

# COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

## SPEECH

BY

The Rt Hon. J. G. GORTON, M.P.

ON

## DEFENCE

(Ministerial Statement)

*[From the 'Parliamentary Debates,' 25 February 1969]*



Mr GORTON (Higgins—Prime Minister)—by leave—Mr Speaker, the purpose of this statement is to inform the House of what the Australian Government is prepared to do militarily in Malaysia-Singapore after the British withdrawal from those areas and to set this in the context of our general interest in, involvement in and thinking concerning the region. It is not to be thought that we look on our activities in that region as being purely, or mainly, military. Any examination of our policy in relation to our neighbours of the north will show that we have encouraged them to develop policies promoting political stability and economic growth, promoting their own defence capabilities in association with our own forces and those of our allies and in promoting regional co-operation.

Indeed, the stability and security of the area rests on many things. It rests on the avoidance of territorial or other disputes between the countries in the region. It rests on the economic progress of those countries and on the capacity and willingness of rulers there to see that that economic progress is reflected in the raising of the standards of living of the ordinary people. It rests on peaceful co-operation between those countries in many fields. And these are the bases without which there will not be enduring stability.

Therefore, these are the goals which Australia, through diplomatic effort, through economic assistance, through assistance in the field of trade, will strive to help these countries attain. For this is fundamental to the Australian Government's approach—a positive, co-operative effort to encourage and assist peaceful change and progress. Yet just as ultimate stability depends on progress and rising standards of living, so does the possibility of progress depend on maintaining immediate stability. And provision for defence is necessary to help provide that immediate stability. Indeed, helping in conditions of stability to accelerate progress, and helping by military means to preserve conditions of stability, are two sides of the one coin. And the military action we propose to take in the area to our immediate north is the side of the coin that concerns us in this statement.

Just a little over a year ago Great Britain announced a considerable acceleration in the pace and scale of the withdrawal of British forces from Malaysia-Singapore. Those forces are to be totally withdrawn. The withdrawal is to be completed by the end of the calendar year 1971—and the circumstances under which they may return to assist in an emergency are unknown. For Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand and ourselves this latest announcement underlined

the fact that an era had ended. During the lifetime of any one of us sitting in this House British forces have been stationed in Malaysia-Singapore to keep, or try to keep, peace and stability in that region.

During the Second World War, and since, Australian and New Zealand forces have assisted in that task and Malaysian and Singaporean troops have contributed also. For our part we contributed to the long drawn out military measures which defeated the Communist subversion campaign in Malaya, externally inspired and sustained, which became known as the Emergency. We contributed to the military measures which repelled the raids and infiltrations during the sad days of Confrontation. We contributed, with New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore, to a force the backbone of which was provided by British forces—seen to be there and known to be backed by all the resources and reinforcements which Great Britain could, if necessary, send them. Now all that has changed. The major power will be withdrawn. It is no longer a contribution to the efforts of a major power which we will all be called upon to make. It is a substitution for the efforts of a major power. And such a substitution must fall far short of what previously existed and be of a different character.

Faced with this basic change, we and the other nations concerned have had to reassess our position and then discuss with one another what each of us should do in the light of such reassessment. There have been almost continuous consultations at all levels—military and civilian, political and technical—on steps to be taken to meet the changing situation. Over a period of time the plans of each of us have been influenced and shaped by what has been thought and suggested by the others and by the contributions each has felt itself able to make, or to be prepared to make in the future. Our own starting point was and is that we are a part of and are situated in the region. Hence security, stability and progress for the other nations in the region must also contribute to the security of Australia. We cannot fail to be affected by what happens in our neighbours' countries. What affects their security affects our security. Again, if economic development in the region is to

occur at the pace required, and if the stability needed for this is to be maintained, the immediate economic support of great nations outside the region, and the potential military support of great nations outside the region, will be needed.

Australia, the most industrially and technically advanced nation in the region, surely would not wish, in these circumstances, to refrain from helping the region in all ways. We could not turn our backs on our neighbours, refuse to help provide forces for their security, and wash our hands of the possible consequences to them and to ourselves. Yet there were obviously several possible courses for us. One theoretical course was to withdraw all our forces from Malaysia-Singapore at the time that Britain's withdrawal is completed; to withdraw into Australia behind a sea frontier and turn our backs completely on the region as regards providing military assistance, except for a willingness to assist in United Nations action. We reject this utterly. It is contrary to our historical actions in Korea, in Vietnam and in the region of which I speak, and it is contrary to our future interests. Were we, with our potential, to do this we could scarcely expect smaller countries in the region to be encouraged to protect themselves or larger countries outside the region not to be affected in any future decision they might have to make should the region be endangered. For us, the question has never been whether we should play a part militarily, but how we should play that part.

