



# PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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## STATEMENT TO THE HOUSE ON MULTI-NATIONAL EXERCISES

I informed the House on 19 February, 1980, when I outlined the Government's response to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, that we intended discussing with our regional friends the further development of our defence relations with them.

Amongst the specific measures that I mentioned then were combined exercises between the Australian defence force and Forces of our South East Asian neighbours.

The resilience of independent regional countries is an important element in contributing to regional stability, and the abiding security interests we have in common with our neighbours call for continuing consultation and co-operation in the defence field. The Government regards such co-operation as a long-term measure of major importance.

I am pleased to be able to inform Honourable Members that I took the opportunity during the recent Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting in New Delhi to hold further consultations on defence matters with the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Hussein Onn, and the Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew. We all agreed that all three countries would gain much from the conduct by our respective defence forces of multinational exercises. It was agreed that we should initially look to conducting these under the auspices of the five power arrangements.

Since returning from New Delhi, I have consulted with my British and New Zealand colleagues. They have indicated that they endorse what is proposed. There is therefore now agreement in principle between all parties of the five power arrangements.

Honourable Members may be aware that the last major exercise involving all participants in the five power arrangements, including both ground and air forces, took place in 1970.

Air defence exercises are regularly held in the Malaysia and Singapore area and there are frequent bilateral exercises involving ground forces of the various participants. For example, today there are Singapore soldiers in Townsville preparing to take part in an exercise with Australian troops.

An infantry company of the Malaysian Army took part in a similar exercise in Australia in May-June last year. Now that we are all agreed that exercises having a more distinctive multinational character should be re-instituted, we shall be taking early action towards this end. I have given instructions that Australia should move with full vigour to help put the agreement into practical effect.

Singapore recently requested that the Singapore Armed Forces be permitted to carry out their own training exercises in agreed training areas in Australia. A small country, Singapore faces exceptional difficulties in finding adequate training space for its armed forces on its own territory. The Singapore request is for facilities to enable them to exercise their commanders and units of their ground forces. Some naval training and air crew training is also envisaged.

Included in the last-named is a request to deploy and maintain at Nowra Naval Air Station a small number of Skyhawk aircraft to facilitate advanced pilot training. We have been pleased to agree to Singapore forces conducting training exercises in Australia and have also agreed to their specific request to deploy Skyhawk aircraft to Nowra. All this has been discussed with Malaysia as a member of the five power defence arrangements.

I have already emphasised Australia's abiding interest in the security of the area to our north. The Government is prepared to give sympathetic consideration to meeting the special needs of other regional countries. Indeed, I made this clear during my discussions in New Delhi. We are exploring with the Malaysian and Singapore Governments arrangements for high-level talks on a broad range of matters in the defence field including those I have already referred to.

I have indicated to Prime Minister Hussein Onn and to Prime Minister Lee our readiness to have the Secretaries of the Departments of Defence and Foreign Affairs and the Chief of the Defence Force Staff visit Kuala Lumpur and Singapore for such discussions at an early date.