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The Five Power Defence Arrangements and the reappraisal of the British and Australian policy interests in Southeast Asia, 1970–75

Andrea Benvenuti and Moreen Dee

Working from recently declassified Australian and British government files, this paper examines the archival evidence on policy thinking in London and Canberra towards the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) during the period 1970–75. The article argues that one of the main reasons for the Heath government's decision to deploy a token military force in Southeast Asia as part of a multilateral defence arrangement with Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore was the desire to uphold these Commonwealth connections. By contrast, Canberra was beginning to question the value of such arrangements in a rapidly changing Southeast Asian strategic environment.

In July 1967, the British Labour government of Harold Wilson announced its decision to pull out of Malaysia and Singapore by the mid-1970s. Under pressure to reduce government spending in the aftermath of a severe sterling crisis, however, in January 1968 the Labour Cabinet accelerated the withdrawal with its decision that it would be completed by December 1971.[1] Coming on the heels of the announcement that the Labour government was committed to negotiating Britain's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC), both decisions placed considerable strain on relations between the British and Australian governments. Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt encapsulated his country's response towards the proposed withdrawal when he declared that Britain now considered that 'the world East of Suez could go to hell'.[2] In his final despatch from Canberra to the Foreign and

Dr Andrea Benvenuti is Lecturer in International Relations and Convenor of the European Studies Programme at the University of New South Wales. Correspondence in connection with this paper should be addressed to: Andrea.Benvenuti@unsw.edu.au. Dr Moreen Dee is from the Asia-Pacific Civil-Military Centre of Excellence Canberra. Correspondence in connection with this paper should be addressed to: moreen.dee@civmilcoe.gov.au. The authors would like to thank the National Archives of Australia (NAA) and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at UNSW for their financial support.

[1] For the decision to bring forward the date of the final withdrawal, see Phuong Pham, 'The end to "East of Suez": The British decision to withdraw from Malaysia and Singapore, 1964 to 1968' (Ph.D. diss., University of Oxford, 2001), ch. 7; Saki Dockrill, *Britain's retreat from East of Suez: The choice between Europe and the world?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 202–8; Matthew Jones, 'A decision delayed: Britain's withdrawal from South East Asia reconsidered, 1961–68', *English Historical Review*, 117, 472 (2002): 569–95.

[2] The National Archives, Kew, London (henceforth TNA), PREM 13/1323, Memorandum of Conversation (henceforth Memcon), Healey, Holt and Fairhall (London), 14 June 1967.

Commonwealth Office (FCO), outgoing British High Commissioner Charles Johnston noted that the 'British Government's policy on defence and the step-by-step way in which it took shape—each stage firm and final until it was scrapped and replaced by the next one—did much to harm our relationship with Australia'. 'It was', he added, 'a painful process for us here to watch our Government's credibility evaporate'.[3] Australia's difficulty in reconciling itself to 'the virtual disappearance east of Suez of British military power and the capacity to deploy it' was inevitable.[4] Suddenly, a cornerstone of Australian defence policy – reliance on Britain's Southeast Asian military capability as a bulwark against regional threats – was no longer sustainable.

The situation changed somewhat following the unexpected Conservative electoral victory in Britain in June 1970 and Prime Minister Edward Heath's announcement that his government would retain a military presence in the Southeast Asian region. While presented as a reversal of the previous government's 'east of Suez' policy, the proposed size, scope limitations and political constraints on the presence did not signal a return to the military commitment of the past. British forces were now to be committed under Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) between Britain, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand, initially proposed by former Labour Defence Secretary Denis Healey.[5] The arrangements were to replace the Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement (AMDA), under which Britain was then responsible for the defence of Malaysia.[6] Unlike the AMDA provisions, the FPDA did not represent an automatic British commitment to the defence of the Malaysian region. The new arrangements terminated what was an open-ended, and potentially risky, obligation, replacing it with one that only required the five signatories to consult under certain circumstances.

This article examines the reasons behind the Heath government's decision to maintain a small military contribution to the security of Malaysia and Singapore and contends that it reflected, in part, a desire to retain close relations with key Commonwealth partners, especially Australia and New Zealand. It was an unexpected decision given that the Conservative government had little time for the Commonwealth as a whole, seeing it as largely ineffective and of very limited value to Britain's interests.[7] Policymakers regarded membership in the EEC as more crucial, seeing it as the answer to Britain's economic decline and loss of prestige in foreign affairs. Heath had long supported EEC membership and on coming to government

[3] TNA, FCO 24/1072, Johnston to Douglas-Home, 2 Apr. 1971.

[4] Sir Arthur Tange (Secretary, Department of External Affairs 1954–64; Secretary, Department of Defence 1970–79) quoted in Eric Andrews, *The Department of Defence: The Australian centenary history of Defence, vol. 5* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 148. For the Australian response to the British withdrawal, see Andrea Benvenuti, *Anglo-Australian relations and the 'turn to Europe', 1961–1972* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2008), ch. 5.

[5] Kin Wah Chin, *The defence of Malaysia and Singapore: The transformation of a security system, 1957–71* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 171.

[6] Under AMDA, signed in 1957, Britain was responsible for the security of Malaya. The commitment was extended in 1963 to cover the newly formed Federation of Malaysia. For an examination of AMDA, see Karl Hack, *Defence and decolonisation in Southeast Asia 1941–1968* (London: Curzon Press, 2001), pp. 223–33.

[7] See Steven Ashton, 'British government perspectives on the Commonwealth, 1964–71: An asset or a liability?', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 35, 1 (2007): 90.

was determined that entry into Europe would be a foreign policy priority. Nonetheless, as this paper shows, his government was reluctant to have Britain's membership bid complicate its close bilateral links with two major Commonwealth nations and accepted that some action was required if Anglo-Australasian (and Anglo-New Zealand) relations were to be maintained. London hoped that making a commitment, albeit small, to Southeast Asian defence would demonstrate to the former dominions a continuing interest in an area of strategic importance to them.

In Canberra at the time, the Liberal-Country Party Coalition government of John Gorton, which in February 1969 had decided that Australian defence forces would remain in Malaysia and Singapore regardless of Britain's planned withdrawal, welcomed the Conservatives' decision.[8] Nonetheless the Australian response was cautious. Canberra did not want to see a continued British presence interfere with its progress towards a more independent formulation of Australia's regional interests and policy objectives. The reaction was indicative of the increased Australian focus on its regional relationships since the early 1960s and its acceptance of the realities of the Wilson government's decision to disengage from east of Suez as well as the changes taking place in the Southeast Asian strategic landscape following US President Nixon's enunciation of the so-called Guam Doctrine in 1969. Australian officials accepted that with the proposed British withdrawal and America's gradual disengagement from South Vietnam, Canberra's 'forward defence' strategy of protecting Australia's coastline away from its shores was increasingly outdated. Australia would assess the potential benefits to be gained from FPDA, but in time the advent of the Whitlam Labour government in December 1972 would mark the beginning of the end of Canberra's defence posture in the Malaysian region. Heath's hopes that close links with Australia could be maintained through close and effective defence collaboration were to be dashed. In the early 1970s, the once-vital importance of a British military presence on mainland Southeast Asia became increasingly irrelevant to Australia's foreign policy interests.

Anglo-Australian dealings over the east of Suez question itself have been adequately documented in a number of recent works,[9] but the outcome of political changes in both Britain and Australia in the aftermath of the Wilson decision to withdraw awaits examination. Working from previously classified Australian and British government files, this study examines the archival evidence on policy thinking in London and Canberra towards the Southeast Asian region for the period 1970–75. The result is an interesting insight into the evolving character of Anglo-Australian relations in the age of Britain's end of empire and the management of Australia's relations with one of its major allies.

