

PRIME MINISTER'S STATEMENT IN PARLIAMENT
ON THE ACCELERATED WITHDRAWAL OF BRITISH FORCES

Mr. Speaker, Sir, official discussions with the British Government took place on the 14th of January from 5.30 p.m. to 10.45 p.m. On the Singapore side, I was accompanied by my colleague, the Minister for Finance, the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence, and our High Commissioner in London. On the British side were the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Roy Jenkins, the Secretary of State for Defence, Mr. Denis Healey, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Mr. George Brown, the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, Mr. George Thomson, and several Under Secretaries.

I have already disclosed all that can reasonably be disclosed about our defence discussions.

The relevant section in the British Prime Minister's statement in the House of Commons on Tuesday, 16th of January, reads as follows:

'We (I quote here meaning the British Government) have accordingly decided to accelerate the withdrawal of our forces from their stations in the Far East which was announced in the Supplementary Statement on Defence Policy of July, 1967 (Cmnd. 3357) and to withdraw them by the end of 1971. We have also decided to withdraw our forces from the Persian Gulf by the same date. The broad effect is that, apart from our remaining Dependencies and certain other necessary exceptions, we shall by that date not be maintaining military bases outside Europe and the Mediterranean.

Again by that date we shall have withdrawn our forces from Malaysia and Singapore. We have told both Governments that we do not thereafter plan to retain a special military capability for use in the area. But we have assured them both, and our other Commonwealth partners and allies concerned, that we shall retain a general capability based in Europe (including the United Kingdom) which can be deployed overseas as, in our judgment, circumstances demand, including support for United Nations operations. During his recent visit to Kuala Lumpur, my right honourable friend the Commonwealth Secretary, told the Government of Malaysia that we

wish to reach a new understanding with them about the Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement so as to make it fit the changed conditions. As the House knows, the Agreement contains provisions for a review of this nature. He also assured the other Commonwealth Governments concerned of Britain's continued interest in the maintenance of security in South East Asia, with the forces which will be available here. Meanwhile, if our Commonwealth partners so desire and mutually satisfactory arrangements can be made we would be prepared to assist them in establishing a future joint air defence system for Malaysia and Singapore and in training personnel to operate it. We have informed the Governments of Malaysia and Singapore that we will discuss with them the aid implications of our accelerated withdrawal. We shall amend our force declarations to SEATO as our forces in the area are run down.

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Sir, on the 18th of January, as I was leaving London, the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations sent me a note stating that the British Government intended to do all that they could to assist Singapore and Malaysia, both separately and collectively, and in consultation with other Commonwealth partners in the area, to maintain their own national security.

As a result of decisions made consequential on the devaluation of the Pound, we shall have to undertake sooner than we expected full responsibility for our own defence. Before the 31st of December 1971, there will probably be a number of conferences of governments with an interest in the security of the Singapore/Malaysia area. The Singapore Government is willing to attend any conference which will enhance peace and security in the Singapore/Malaysia area. And long before the 31st of December, 1971, we will have developed a sufficient defence capability to make us a dependable and a desirable partner in any defence arrangement.

Mr. Tang See Chim (Choa Chu Kang): Mr. Speaker, Sir, would other people find it credible that we can defend ourselves by the end of 1971?

The Prime Minister: Mr. Speaker, Sir, some people did not find it credible as late as March and April 1966 that we could develop sufficient land forces in order to look after ourselves by the end of 1967. But I can assure the honourable Member that the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia found it fully credible that Singapore had sufficient land forces to look after itself. In a letter from the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia to our Minister of Defence dated the 14th of November explaining why the Malaysians were withdrawing not only their battalion at Khatib but all their other units, he said:

‘I also understand that since the separation of Singapore, the Government of Singapore has increased its Armed Forces for the purpose of defence of Singapore. The Malaysian Government, therefore, feels that it is no longer necessary to maintain its army units in Singapore and I am therefore informing you that they will be withdrawn completely from Singapore by 31st December, 1967.’

He obviously found it credible that we can look after ourselves.

Mr. P. Govindasamy (Anson): Mr. Speaker, Sir, will the British Government respect the recent agreement?

The Prime Minister: All I can say to that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that we must accept the solemn undertaking of any British Government at face value.

But as has happened in the case of the solemn undertaking given us in July 1967, intervening acts almost of God, like the devaluation of the Pound Sterling, made certain consequential amendments necessary.

Mr. P. Selvadurai (Bukit Panjan): Mr. Speaker, Sir, can the Prime Minister tell the House how real are the possibilities of establishing a five-nation defence system for this part of the world?

The Prime Minister: Sir, no one would expect me to anticipate what the final outcome of the meeting of the five governments can be. In the very short space of time between July 1976 and January 1968, circumstances have altered so completely as to make it necessary for us to rethink our basic position. It is such a fundamental change of circumstances that I think it is rash for anybody to predict what the position would be after a series of meetings which will take place before the 31st of December, 1971.

Mr. Lim Guan Hoo (Bukit Merah) (In Mandarin): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has mentioned a few moments ago that under certain circumstances and with the consent of other Commonwealth allies, the British Government is prepared to assist Singapore and Malaysia in the establishment of a joint air defence system. In this respect, can the Prime Minister clarify the position regarding this question? What arrangements will be made to see that this kind of system will be satisfactory to both sides? Will there be any principles evolved at the meetings?

Another point concerns the joint air defence system – will it give rise to certain interpretations? Will there be some kind of merger militarily between Singapore and Malaysia?

The Prime Minister: Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think it would be best if I were to re-read that portion of the British Prime Minister's Statement regarding his intentions to assist in a joint air defence system. It says:

‘Meanwhile, if our Commonwealth partners so desire and mutually satisfactory arrangements can be made we would be prepared to assist them in establishing a future joint air defence system for Malaysia and Singapore and in training personnel to operate it.’

I do not think I have any authority to go beyond the public statement of the British Prime Minister. All I can add to that is that we have every intention on our part to increase our own capability, because, unlike many other countries in the area, we form a very compact and neat target, and therefore a sneak aerial attack is a major preoccupation of any Defence Minister of Singapore. It is therefore our intention to ensure that such a sneak attack can never succeed.

Mr. Teong Eng Siong (Sembawang) (In Mandarin): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has told the House just now about his talks with the British Government in London and about having obtained certain promises in the air

defence involving Malaysia. I would like to ask the Prime Minister this question.

On this point, what is the attitude of the Malaysian Government?

The Prime Minister: First of all, the assistance will comprise such equipments as have already been installed here. I have mentioned them – the radar system, the installations at Bukit Gombak, the ground-to-air missiles and the training of personnel to operate all these defence weapons.

As to the attitude of the Malaysian Government to the statement of the British Prime Minister, I think it is only right and proper that we should await their official response at their own time. It is not for us to respond on their behalf. But we would definitely welcome assistance in expertise which is impossible to produce within the four years minus 24 days that we have got left.

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Date : 24th January, 1968.