



BRITISH WHITE PAPER ON DEFENCE

Comment by the Prime Minister, Mr Harold Holt

The principal decisions relating to British defence policy east of Suez now announced in the British Government's White Paper on Defence have been the subject of consideration by the Australian Cabinet.

My visit to London in June this year was, of course, primarily to discuss these important issues with Mr Wilson and other senior members of his Cabinet. Mr Wilson and Ministers also held talks with the Prime Ministers of Malaysia and Singapore and also with the New Zealand Deputy Prime Minister, who was representing Mr Holyoake. Consultations also took place with the United States Administration.

These discussions were clearly desirable since it is not only British interests that are affected by the decisions taken.

The White Paper sets forward a number of decisions and states plans or planning intentions. It is important that it should be seen in full perspective. The decisions and the plans will be phased over a considerable period of years running into the mid-70's.

There will first be a reduction of British forces deployed in Singapore and Malaysia between now and 1970/71 to about half current levels. We have for some time assumed that some reduction would occur. British forces in Malaysia and Singapore were increased at the time of confrontation and we have recognised throughout that this increase would, as occasion permitted, be reversed and the level of forces reduced. There are, however, reductions proposed over the next few years going considerably beyond our earlier expectations.

Beyond 1970/71, the United Kingdom Government plans would, as they stand, lead to total withdrawal of British forces from their bases in Malaysia and Singapore some time in the mid-1970's. By then Britain proposes to have reorganized its armed forces about a highly mobile strategic reserve. But it has clearly stated that it cannot plan beyond 1970/71 in the same detail as for the period up to that time, and the precise timing of the withdrawal from the mainland will depend on progress made in achieving a new basis of stability in South-East Asia and in resolving other problems in the Far East. This is an important element in British Government intentions. It indicates that Britain will play a continuing military role in the area.

This intention is again illustrated by the plan announced in the White Paper, to maintain a military capability for use in the area if required, even after withdrawal from mainland bases. Further Britain undertakes in the White Paper to continue to honour obligations under SEATO and obligations under the Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement. The Australian Government welcomes these particular policy decisions.

The British people have made a notable and indeed historic contribution to the establishment of stability and security in the Malaysia/Singapore region since the Second World War, and, in our view, Britain can still play a role no other country is so well qualified to play.

Some aspects of the British Government's announcement, of course, are disappointing to us. We do not overlook the economic problems with which Britain is at present contending, and the substantial savings in defence expenditure, including expenditure overseas, which its Government believes to be necessary. Neither do we overlook the British view that the requirement to station large forces in bases in Malaysia and Singapore will lessen as those countries, over the next decade, increase their own military capacities. But even so, we very much regret that the British Government should feel itself impelled to plan now for final withdrawal from Malaysia and Singapore at a date so far ahead, and when it is so difficult to predict how the situation in South-East Asia will move.

One of the principal aspects of my discussions with Mr Wilson was to urge that his Government retain as much flexibility in its forward planning as was possible. His Government has felt it necessary to set out a plan for withdrawal. It has explained its reasons for this. It has given recognition to the need to have the precise timing of the further moves beyond 1970/71 towards withdrawal from the bases depend upon progress made towards stability in South-East Asia and on other factors in the Far East. We attach considerable importance to this.

The British announcement carries implications which obviously must form part of the continuing review we make of our defence policy and planning.

The White Paper mentions the possible use by Britain of facilities in Australia. This flows out of the discussions which Mr Healey, the British Minister for Defence, had in Canberra early last year with the Australian Cabinet. The examination of these possibilities, including feasibility studies, has been conducted at Service level. This examination will be continued.

I would add that I have maintained personal contact with Mr Holyoake, the Tunku Abdul Rahman and Mr Lee Kuan Yew, and our frank and constructive exchanges with them and also with the British and American Governments in relation to these matters will also continue.

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