[8] On this point, see Ian Hancock, *John Gorton: I did it my* way (Sydney: Hodder Headline, 2002), pp. 226, 234.

[9] On the east of Suez question, see Benvenuti, *Anglo-Australian relations*, ch. 5; David Goldsworthy, *Losing the blanket: Australia and the end of Britain's empire* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), pp. 157–72; Jeppe Kristensen, 'Community of interest: Australia and Britain "east of Suez", 1966–68' (M.A. diss., University of Southern Denmark, 2000); and Daniel House, 'Rethinking the region: Australia and Britain's withdrawal from Southeast Asia, 1965–71' (Ph.D. diss., Deakin University, 2004). Some attention is given to the post-withdrawal phase in Benvenuti, *Anglo-Australian relations*, ch. 5 and 8.

Heath's decision to maintain a token military presence in Southeast Asia

In 1968, Ted Heath, as leader of the Opposition, was strongly critical of Wilson's decision to pull out militarily from east of Suez. He believed that withdrawal was 'a flagrant breach of pledges' to Britain's allies, and a 'humiliation' for the country'. 'When the time comes', he told the House of Commons on 18 January, 'we shall ignore the time phasing laid down by the Prime Minister and his Government for the Far East and the Middle East. We shall support our friends and allies and we shall restore the good name of Britain'.[10] Subsequently, during a visit to Australia in August that year, he revealed that if elected, he 'would provide a small but permanent military force within the context of a five-power military arrangement between Britain, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand'.[11]

Heath's approach had nothing to do with an attachment to the notion of the Commonwealth: unlike Harold Wilson, he was not a Commonwealth man. A keen Europeanist, he was convinced that Britain's destiny lay in Europe and that its decline could only be arrested if London joined this group of influential nations with their fast-growing and dynamic economies. Heath was determined to enter the EEC, and under his premiership Whitehall's interest in the Commonwealth as a movement waned.[12] Yet, more so than Wilson, Heath appeared determined to maintain close relations with the old dominions – Australia, New Zealand and Canada – and a few other key Commonwealth partners such as Malaysia and Singapore.[13] He saw the question of Southeast Asian defence as an area in which significant progress could be made to improve Commonwealth relations after the tense Wilson years. Despite his Europeanism, Heath did not wish to see Britain's post-imperial future cast in purely European terms. He espoused the view of Britain as a leading power with extra-European interests, a view that helped neutralise potential domestic opposition to EEC entry.[14]

Within days of the party's electoral victory, senior Conservative ministers began consideration of the issue. On 1 July, the new Defence Secretary, Lord Carrington, told the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (OPD), Cabinet's most senior subcommittee on foreign policy and defence affairs, that AMDA would have to be renegotiated. Britain could no longer afford an open-ended commitment to Malaysia. He stressed that in any future arrangement, the British commitment should not go beyond what Australia and New Zealand were prepared to undertake: in effect, a relatively limited one. Accepting Britain's military and financial constraints, the OPD ministers concurred and agreed that their offices look into the political, military

[10] Britain, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 1966–67, vol. 756, col. 1969.
[11] See Heath's address to the National Press Club in Canberra in TNA, FCO 24/203, British High Commission (henceforth BHC) Canberra to Commonwealth Office, telegram 1077, 14 Aug. 1968.
[12] John Young, *Britain and European unity, 1945–1992* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 107; Ashton, 'British perspectives on the Commonwealth', p. 90; *British documents on the end of empire: East of Suez and the Commonwealth 1964–71*, ed. Stephen Ashton and William Roger Louis (London: Stationery Office, 2004), p. xxxiii; and Hugo Young, *This blessed plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair* (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 214–56.
[13] Ashton, 'British perspectives on the Commonwealth', p. 91.
[14] Christopher Hill and Christopher Lord, 'The foreign policy of the Heath government', in *The Heath government, 1970–74*, ed. Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (London: Longman, 1996), pp. 288–92.

and financial implications of a continuing British military presence in the Southeast Asian region.[15]

Among the departmental studies assessing Britain's options prepared for ministers, the FCO's position paper argued strongly that Britain's prosperity rested on closer links with Western Europe. EEC entry was a way of improving the country's material wealth and it was seen as a means of maintaining British influence in world affairs. Additionally, entry would help strengthen the western European arm of NATO, on which British security crucially depended. The Atlantic region was considered the area of most strategic importance and, as such, 'must have the first call on our resources'. As for Southeast Asia, FCO officials concluded that the region was the least important to Britain's security and prosperity and thus low on the scale of London's foreign policy priorities.[16]

Nonetheless, the FCO still favoured a small military contribution to Southeast Asia, citing the strengthening of Britain's relations with Australia and New Zealand as one of the principal reasons for making such a commitment.[17] In a planning paper on Britain's relations with the two former dominions, completed on the eve of the June election, the FCO's Planning Committee had warned that Anglo-Australasian relations were likely to face several irritants in the decade ahead. To limit potential damage, the paper suggested that the government 'actively explain our views and policies and not passively expect the present relationship to flourish unattended'. For British planners it was essential that close cooperation with Australia and New Zealand over the whole field of international affairs be maintained and that their continued support for British policies be secured.[18]

With Britain's negotiations in Brussels imminent, maintaining a defence presence in Australia and New Zealand's area of strategic importance appeared the logical option in allaying both countries' concern about the British withdrawal from the region and turn to Europe. 'This move into Europe', High Commissioner Johnston wrote from Canberra, 'will cause something of an emotional shock here, when it actually happens and will face us with a difficult rearguard action'.[19] Even before the general election, he had suggested the means whereby the depth of the reaction might be alleviated:

> Anything we can do in this area [defence] is likely to bring us first class publicity. I am of course not suggesting that in the context of E.E.C. membership we should try to reverse the present defence policy east of Suez, but I would think there might well be the possibility of relatively minor adjustments of policy … which could demonstrate to Australia that entry into Europe will certainly not be at the expense of our interest and commitments in other continents.[20]

[15] TNA, CAB 148/101, DOP(70) 1st mtg, 1 July 1970.
[16] TNA, CAB 148/101, DOP (70)13, FCO paper, 'Priorities in Our Foreign Policy', 21 July 1970.
[17] Ibid. In an earlier paper, FCO officials had also pointed out that, among the political objectives that a British military presence in Southeast Asia was expected to serve were the maintenance of British influence in the region; the continuation of Britain's special relationship with the United States; and the preservation of its influence over American policy in Asia. TNA, FCO 49/304, British Policy in Southeast Asia, undated.
[18] TNA, FCO 24/621, British Policy towards Australia and New Zealand after 1971, 8 June 1970.
[19] TNA, FCO 24/621, Johnston to Grenhill, 8 Sept. 1970.
[20] TNA, FCO 30/608, Johnston to Fingland, 15 Jan. 1970.

Johnston's suggestion was now to be acted upon. The question was what would be the exact nature of the 'relatively minor adjustments' to British defence policy in Southeast Asia.

