the wishes and aspirations of the Vietnamese people. We agreed that the Vietnamese Government should be a full participant in any negotiations to end the conflict and that the nations which have contributed to the defence of Vietnam should also participate. We cannot, of course, lay down in advance what form this might take.

I believe the remarkable progress evident in Korea is of relevance to Vietnam and gives us hope, by its example, that beyond the clouds of war there is a horizon of peace, political stability, social justice and economic advancement.

I comment now briefly on the attitudes to our position in Vietnam as they were given to me at various points in my tour. In both Taiwan and Korea there was strong support of the stand we have taken in Vietnam. In Laos, there was understanding of our action and in Cambodia, which has publicly expressed its opposition to United States policy in Vietnam, I was able to confirm that our own policy towards Vietnam and our actions in that country have not damaged the good relations which exist between Australia and Cambodia. As I said earlier, Cambodia bases its attitude to us on a principle of reciprocity: if we are friendly to it and behave as a good friend to it Cambodia is friendly and behaves as a good friend to us.

Generally, I am reinforced in my judgment that Australia is not—as is sometimes alleged by critics of my Government—damaging its image in Asia because of our action in respect of Vietnam. Many countries in the region publicly support our position. Others have expressed, in private,

understanding of our reasons for our participation in Vietnam. To speak of Asian opinion in this context as though there was a general view prevailing throughout Asia is totally misleading. As I have said earlier, Asia, except as a geographical description, is a practically meaningless term. Each country in Asia has its own identity, its own policies, and its own views on Australia's actions in Vietnam or, for that matter, anywhere else.

One of the things which impressed me on this visit is the degree to which national identities and national cultures are flowering and being rediscovered, following the end of the colonial era. I have now visited Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos. Each of the countries visited has its own quite different language, its own national culture, and its own identity. It is not very long ago that Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos were all grouped together by their colonial administrators as Indo-China. We must, while the war drags on, be vigorous in our planning for peace. We put roots down a long, long time ago with the Colombo Plan, and as I moved from country to country I saw something of what we were doing.

In Cambodia, Government leaders spoke highly of the value and effectiveness of Australian aid. Prince Sihanouk personally gave to the hydrographic survey vessel we presented, which is doing such valuable work in the harbour of Sihanoukville, the name 'Khmer-Australie Amitie'—or, in our language, 'Cambodian-Australian Friendship'. In Laos, Prince Souvanna Phouma expressed his profound gratitude for what he referred to as 'the positive and constructive' aid given by Australia.

In South Korea, I saw the contribution which we were making to Korean technical progress through the supply of machine tools and other equipment to Yong San Technical School.

Generally, I formed the impression that our aid programmes in these countries, though modest, have proved valuable and effective. One of the reasons for this is that our aid is all in the form of grants. It is given without strings—with no conditions. It usually takes a highly practical form of identifiable items or of the technical assistance given by Australian personnel.

Aid-receiving countries accept that we see the raising of Asian living standards as a desirable end in itself, and not simply a means of making gains in the cold war. Communist countries which attack the giving of aid by Western nations as a form of neo-colonialism are themselves seeking to deny these countries the assistance which the countries need to progress and develop. By their attacks they would perpetuate an economic and social backwardness from which those in need of aid hunger to free themselves.

We should not be deceived by Communist jargon. So when they talk of neo-colonialism they tend to mask their own efforts to bring newly independent countries under their own direct sphere of influence. When they talk of wars of national liberation, they abuse the English language in that the wars they have in mind are in essence both anti-national and opposed to genuine liberation. Again, they seek the establishment of docile Communist regimes under this slogan.

We are not opposed to the social revolution which has been taking place and is continuing in South East Asia. This social revolution reflects long suppressed yearnings for national identity, social betterment and economic progress. We seek these things for ourselves. What we are opposed to is the perversion of the forces of social revolution in Asia to establish through indirect pressures, through subversion, through insurgency, through terrorism and aggression, Communist regimes which are neither sought nor wanted by the majority of the people in the countries concerned.

What results can fairly be claimed from this journey? I believe my visit has contributed to the consolidation of our relationships with each of the four countries concerned. I believe it has strengthened our stature and influence with the four Governments with whose leaders I conferred. Moreover, it has given added backing to our diplomatic effort in Phnom Penh, Vientiane, Taipei and Seoul.

I believe the visit was of value to me personally in an educational sense. I feel I now have a greater understanding in depth of the problems which affect us in

each of the four countries, just as I feel that they now have a greater understanding of us. Knowledge strengthens understanding and understanding strengthens friendship. I believe that thanks to an excellent coverage by Press, radio and television, these countries and their problems and potentialities have become better known to the Australian people. I believe that, through my visit, further progress has been made along our chosen path of securing the acceptance of Australia by the countries of the Asian and Pacific region as a co-operative and useful member of the region.