A second possible course was to decide to withdraw all our military forces, of all arms, at the same time as Britain withdrew, but to assure Malaysia-Singapore that we retained an interest in their military security, that we had not withdrawn to our island Australia from which we would never make a sally to assist them, but that we would, if and when we judged it necessary, be prepared to despatch military forces to their shores to help them. This course could well cast doubt on our sincerity of purpose as far as Malaysia-Singapore and other countries of the region were concerned; and it had also obvious military drawbacks.

It is much easier to despatch aircraft from Australia to assist in another area of

the region if Australian aircraft are already situated on a base in that area, and operating from it, and in possession of or provided with all the complicated equipment needed to service and maintain and guide such aircraft. It is much easier to despatch ground forces to an area if, in that area, there is a securely held base and the headquarters and command and signals and supply complex is already set up and operating and needing only expansion instead of construction de novo. And of course, it is much easier for a country which is to be assisted to believe that it will be assisted if forces from the country which may provide such help are there and are visible. We therefore, took the view that while a capacity for swift additional assistance should be maintained within Australia, yet it was essential for some forces to be stationed within Malaysia-Singapore itself. In so stationing them we are doing not only what we believe right but also what these countries want us to do. Accordingly we are prepared to maintain and are planning to maintain forces of all arms in that area after the British withdrawal—without setting any specific terminal date.

The forces planned to be retained will consist of 2 squadrons of Mirages, totalling in all 42 aircraft, and stationed at Butterworth in Malaya, except for one section of 8 aircraft which will be stationed at Tengah in Singapore. In addition, both ourselves and the New Zealanders will each maintain a naval ship in the area at all times for purposes of protection and not merely for purposes of training. Further, we are planning to maintain, in conjunction with New Zealand, a 2 battalion organisation of ground troops of which the Australian component excluding personnel required for headquarters, communications and the Jungle Warfare Training School in Malaya to which we shall contribute will be approximately 1,200 men. These troops, in accordance with the advice tendered to us by our military advisers on military grounds, and because of the considerable financial savings involved will be based at Singapore, although one company will be detached in rotation to Butterworth except on occasions when the whole force is training either at the Jungle Warfare School or elsewhere in Malaysia. It has

of course, already been accepted by all concerned that for purposes of defence, Malaysia and Singapore are indivisible. Consequently, no matter in what part of the Peninsula (including Singapore) our forces are stationed, we regard them as being there in order to assist the security and the stability of the whole of that Peninsula.

Now, Mr Speaker, having specified the Australian Forces which we are prepared to dispose in this way, I wish to indicate the conditions under which they will be there and the role which we envisage they will fulfil. They will be stationed in the area under existing arrangements, the terms of which are governed by our association with the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement. Should that Agreement in the future cease to be operative we would wish general understandings rather than specific treaty obligations to be worked out with the countries concerned and ourselves. Our forces will not, of course, be there or remain there unless their presence continues to be actively desired by the governments of the countries in which they are stationed. While there, they are not intended for use, and will not be used, for the maintenance of internal civil law and order which is the responsibility of the government concerned. Their presence, and their military co-operation with Malaysia and Singapore, are not directed against any other country in the region, and this we believe is well understood and accepted. Indeed, by helping to strengthen the defences of one part of the region it is hoped that they will indirectly contribute to the stability of the whole.

Their presence in Malaya and Singapore, and their participation in training and military exercises with Malaysian and Singaporean troops will we believe have value in helping to build the indigenous defence capacity of both Malaysia and Singapore, will provide additional security while that indigenous defence capacity is built up, and will make it more possible for Malaysian troops to be assigned to other parts of Malaysia should the Malaysian Government so desire. They will be available—our troops—subject to the usual requirement for the Australian Government's prior consent for use against externally promoted and inspired Communist infiltration and subversion of

the kind which became familiar during the Emergency and which is judged by our military advisers to be the most likely form of aggression in the area.

Our advice is that the greatest threat to stability and security arises from the possibility of insurgency in South East Asian countries which could ultimately expose us to threat by the spread of Communism in an insecure and unstable Asia. We have seen insurgency associated with direct military action in Vietnam and whilst the decision to employ our forces is, as it always has been, a matter to be determined by the Australian Government at the time, and in the circumstances of the time, these forces will be available to oppose any insurgency which is externally promoted, which is a threat to the security of the region and which is beyond the capacity of the forces of Malaysia and Singapore to handle.