Within the FCO, differences existed, primarily as to whether Britain's military contribution would include a ground element. Percy Cradock, Head of the Planning Staff, argued that Britain's goals in Southeast Asia were essentially political and that these could be best accomplished by a 'low risk contribution', consisting of naval and air units only. 'No doubt', he surmised, 'the Australians and New Zealanders will press hard for us to contribute to ground forces. But tactically we shall be in a relatively strong position since we start from scratch'.[21] Cradock was satisfied that a small naval and air contribution would be enough to please the two Australasian nations as this represented an improvement on previous Labour policy. D.P. Aiers, Head of the South West Pacific department, however, doubted this would be the case and argued that only the deployment of ground troops would make Britain's commitment to Southeast Asian defence credible. 'Australia and New Zealand', he advised, 'will attach great importance to our complementing their ground forces with a ground force of our own … they will regard this as the touchstone of our good faith'.[22] The question was resolved at the Under-Secretary level on 17 July. Aiers' view prevailed, with the upper echelons of the FCO agreeing that a military contribution without land forces would not be credible to Britain's allies.[23]

Like the FCO, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) considered Southeast Asia peripheral to British interests. In a paper drafted for the Defence Secretary, officials stressed that Europe and NATO were Britain's 'first defence priority' and that, as a consequence, any deployment of British troops in Southeast Asia should 'avoid a major adverse impact' on the Atlantic alliance. Nonetheless, the ministry was more open than the FCO to the deployment of ground forces, regarding 'a British ground presence on some scale' in Southeast Asia to be 'politically necessary'.[24] Frank Headlam, Head of the Australian Joint Service Staff in London, advised Canberra that within MOD 'there is a marked air of enthusiasm and also a strongly expressed desire to consult closely and fully with us on matters affecting our area of strategic interest'.[25] Carrington in particular was familiar with Australasian views, having served in Canberra as High Commissioner between 1956 and 1959 and cultivated close personal links with prominent Australian policymakers.[26] The FCO, unsurprisingly, believed that Carrington's decision on a ground contribution was the result of 'strong' representations by Australia and New Zealand.[27]

[21] TNA, FCO 46/622, Cradock to Tomlinson, 15 July 1970.
[22] TNA, FCO, 49/304, Aiers to Tomlinson, 16 July 1970; Aiers to Cradock, 20 July 1970; FCO 24/643, Aiers to Tomlinson, Royle and Douglas-Home, 16 July 1970.
[23] TNA, FCO 46/622, Peck's comments to Cradock to Tomlinson, 17 July 1970, written note to Aiers to Tomlinson, Royle and Douglas-Home (16 July 1970), 17 July 1970.
[24] TNA, CAB 148/101, DOP(70)10, UK military presence in South East Asia after 1971 – The basis for consultations with our Commonwealth allies, 17 July 1970.
[25] The National Archives of Australia, Canberra (henceforth NAA), A1838, 696/1/9 part 12, Australian High Commission (henceforth AHC) London to Canberra, cablegram 11069, 26 June 1970.
[26] Peter Carrington, *Reflect on things past: The memoirs of Lord Carrington* (London: William Collins, 1988), pp. 113–45 and 193.
[27] TNA, FCO 24/643, Tomlinson to Cradock, 17 July 1970.

As to the nature of the ground contribution, MOD officials argued that it should consist of a battalion with an air platoon and an artillery battery, together with staff, engineer and logistic detachments. In addition, Britain should also commit a limited number of naval and air forces, including five frigates or destroyers, a share in afloat support, one flight of six Whirlwind helicopters and up to four Nimrod aircraft.[28] Overall, the MOD view was that the British military contribution should be 'small, and backed by a minimum of facilities': in case of a major emergency in Southeast Asia, reinforcements could only be provided from British forces based in Europe. The contribution should also 'be kept in the area only for so long as it is welcome to all Commonwealth allies' and 'it should not be predominant'. The proposed force should be seen as a part of joint Commonwealth defence arrangements in Southeast Asia to replace AMDA. Finally, such arrangements should not go beyond a pledge to consult in the event of an armed attack (or the threat of an armed attack) or of externally-promoted, communist-inspired, insurgency and subversion against Malaysia and Singapore.[29]

On 22 July 1970, OPD Committee ministers accepted Carrington's arguments for a limited military commitment that would include a ground force as set out in the MOD paper. They pointed out, however, that the government's offer should by no means be regarded by Britain's Commonwealth allies as a 'floor' to be improved on during the forthcoming negotiations.[30] They agreed with the FCO recommendations that the government replace AMDA with a five-power defence agreement to be purely consultative in nature and subject to a time limit or periodic review. Ministerial intentions were to achieve two broad objectives: to end Britain's open-ended commitment to the defence of Malaysia and to limit the scope of any future five-power defence arrangement.[31] Cabinet endorsed the OPD Committee's recommendations the following day and directed the Defence Secretary to consult personally with the governments of Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore.[32] As the FCO told the Australian High Commission in London: 'British ministers felt that the question of the political purpose of the five-power defence arrangements and the political commitment were delicate and difficult. They called for careful study and consultation'. The Australians were also told that Heath had spoken of 'Britain's role … [being] in equal partnership with her Commonwealth allies'.[33] This 'equal partnership' theme would be stressed often by Defence and FCO officials during the first month of the Heath premiership.

[28] Defence officials were also willing to consider the provision of further forces if consultations with Britain's Commonwealth allies showed this to be desirable. See TNA, CAB 148/101, DOP(70)10, UK military presence in South East Asia after 1971 – The basis for consultations with our Commonwealth allies, 17 July 1970.

[29] Ibid.

[30] TNA, CAB 148/101, DOP(70) 4th mtg, 22 July 1970. For Carrington's memorandum, see TNA, CAB 148/101, DOP(70)10, 17 July 1970.

[31] TNA, CAB 148/101, DOP(70) 4th mtg, 22 July 1970; see also DOP (70)8, Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement, 20 July 1970.

[32] TNA, CAB 128/47, CM(70) 8th mtg, 23 July 1970.

[33] NAA, A1838, 696/1/9 part 11, AHC London to Canberra, cablegram 12646, 23 July 1970.

Australian and regional reactions

The initial reaction of Britain's Southeast Asian and Australasian allies to the new Conservative government's plans on regional defence was generally favourable, although somewhat restrained. Press reports tended to temper their welcome at the news with expressions of concern as to how long Britain would be able to remain in the region, given its economic difficulties. From Singapore, the British High Commission reported to London that Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was elated at Heath's electoral victory,[34] but Lee's public statements would suggest a more low-key and practical reaction, at least in regard to a continued British defence presence. In a statement on 22 June, he spoke of the Conservative government's decision enhancing security and stability in the area and observed that this stability would help investment and development, but he warned that the Conservative victory did not mean a reprieve. Lee's view was that it was 'in Singapore's interests to keep British military expenditure to an absolute minimum … [as] sooner or later … British military bases [would] not be part of our economy', and the sooner Singapore adapted to that reality, the better. A few days later he explained his position on the continued military presence further when he stated that even a small force would provide 'added security for another 3½ to 4½ years' and allow the Singapore government to 'readjust our plans and have thorough training for our air and naval forces, and go on to more sophisticated weapons.'[35] Lee's practical response to the situation was in line with his thoughts in the immediate lead-up to the British election, when he told visiting Australian Defence Minister Malcolm Fraser that he hoped London would end up deploying two battalions – one in Singapore and one in Malaysia – and three air squadrons in the region as 'what was needed was … a commitment that would be not so expensive that would make it difficult for the British to maintain it over a long time'.[36] In effect, Lee regarded a continued British presence in Southeast Asia as 'a bonus for 3 or 4 years at the most' and at most as a 'breathing space'.[37]