I visited two countries which are closely allied, like ourselves, with the United States of America, and two countries which seek to preserve a status of neutrality. Our relationships with other countries are not determined solely on the basis of whether they are allied with us. We accept diversity. In our search for a stable, secure Asian region, growing in economic prosperity, we promote the closest relations with Asian allies in collective defence organisations. But we also seek to promote the best possible relations with countries which have chosen the path of neutrality. We support and seek to uphold the national integrity of all countries in the region. And beyond this, we look to a future settlement with mainland China, without which there can be no lasting peace in Asia.

The success of my visit to these four countries, the warmth of my reception in each one of them, and the genuinely friendly attitude towards Australia which I discovered, are due in some measure to the years of patient effort put into developing personal contacts with these countries through the efforts of the Department of External Affairs and our diplomatic representatives in the area. I cannot speak too highly of those who, sometimes under arduous conditions and at times conditions of danger, represent Australia in such a dedicated manner in these countries. It is a matter of some pride to me, and a measure of the focus of our interest in the Asian region, that with the establishment of our embassy in Taiwan last year, we are now represented in every independent country in the Asian and Pacific region which we recognise, except Mongolia, which we have only recently recognised.

There has been silly comment in some quarters to the effect that in undertaking journeys of this kind I am, in some way, usurping the role or functions of the Minister for External Affairs. This is nonsense. The Prime Minister as head of his Cabinet has an important responsibility for the foreign policies of his Government and its relations with other countries and the view held of his own country by them. A government's foreign policy is no more divisible from the central problems of government policy-making than its domestic policies.

In some countries, the Prime Minister holds the portfolio of foreign affairs; in others, the Minister for Foreign Affairs tends to be not much more than an echo of the views of his head of state or Prime Minister. In Australia, the position is much more closely identifiable with that of the United Kingdom where it is customary to find a strong personality holding the foreign affairs portfolio, capable of interpreting articulately the foreign policies of his Government, negotiating for it, and holding meetings at the highest level. This situation has never excluded journeys or attendances by the Prime Minister on occasion, sometimes accompanied by his Foreign Minister, sometimes not. My own overseas journeys during my term of office have principally been of an educational kind, with the added objective of establishing personal relations with heads of government in other countries. On the only two occasions when I have attended conferences, both conducted at a level of heads of government—the Prime Ministers Conference in London and the Manila Summit Conference—I arranged for the Minister for External Affairs to accompany me.

In the modern world where international contacts tend to proliferate, a Foreign Minister is busily occupied throughout the year. Our own Minister for External Affairs has personally represented us at meetings of the United Nations, of SEATO, of ANZUS, of ECAFE and of ASPAC, and at the conference establishing the Asian Development Bank, as well as accompanying me to the conferences I have mentioned and conducting many discussions on visits to many countries in Asia, Europe and North America at Foreign Minister and, indeed, higher levels. I believe that our activities have usefully supplemented those of each other in our respective spheres.

There has been another purpose in my own journeyings, and that is to focus public attention in the countries visited on Australia's viewpoints, and also to build a better informed Australian knowledge and opinion about countries—some of them little known—of special importance and interest to us. As the size of the Press parties accompanying me on my own tours would confirm, there is, by virtue of the office of Prime Minister, a more concentrated and wider public notice taken of a visit by a head of government than by any of its other members. We know from our own experience that delighted as we are to receive a visit from a Foreign Minister, or a Finance Minister or a Trade Minister, there is an even greater interest in the visit of a head of government or head of state. This is one of the well recognised facts of political life. Undoubtedly, my own visits have brought Australia more prominently under notice in each of the countries I have visited and have helped to make those countries better known here at home.

We Australians can count ourselves fortunate to have a Foreign Minister of the experience, intellectual quality and sagacity of our present Minister. He not only enjoys the full confidence and respect of his colleagues of the Government and of the Government Parties, but I can vouch from personal knowledge that he is held in the highest regard by his opposite numbers wherever he moves. His job is made no easier nor are Australia's interests abroad advanced by stupid comment of the kind to which I have referred.

No account of this journey would be complete without my thanks to the very able team of officials who accompanied me, to our medical adviser, who so promptly attended to the minor disorders which affected most of us in what was a very strenuous tour through a variety of climatic conditions, to the aircrews whose skill invariably brought us to a happy landing, and to the large Press party which assisted our general purposes by a coverage that was, generally speaking, fair, factual and comprehensive. I publicly say my thanks, also, to my wife, who made her own distinctive contribution to the success of the tour. There must be thanks, also, to all our hosts, whose hospitality we shall always

remember with appreciation, and which we shall find it difficult to emulate.

There is no shadow of doubt in my mind that this was a valuable journey for Australia. The Prime Minister of South Korea summed up the visit as an important

milestone in the history of the relationship between our two countries. I believe that can be said of all the four countries visited, and I hope this will be the judgment, also, of this Parliament and the Australian people.