It is clear however that at some time in the future it could be possible that a situation might arise when the scale of such subversion and infiltration from outside—or some other organised threat to the region at present unforeseen—could be such that Australian resources alone would be insufficient to support successfully the forces of Malaysia and Singapore. If such a situation should arise we would have to look to the support of allies outside the region and the scale of Australia's continued effort would in that case have to be decided in the light of all the circumstances that then prevail. What they would be we cannot now know and we cannot therefore now make, precise decisions. But we can, and have decided, that we are prepared to dispose part of our forces in the manner I have described. At the same time we shall continue our efforts to help with the training of local Malaysian and Singaporean forces which we expect will be increased in size and capacity, and to provide financial assistance for defence aid aimed at assisting Malaysia and Singapore to build up their own defence capacity.

We have, to date, allotted some \$41m for the supply of equipment to the Malaysian armed forces, the Royal Malaysian Police, and the Singapore armed forces—and we have allotted \$4m for the provision of specialist training courses in Australia and for meeting part of the cost of

Australian servicemen seconded to the Malaysian armed forces. This programme has been and is continuing in close consultation with the Malaysian and Singapore defence authorities.

Side by side with military measures to promote regional defence and co-operation, the Government has pursued and will pursue active measures in other fields—diplomatic and economic. The Australian Government is itself in regular contact with all the governments of the region of South East Asia and with other governments with a direct interest in the region, either through bilateral dealings or by participating in the work of international organisations. It has been our endeavour to play a constructive role in helping to ease tensions and to reduce or eliminate causes of friction. We have seen it as a positive task to help promote political and economic conditions which will allow the independent countries of the region to proceed with their programmes of national development in an atmosphere of confidence.

The basis of security for the region is weakened when there are divisions within the region—divisions that threaten to get out of hand and to lead to serious clashes. Of course, there will be differences of opinion between countries and interests will not coincide on all matters but it is not an impractical aim to try to have some assurance that differences will not lead to armed clash and that no country in the region need fear for the security of its own borders.

Where differences exist within the region, their settlement should be sought by peaceful means and by peaceful means only, and various ways of achieving this exist. Some of them are directed at the removal of the causes of disagreement, others are directed at creating an atmosphere in which solutions can be sought. One possibility that has appealed to us as an aim is the attainment of a non-aggression pact or pacts whereby the countries of the region would declare their intention of never resorting to force against one another and of respect for existing territorial boundaries. I do not regard this as being the total answer to the problems of regional security and regional development, but it could be a most useful and stabilising element in a total approach. It is not capable of immediate achievement. As in so many matters,

we shall have to feel our way forward, making progress as conditions permit. The countries of the region, including Australia, cannot force anything on one another, but by trying to understand one another's interests and aims and broadening our co-operation with one another the conditions for still closer co-operation will be created.

One of the difficulties at present disturbing the region is the dispute between the Philippines and Malaysia over Sabah. For our part we respect the territorial integrity of all the countries in the region within their existing boundaries. And we believe all governments in the region should do the same. We recognise Malaysia as the rightful successor to Britain in Sabah and we believe that the people of Sabah have already exercised the right of self determination. We believe, too, that the Philippines would not wish to prosecute its claim by armed attack and indeed the former Minister for External Affairs was assured of this by the Government of the Philippines.

Bearing in mind that the use of Australian forces is always a matter for decision by the Australian Government—and that that decision will be made in the light of our judgment of all the circumstances at any given time—we believe that the best contri-

bution we can make to the peaceful settlement of that dispute is by diplomatic means.

Mr Speaker, this statement has confined itself, as I said it would, to the question of what we are prepared to do in Malaysia-Singapore after the end of 1971. It has touched on the disposition of part of our forces. Our military advisers have for some time, knowing that we wished to provide for the possibility of such disposition and in the context of their new strategic assessment, been working on plans for the future composition and equipment of Australian forces which will give us flexibility—a capacity for home defence which will also allow us to contribute in accordance with our treaty agreements of SEATO and ANZUS. This study is still proceeding.

But I commend to the House the decisions here announced: That we are prepared to provide to the region in which we live military assistance for which Malaysia and Singapore have asked—military assistance visible to them—and an assurance that both we and they share a common purpose in being prepared to combat that Communist inspired military subversion which our advisers consider to pose the major threat to the region. I present the following paper:

Defence—Ministerial statement, 25 February 1969.