Across the Causeway in Malaysia, the press reaction also reflected the confusion felt at just what Heath's victory would mean for the region. Expressions of delight that regional defence problems have 'been transformed' were countered by the acknowledgment that economic realities were likely to limit what Heath could actually do. On balance, there was optimism that the new Conservative leadership would be more sympathetic to Southeast Asian views than the previous Labour administration.[38] Both Tunku Abdul Rahman and Defence Minister Tun Razak welcomed Heath's electoral triumph on behalf of the Alliance but a realistic assessment of Britain's new defence policy for Southeast Asia prevailed within the government in Kuala Lumpur. The Tunku acknowledged that any British military presence would be limited, but he felt that this would suit Malaysia as it would 'help to instil confidence in the business community and in particular the British businessmen who have vast investments in Malaysia'.[39] Nonetheless, there was

[34] TNA, FCO 24/695, Hickman to Aiers, 29 June 1970.
[35] NAA, A1838, 696/1/9 part 12, AHC Singapore to Canberra, savingram 2/70, 24 July 70.
[36] NAA, A1838, 696/1/9 part 12, Memcon, Malcolm Fraser and Lee Kuan Yew, 19 June 1970.
[37] NAA, A5882, CO988, AHC Singapore to Canberra, cablegram 2417, 28 July 1970.
[38] NAA, A1838, 696/1/9 part 11, AHC Kuala Lumpur to Canberra, cablegram 2542, 26 June 1970.
[39] NAA, A1838, 696/1/8 part 10, AHC London to Canberra, reporting a Malaysian High Commission in London announcement, memorandum 465, 24 June 1970.

'still a strong strain of disillusionment with the British here', Australian High Commissioner John Rowland reported to Canberra.[40]

By contrast with Singapore's seeming intention not to rely on the British military presence but at the same time make it easy for Britain to remain, Malaysian officials wanted to wait and see exactly what kind of defence commitment the British were willing to offer before deciding on the value of maintaining their presence in Malaysia at all. Notwithstanding the economic advantages of a continued military presence, the Malaysians were concerned at London's apparent reluctance to maintain AMDA and its intention to replace this particular Malaysian defence arrangement with five-power arrangements. Concerns in Kuala Lumpur about the extended defence arrangements arose out of Malaysian distrust of Singapore and were a factor in its cautious attitude towards a renewed British military role in the region. A British presence on Malaysian soil under a five-power umbrella could open the door to a Singaporean presence under the same arrangements. Furthermore, Malaysians were committed to a large expansion of their own ground forces and were not keen to spend their limited defence budget on providing facilities for the British or Australian ground forces.[41]

On 30 June, Foreign Minister Tun Ismail told a visiting Australian parliamentary delegation that he did not foresee a return to the old arrangements governing Malaysia's external defence. 'The only difference', he claimed, 'between Labour and Conservative attitudes was that the latter were prepared to leave behind a small force'. Malaysia understood that 'basically it should be self-reliant'. Ismail was of the same mind as Lee Kwan Yew that the five-power arrangements could provide a breathing space of some years and he believed that Malaysia had to use this period to develop its own defence strength.[42] Although Malaysia had never been a member of the then increasingly moribund Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO), Kuala Lumpur was encouraged that Britain intended to uphold its election promise on regional forces when the British representative assured the SEATO Meeting in Manila on 2 July that Britain would be contributing to the Commonwealth force in the region under a five-power defence arrangement.[43]

In New Zealand, the Conservative electoral victory was welcomed 'with a sense of relief and elation' because of the promised changes to British defence policy in the region. However, for New Zealanders these changes were less significant than the pressing concerns that the Heath government would be less sympathetic than its predecessors to New Zealand's interests in the forthcoming negotiations with the EEC. Some of these concerns were allayed during the visit of John Marshall, New Zealand's Deputy Prime Minister, to London in July, and so it was in a relaxed

[40] NAA, A5882, CO988, AHC Kuala Lumpur to Canberra, cablegram 2893, 27 July 1970.
[41] Ibid.
[42] NAA, A1838, 696/1/9 part 12, AHC Kuala Lumpur to Canberra, cablegram 2660, 1 July 1970.
[43] NAA, A1838, 696/1/9 part 12, AHC Kuala Lumpur to Canberra, cablegram 2686, 4 July 1970. Established in 1955 to prevent further communist intrusion in Southeast Asia, SEATO by 1970 was proving ineffectual as a collective defence organisation due to its inability to intervene in the Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese conflicts because intervention required a unanimous decision by members. Questions on dissolving SEATO arose in 1973, and the end came in 1977.

atmosphere that Lord Carrington was able to conduct the last round of discussions in the initial five-power talks in Wellington in early August.[44]

As noted, the Gorton government in Australia also welcomed the Conservatives' intention to retain a military presence in the Southeast Asian region. While British ministers and officials worked to finalise details of the commitment, the Department of Defence (DOD) in Canberra, under Sir Arthur Tange, deliberated on the kind of British force that Australia would like to see stationed in the region. In preliminary discussions on 10 June 1970, the Australian Chiefs of Staff Committee (COS) concluded that such a force should include a battalion group with logistic support, a naval contribution up to four destroyers with an afloat support element, a maritime patrol squadron, tactical air support transport and fighter/ground attack aircraft.[45] Tange also wanted Australian representatives in London to endeavour – discretely – to influence British thinking so that their decisions accorded with Australia's best interests. At the same time, he was careful to instruct that they not reveal the kind of numbers Australia wished to see the British deploy in Malaysia and Singapore, as he believed that British possession of such information 'might be held to close off later opportunities for Australia'.[46] Officers from the Australian High Commission in London met with FCO and MOD officials in early July to carry out Tange's instructions. They set out Australia's wish to see a balanced British air, ground and naval contribution and emphasised the need for London 'to commit a self-contained ground force and not to confine themselves … to specialist assistance'.[47]

Back in Canberra, the DOD compiled a detailed position paper on Australia's broad aims and requirements in preparation for the upcoming discussions with Lord Carrington. Australia's preference was for the continuation of AMDA, implying that any future British deployment should be of sufficient capability to discharge the AMDA obligation. Defence suspected that such an outcome would be unlikely and accepted that Australia should be prepared to settle for 'a commitment to consult'. For tactical reasons, however, it was 'essential that the British should be the first to define this commitment'. Defence officials realised that 'the new British presence [would] be severely limited in numbers of men and other resources and hence ultimately in political commitment'. Within these constraints, they hoped that a British presence would be 'large enough to contribute to confidence and stability' in the region, and 'sufficiently substantial to weigh with the Americans and with our SEATO allies'. At the same time, that presence should 'be no larger that can be endured by the British (present and possibly succeeding governments) rather than one so large as to stimulate fresh domestic pressures for withdrawal, and add to doubts in the region as to its permanence'. This presence should also 'be backed up, and through appropriate exercises, be seen to be backed up, by a substantial reinforcement capability'.[48]

These considerations were broadly in line with past Australian views. Following Wilson's decision in mid-1967 to withdraw, the government had hoped for a

[44] NAA, A1838, 696/1/9 part 12, AHC Wellington to Canberra, savingram 15/70, 7 Aug. 1970.
[45] NAA, A1838, 696/1/9 part 12, Canberra to AHC London, cablegram 8050, 24 June 1970.
[46] NAA, A1838, 696/1/9 part 12, Canberra to AHC London, cablegram 8319, 29 June 1970.
[47] NAA, A1838, 696/1/9 part 12, AHC London to Canberra, cablegram 11419, 3 July 1970.
[48] NAA, A5882, CO988, Discussions with Lord Carrington: Australian position paper, July 1970.

continuing, albeit significantly reduced, British presence in Southeast Asia throughout the withdrawal phase and for the maintenance of a general capability after the mid-1970s. Canberra had thus been taken aback by the British Cabinet's decision to quicken the pace of the withdrawal in January 1968 and by the discarding of these options. Nonetheless, Gorton had reaffirmed his predecessor Harold Holt's pledge to continue stationing a small military contingent in Malaysia and Singapore in order to provide political reassurance to these two neighbours.[49] British plans now to continue with a limited military contribution in the region appeared to turn the clock back to late 1967, reversing, to an extent, the Southeast Asian policy of the Wilson administration. Britain's withdrawal had meant Australia would have to assume increased regional responsibilities. A continuing British presence, whatever its limitations, impacted on the necessity to accept such undertakings. Defence officials in Canberra could only regard Heath's announcement of a continued contribution as a positive development.

Lessons had been learned from the 1967 shock of the proposed British withdrawal, however, and while welcoming the deployment of a small British force, Australian defence officials considered that its presence in the region should not jeopardise Australian interests. In meeting with Carrington in July 1970, they believed it important to point out that the renewed British presence should not 'reverse or hinder the healthy adjustments of attitude and thinking that has taken place and is continuing to take place in Australia'.[50] This view signified a marked change in Canberra's defence thinking over the intervening years. Gone were the traditional anxieties that British forces had to be maintained in Australia's region at all costs. The DOD was now raising the possibility that a continued British presence might actually hinder the implementation of the more independent Australian regional policy-making that had developed out of the country's adjustment to post-imperial realities. In short, defence officials in Canberra did not want the renewal of the British presence

> to introduce influences that could obstruct the independently Australian purposes we had in mind when deciding to leave our own forces in the region (on the contrary, we should be looking to harness the renewed British presence to those purposes); to antagonise Indonesia, complicate the development of our defence relations with that country or other countries in the region, or tend to restore the previous high level of militarization across the Southeast Asian Archipelago; to focus our presence (and our thinking) too narrowly for too long on Malaysia/Singapore.[51]

Further afield, DOD was keen to see a renewed British contribution make a 'helpful impact' well beyond the Malaysian region, namely in the Indian Ocean area, and help maintain 'a special defence relationship among the ANZUK countries'. They stressed, though that Canberra's political support for Britain's continuing role in the wider east

[49] NAA, A5840, vol. 3, Cabinet Decision 771 (FAD), 11 Dec. 1967; and Hancock, *Gorton*, pp. 226, 234. The Australian contribution included one infantry battalion, one battery (based at Terendak near Malacca in Malaysia), two destroyers or frigates (based in Singapore), fighter squadrons (based at Butterworth near Penang in northern Malaysia). See NAA, A1209, 1967/7334 attachment 2, DOD brief no. 25, May 1967.

[50] NAA, A5882, CO988, Discussions with Lord Carrington: Australian position paper, July 1970.

[51] Ibid.

of Suez theatre should not be taken to imply Australian approval for possible Commonwealth initiatives aimed at discharging British responsibilities in Hong Kong, Brunei, Gan (Maldives) or Mauritius.[52]

Australian concerns were clear. Defence cooperation with Britain could draw Australia into commitments that were not only inimical to Canberra's interests, but possibly also antagonistic to its nearest neighbours, particularly Indonesia. It was essential, therefore, that the British presence be 'directed towards enhancing defence co-operation between the local countries, and to assist the rational development of those forces', and not to discouraging 'the development of resourcefulness and self-reliance in Malaysia and Singapore'. Australia had to remain 'cautious lest the renewal of the British presence lead to notions of a self-contained "Old Commonwealth" military community and induce inward-looking attitudes among our people in the region'. The Defence view was that the Australian government

> need[ed] to keep in mind that we had already made decisions as to the forces we would retain, and the commitments we would accept, after the British left the region. We don't want what may still prove to be merely a temporary renewal of the British presence to leave us saddled later with undertakings (either forces in the region, or political commitment) any larger or more enduring than we would have made if the British had stuck to Labour's timetable for departing from Malaysia/Singapore.[53]

These views did not mean that the DOD failed to recognise that Heath's decision afforded 'opportunities for renewing [Australia's] defence connection with the U.K.'. Such cooperation had been essential for previous Australian governments seeking to harness British influence in the region to Australian interests. However, the important consideration following Heath's announcement was that any limitations placed on the military and political responsibilities that Britain was planning to reassume in Southeast Asia 'should not be seen to be shared with Australia'.[54] In Canberra, the benefits of this once all-important factor in Australian defence relations were now being seen in the light of the possible risks that it would pose to the independence of Australia's regional relationships. Australian defence thinking was not moving away from a bottom-line reliance on Canberra's more militarily capable allies but it was premising that Australia had an independent responsibility for defence matters in its own backyard.

The establishment of the Five Power Defence Arrangements

Lord Carrington arrived in Canberra on 31 July and spent that and the following day in discussions with Prime Minister Gorton and his ministers. He reiterated the British government's intention to terminate AMDA and to replace it with a much looser five-power agreement. The powers were to be 'equal partners and the three overseas nations [were to have] the same political commitment'.[55] The Defence

[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] NAA, A5882, CO988, Cabinet Decision 575 (Ad Hoc), 31 July 1970; see also TNA, FCO 46/622, Memcon, Carrington and Australian ministers (Canberra), 31 July 1970. Under AMDA, Britain was responsible for the defence of Malaya/Malaysia against external aggression; this did not apply to

Secretary made it clear that London would accept no undertaking beyond a simple obligation to consult 'in the event of external aggression or the threat of external aggression'. He also re-emphasised the limited size and scope of the planned British military contribution to future five-power arrangements in view of Britain's limited resources, and its primary commitment to European security.[56] He stressed to the Australians that 'if the British commitment East of Suez were not too costly it could possibly become in Britain a bipartisan policy'.[57] Carrington was also able to give the Australian government a provisional outline of the planned British force. The naval capability in the area was to amount to five frigates or destroyers (one located in Hong Kong) and a share in afloat support. Visits by Royal Navy vessels for training and exercises were also contemplated. The ground contribution was to include one battalion group to be stationed in Singapore, and some supporting elements. Britain's air capacity would consist of four Nimrods and a flight of Whirlwind helicopters, with aircraft rotated in and out of the area (at the rate of about 600–700 movements a year).[58]

There is a report that Carrington was privately taken aback when acquainted in return with Australia's views on the proposed arrangements, complaining that 'one would almost think that Australia did not want us back in the area'.[59] This report is not supported by archival evidence, however, or indeed by the recollections of others involved, including Lord Carrington.[60] The official British version was that on the whole, Canberra received the proposals warmly. John Gorton did 'put up a show' of urging the British party to maintain AMDA and, in private, 'took a strong line about this'. It was nonetheless soon clear that even Gorton did not expect the British to retain AMDA.[61] In fact, Australian ministers quickly accepted Lord Carrington's ideas, despite simmering tensions within Cabinet between the supporters of Australia's 'forward defence strategy' (Defence Minister Malcolm Fraser and Minister of External Affairs William McMahon) and those like Gorton himself who were increasingly sceptical about military deployments in Southeast Asia.[62] Gorton's desire to avoid such deployments led him to seek a distinction between

Australia and New Zealand as they were not signatories to AMDA. In 1959, both countries associated themselves with the agreement in relation to Malaya, extending the association to Malaysia after its formation in 1963.

[56] NAA, A5882, CO988, Cabinet Decision 575 (Ad Hoc), 31 July 1970. It is noteworthy that by 1970 internal security problems in Northern Ireland had already begun to place British military resources under strain. See Michael Carver, *Tightrope walking: British defence policy since 1945* (London: Hutchinson, 1992), pp. 100–1.

[57] NAA, A5882, CO988, Cabinet Decision 575 (Ad Hoc), 31 July 1970.

[58] Ibid.

[59] See Peter Howson, *The Howson diaries: The life of politics* (Ringwood: Viking Press, 1984), p. 648.

[60] Benvenuti, *Anglo-Australian relations*, ch. 8.

[61] TNA, FCO, 46/622, Memcon, Carrington and the Australian Cabinet, 31 July 1970; FCO 24/645, Carrington to FCO, telegram 862, 1 Aug. 1970; Johnston to Douglas-Home, 4 Aug. 1970; Moon to Stephens, 11 Aug. 1970; FCO 24/646, Carrington to Heath, 6 Aug. 1970.

[62] NAA, A5882, CO988, Cabinet Decision 575 (Ad Hoc), 31 July 1970. Gorton was known for his scepticism towards a continuing Australian military presence in Southeast Asia. See Peter Edwards, *A nation at war: Australian politics, society and diplomacy during the Vietnam war 1965–75* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), pp. 199–201. See also Alan Reid, *The Gorton experiment: The fall of John Grey Gorton* (Sydney: Shakespeare Head Press, 1971), p. 143; Hancock, *Gorton*, pp. 177–80.

East and West Malaysia in possible future commitments.[63] Derek McDougall contends that this distinction arose from Gorton's concerns that Australia could become involved in an awkward diplomatic dispute between Malaysia and the Philippines over the latter's revived sovereignty claims over the East Malaysian state of Sabah.[64] Privately, however, British records show that both Fraser and McMahon reassured Carrington that they would be able to prevent Gorton from 'having his way' in Cabinet should he try to make troops unavailable for use in East Malaysia.[65]

The Carrington visit to the Far East achieved the desired result. In Wellington, the response was even more forthcoming than in Canberra. The Keith Holyoake government expressed its 'genuine and unreserved satisfaction' over the change of direction in British policy and told Carrington that British proposals were in line with New Zealand's expectations.[66] In Singapore, Prime Minister Lee welcomed 'the spirit in which the British proposals had been put forward' and offered no objections to the renegotiation of AMDA, nor did he have any problem with the proposed size and shape of British forces in Southeast Asia. His only preoccupation in this respect was to ensure that a British military presence would be, as he put it, 'low cost for a long stay'.[67]

In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysian ministers were unable to hide their disappointment at London's resolve to abandon AMDA. Reluctantly, they recognised that AMDA was no longer a 'political reality' and accepted that if an automatic British security guarantee was unattainable, Malaysia should settle for a looser defence arrangement which, while far from optimal, would at least allow the country to uphold its non-aligned image.[68] The knowledge that it could not as yet fully provide for its own defence and its non-aligned ambitions presented a dilemma for the Malaysians. So, while telling Carrington that they wanted to see a continuing British commitment to regional defence, ministers appeared half-hearted about the reintroduction of British (and Australasian) land forces on Malaysian soil, conveying the impression that Kuala Lumpur would rather see them stationed in Singapore. The view was that without an automatic defence guarantee, a British ground presence on Malaysian soil had little value. It would not only tarnish Kuala Lumpur's image as a non-aligned country – an image that the government had been cultivating since the late 1960s – but it could also hinder Malaysia's progress towards genuine military self-reliance.[69]

[63] NAA, A5882, CO988, Cabinet Decision 575 (Ad Hoc), 31 July 1970.

[64] Derek McDougall, 'Australia and the British military withdrawal from east of Suez', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 51, 2 (1997): 191. In 1968 the Marcos administration had revived Filipino claims over Sabah (Chin, *Defence*, pp. 149–62).

[65] TNA, FCO 24/645, Carrington to FCO, telegram 862, 1 Aug. 1970.

[66] TNA, FCO 24/645, Memcon, Carrington and the New Zealand Defence Council, 3 Aug. 1970; Carrington to FCO, telegram 427, 3 Aug. 1970; FCO 24/646, Memcon, Carrington and the New Zealand Cabinet, 3 Aug. 1970.

[67] TNA, FCO 24/645, Memcon, Carrington and Lee Kuan Yew, 27 July 1970; FCO 24/646, Carrington to Heath, 6 Aug. 1970; DEFE 25/239, BHC Kuala Lumpur to FCO, telegram 17, 10 Aug. 1970; FCO 24/644, de la Mare to Tomlinson, 29 July 1970 and 31 July 1970.

[68] TNA, FCO 24/645, Duff to Aiers, 3 Aug. 1970; Memcon, British and Malaysian officials, 29 July 1970; FCO 24/646, BHC Kuala Lumpur to FCO, 17 Aug. 1970; DEFE 25/239, BHC Kuala Lumpur to FCO, telegram 17, 10 Aug. 1970; FCO 24/664, Carrington to FCO, telegram 485, 29 July 1970.

[69] For Malaysia's shift towards a less pro-Western and more non-aligned stance in foreign affairs, see

In September 1970 and January 1971, officials of the five countries met in Singapore to resolve outstanding differences. They reached agreement on the military aspects of the future five-power arrangements, including the establishment of an air defence council for the functioning of an integrated air defence system (IADS).[70] On 16 February, Fraser announced that British, Australian and New Zealand forces would be organised as a single ANZUK force under an Australian 'two star' commander.[71] On 15 and 16 April 1971, ministers representing the five countries gathered in London to conclude the five-power defence arrangements.[72] As proposed, the understanding included an obligation to consult. Paragraph 5 of the communiqué stated that 'in the event of any form of armed attack externally organised or supported or the threat of such attack against Malaysia and Singapore, their Governments would immediately consult together for the purpose of deciding what measures should be taken jointly or separately in relation to such attack or threat'.[73] A Joint Consultative Council was established to serve as a forum for regular consultations at senior official level.[74] In November 1971, Australia, Britain and New Zealand formally terminated AMDA with Letters of Exchange to the governments of Malaysia and Singapore. These documents specified the rights and the status of ANZUK forces stationed in Malaysia and Singapore, and the assistance these forces were to provide to the two countries.[75]

Towards a policy revision in Canberra

The continued participation of Australia's military contribution to the FPDA (Table 1) was soon in question. Australian domestic politics was on the brink of one of its most turbulent phases. After 23 years in power, the Liberal-Country Party Coalition government was tired and in disarray, and increasingly unpopular. William McMahon had replaced Gorton in March 1971 but failed to establish himself as a strong and effective leader, and his government was riven by factional and leadership rivalries. The new British High Commissioner in Canberra, Morrice James, reported to the FCO that McMahon seemed 'perennially surprised to find himself Prime Minister of such a solid and substantial country as Australia. Both his countrymen, and – to an embarrassing extent – he himself, know that he is not much good in the part'.[76] A federal election was due before the end of 1972 and it appeared increasingly likely that the Australian Labour Party (ALP) would return to power after its long spell in opposition. The ALP was opposed to the stationing of Australian military

M. Rajendran, *ASEAN's foreign relations: The shift to collective action* (Kuala Lumpur: Arenabuku 1985), 24–5; Norman Parmer, 'Malaysia: Changing a little to keep pace', *Asian Survey*, 7, 2 (1967): 136; Marvin Ott, 'Malaysia: The search for solidarity and security, *Asian Survey*, 8, 2 (1968): 131–2; Marvin Rogers, 'Malaysia/Singapore: problems and challenges of the seventies', *Asian Survey*, 11, 2 (1971): 127.

[70] Chin, *Defence*, p. 175.

[71] David Hawkins, *The defence of Malaysia and Singapore: From AMDA to ANZUK* (London: United Services Institute for Defence Studies, 1972), p. 42.

[72] For the legal basis of this loose consultative framework, see Kin Wah Chin, *The Five Power Defence Arrangements and AMDA: Some observations on the nature of an evolving partnership*, Occasional Paper no. 23 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1974), pp. 17–8.

[73] NAA, A5931, CL 285, Communiqué issued in London in April 1970.

[74] Chin, *Five Power*, pp. 1–2.

[75] Chin, *Defence*, p. 177.

[76] TNA, FCO 30/303, James to Douglas-Home, 8 Dec. 1971.

Table 1: Australian military contribution to the FPDA

Location	Type/function	Numbers
MALAYSIA	2 RAAF squadrons	1500
	Technical assistance personnel	30
SINGAPORE	Battalion & Battery in 28 ANZUK Brigade	700
	Other troops in Brigade (i.e. Engineers)	180
	RAAF personnel	30
	RAN shore group	20
	Support, Technical and Administrative personnel	850

Source: NAA, A5931, CL285, FAD Submission 231, 26.3.1973.

forces in Southeast Asia. In 1969, it had fought the federal election on a political platform that included the withdrawal of all Australian forces from Vietnam by June 1970. Labour lost that election only by a narrow margin, and its approach to Australian military commitments in Southeast Asia remained so inflexible throughout 1970 and 1971 that had it come to government, it is doubtful that Australia would have become signatory to the Five Power Defence Arrangements.[77] An incoming ALP government was expected, therefore, to review Australia's commitment to the FPDA.

Once the FPDA came into force at the end of 1971, however, Labour's position, while still negative, began to show signs of flexibility. Throughout 1972, Opposition leader Gough Whitlam and his deputy Lance Barnard continued to question Australia's role in the arrangements but introduced some interesting caveats. While remaining opposed to the stationing of Australian land forces in Singapore, both repeatedly said that they were prepared to honour Australia's obligations under the FPDA but in a reduced capacity. They proclaimed that Labour was in favour of retaining some sort of bilateral defence arrangements with Malaysia and Singapore, particularly in areas such as training and equipment procurement, and they sounded reassuring on the retention of the Australian RAAF base at Butterworth in northern Malaysia.[78]

Nonetheless, policymakers in London monitored Australian political developments with unease. By mid-1972, FCO and MOD officials had begun to give consideration to the defence implications of a change of government in Canberra and to discuss possible action in the event of an Australian pullout.[79] The prevailing mood in Whitehall was not optimistic: 'It is hard to feel reassured', MOD Deputy

[77] See Hancock, *Gorton*, p. 235; Rick Kuhn, 'Laborism and foreign policy: The case of the Vietnam war', in *From Evatt to Evans: The Labor tradition in foreign policy*, ed. David Lee and Christopher Waters (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997), p. 91; and Edwards, *Nation at war*, p. 350.

[78] See for instance TNA, FCO 30/1364, Memcon, Douglas-Home and Whitlam (London), 19 Jan. 1972; FCO 24/1293, Radio Australia News Bulletin, 30 Mar. 1970; FCO 24/1294, BHC Canberra to FCO, telegram 731, 31 May 1972; Memcon, Douglas-Home and Whitlam (Canberra), 29 June 1972; Whitlam, 'It's time for leadership', 13 Nov. 1972, available at http://www.australianpolitics.com/elections/1972/72-11-13_it's-time.shtml [last accessed on 30 Jan. 2009].

[79] For discussions between FCO and MOD officials on the possible effect of political change in Australia on the FPDA and British defence policy in Southeast Asia, see files TNA, FCO 24/1302 and 1303.

Under-Secretary Patrick Nairne wrote to Carrington in July 1972 after a round of consultations with Australian defence officials in Canberra.[80] If implemented, Labour's proposals for a significant cutback in the Australian military contribution to the FPDA could pose a number of problems for the Conservative administration. In general, officials in Whitehall believed that a contraction of Australia's military presence in Malaysia and Singapore would weaken the FDPA. Depending on the scale and the nature of the troop reductions that Whitlam would be willing to contemplate if elected, different scenarios were plausible, including the unravelling of the FPDA itself.[81]

Whatever the result of the Australian election, however, the British were in a worrying position. While concerned about the ALP's pronouncements on Southeast Asian defence, they were also unimpressed by what they saw as the McMahon administration's rather indifferent attitude towards the FPDA.[82] Even before the arrangements were finalised, British officials complained about Canberra's lack of urgency in 'handling of defence questions of common concern to us both, such as the Five Power arrangements'. Believing that 'if we can get Mr McMahon to pay more attention to the field of defence, this could pay off in helping to inspire a greater sense of urgency', the British hoped 'to be able to align the Australians more closely with our views on likely developments in Asia'.[83] Partly for this reason, the Heath government welcomed McMahon's efforts in late 1971 to give new impetus to the flagging Australia-UK bilateral relationship as Britain was set to enter the EEC. Concerned that Britain would increasingly turn 'inward and to Europe' and eager to prevent its growing European orientation from further weakening Anglo-Australian relations, McMahon proposed closer political cooperation 'across the board' as a means of overcoming the current sense of drift in the relationship. Like their conservative counterparts in London, Canberra ministers saw Anglo-Australian defence cooperation in Southeast Asia as an area in which an improvement could be made.[84] Yet, despite these intentions, the McMahon government throughout 1972 appeared to become increasingly hesitant about the future of Australia's politico-military role in Southeast Asia now that the United States was extricating itself from an unwinnable war in Vietnam.

[80] TNA, FCO 24/1294, Visit to Australia: Report by DUS(P), 3 July 1972.

[81] TNA, FCO 24/1302, Five Power Defence Arrangements: Effect of a change of government in Australia, Apr. 1972.

[82] British perceptions were somewhat vindicated by McMahon himself. In June 1972, during a tour of Southeast Asia, the Australian leader said in Jakarta that he did not 'think that there was any real necessity to have a five-power arrangement so far as Britain, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia and Australia are concerned'. McMahon seemed anxious to avoid saying anything that could upset Australia's improving relations with Indonesia, a country that looked at the FPDA with some residual suspicion. In Malaysia and Singapore, McMahon reiterated Canberra's support for the FPDA, but doubts remained about Australia's attitude towards these arrangements. See John Ingleson, 'South-East Asia', in *Australia in world affairs, 1971–75*, ed. W.J. Hudson (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1980), p. 297.

[83] TNA, FCO 24/1048, James to Tomlinson, 26 Oct. 1971.

[84] TNA, FCO 24/1047, Heath to McMahon, 13 Dec. 1971; TNA, FCO, 24/1047, James to Grenhill, 8 Dec. 1971; and 'Anglo-Australian relations: Prospects and initiatives', 1 Dec. 1971, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs policy planning paper, attached to Hickman to Storar, 20 Dec. 1971; FCO 24/1048, James to Tomlinson, 26 Oct. 1971.

Since the early 1950s, Australia's politico–military role in the region had been predicated on the principle that the country's defence was best achieved through forward deployments on the Asian mainland ('forward defence') and in close defence cooperation with its major allies, Britain and the United States. With the arrival of Richard Nixon at the White House in 1969, 'forward defence' looked increasingly outmoded as the new Republican administration began to implement a policy of 'Vietnamisation', which aimed to reduce the number of American forces in Indochina while transferring the burden of defending South Vietnam on to the military forces of that country. Between 1969 and 1972, Nixon reduced the number of American troops from 300,000 to 24,000. His radical reassessment of the US role in Vietnam was not without consequences for Australia. Commencing in late 1970, first the Gorton and then the McMahon governments began to wind down Australia's military presence in Vietnam; by the end of 1971, approximately 150 advisers only were left in the country. Yet while coalition ministers remained publicly committed to 'forward defence', seemingly reluctant to abandon the concept, senior government officials were more ready to question its value in the changing strategic landscape.[85]

In April 1972, the Defence Committee, whose membership included the departmental heads of Defence, Foreign Affairs, Treasury, Prime Minister and Cabinet; the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff (COS) Committee; and the three service Chiefs of Staff, examined a paper drafted by the DOD on the value of the FPDA. DOD officials noted with some disappointment that 'such a limited military presence such as the ANZUK force, and such a limited political commitment such as the London communiqué, can scarcely be expected to produce more than limited achievements'. They argued that it was 'also difficult to demonstrate at this stage that the Five Power Arrangements have achieved much in stimulating peaceful co-operation between Malaysia and Singapore'. If cooperation between the two neighbours was less than ideal, so too was Australian perception of Britain's commitment to the FPDA. The principal source of complaint appeared to be a 'much smaller full-time RAF commitment to ANZUK than we had expected'.[86] DOD officials somewhat exaggerated what they called the 'unsatisfactory imbalance' between the Australian and the British air contributions to ANZUK, but the fact remained that RAF activity in Singapore was 'far short of a par with Butterworth'.[87] DOD officials concluded nevertheless that the FPDA were worth retaining despite their various shortcomings and suggested that it was 'too early to be initiating extensive change'. Instead, they believed that the government should be 'ready to be flexible if and when circumstances require' and that contingency planning should continue for various situations, including the withdrawal of Australian forces from Malaysia and Singapore.[88]

[85] Peter Edwards, *Arthur Tange: The last of the mandarins* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2006), ch. 10.
[86] NAA, A7942, F59, Five Power Arrangements and ANZUK, Defence Committee Agendum 6/1972, 4 Apr. 1972.
[87] NAA, A7942, F59, Comanzukfor Singapore to Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee, DCR 253, April 1972; Five Power Arrangements and ANZUK, Defence Committee Agendum 6/1972, 4 Apr. 1972; Robby to Chief of Air Staff, 11 Apr. 1972.
[88] NAA, A7942, F59, Five Power Arrangements and ANZUK, Defence Committee Agendum 6/1972, 4 Apr. 1972.

The Defence Committee broadly accepted the paper's conclusions, but with ministerial opinion still in favour of maintaining Australia's forward deployments, a holding operation appeared the best course of action. Despite the growing doubts about the wisdom of the 'forward defence' strategy, the committee agreed that for the time being 'the balance of advantages for Australia … lies in maintaining the present arrangements'. The temporary nature of this decision was evident in their agreement also to consider and plan for alternative options, including military disengagement from Malaysia and Singapore.[89] In November 1972, the Joint Planning Committee (JPC) completed a report outlining the modalities of a partial or total Australian withdrawal from Malaysia and Singapore ('Plan Tabaret').[90] The Chiefs of Staff Committee met to consider the report on 29 November but with a general election only three days out, they could do little more than note it and defer further consideration to a future date.[91] Any decision on the future of Australia's presence in Malaysia and Singapore was incumbent upon the government that gained power in Canberra.

The Whitlam revision

The ALP's electoral victory on 2 December 1972 produced a drastic change in Canberra's policy towards the FPDA and coincided with one of most turbulent times in the history of Anglo-Australian relations. From the outset, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam appeared determined to break with the past and to distance himself from what he saw as the Liberal-Country Party governments' close identification with Britain.[92] Within days of his election, Whitlam informed the British High Commissioner that, against British wishes, he was likely to instruct the Australian delegation at the United Nations to support two resolutions condemning Rhodesia.[93] Regarding the FPDA, however, he responded positively to British expectations of consultations 'before any changes were introduced', telling Heath that he looked forward to 'constructive co-operation' between the two countries and welcoming a visit by the British Defence Secretary 'at a mutually convenient date early in 1973'.[94] Not surprisingly, British irritation with the new Australian Prime Minister only increased when, in a matter of weeks, he reiterated his electoral pledge to begin a phased withdrawal from the Malaysian region.[95]

Despite British attempts to persuade the Labour government against this course of action, Canberra remained inflexible. Lord Carrington's visit to Australia in

[89] NAA, A7942, F59, Minute, Defence Committee Meeting, 13 Apr. 1972.
[90] NAA, A7942, F59, 'Withdrawal of Australian Forces from Malaysia/Singapore: AJSP no. 50/1972 – Plan Tabaret', COS Committee Agendum 63/1972, 27 Nov. 1972; JPC Report, 17 Nov. 1972.
[91] NAA, A7942, F59, Minute, COS Committee Meeting, 29 Nov. 1972.
[92] Graeme Davison, 'The colonial strut: Australian prime ministers on the world stage', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 5, 1 (2005): 13, describes Whitlam as a self-assured leader 'with aspirations to world stature, and an ego and physique to match'.
[93] TNA, FCO 24/1335, BHC Canberra to FCO, telegram 1694, 5 Dec. 1972; McConville to Campbell, 6 Dec. 1972; Douglas-Home to BHC Canberra, telegram 1292, 6 Dec. 1972.
[94] NAA: A1838, 696/1/30 part 1, cablegram 19616, AHC London to Canberra, 5 Dec. 1972; and cablegram 15672, Whitlam to Heath, 7 Dec. 1972.
[95] See TNA, FCO 24/1335, McConville to Campbell, 6 Dec. 1972; FCO, 24/1554, Wilford to Norris, 9 Feb. 1973; FCO 24/1600, James to Norris, 12 Jan. 1973; and NAA, A7942, F59, Australian participation in combined military exercises and training in countries of the Southeast Asian and South West Pacific areas, 22 Dec. 1972.

February 1973 derived little consolation from its efforts. The British Defence Secretary made it clear to Barnard, now Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister, that the British authorities could not and would not 'compensate for Australian reductions by putting in more men ourselves'. The Australian response was that the government's plans for the withdrawal of the its battalion and battery from Singapore were simply 'not open to negotiation'; the withdrawal would go ahead and be completed by early 1974. The only concessions that the new government was willing to contemplate were the retention of Australia's naval and air contribution to the FPDA, as well as the rotation of Australian land forces for training in the area. Additionally, and in the face of internal party pressure for greater force reductions, Barnard also pledged to leave sufficient personnel in the logistic support group in Singapore 'to make it unlikely that any extra manpower contribution will be required' from the British. (The ANZUK Brigade relied for its effectiveness on the Australian logistic personnel in Singapore, and the British had strongly urged Canberra to continue providing some sort of logistic support lest ANZUK fall apart.)

In spite of their disappointment at the Australian decision to bring home the battalion and battery stationed in Singapore, Carrington's party remained relatively hopeful that Whitlam and Barnard would be able to carry the Labour Party with them on the concessions and avoid further withdrawals.[96] Mistakenly, the impression was 'that the Australian work is still at an early stage' and that 'Barnard's own approach is helpful and robust'. The British role, therefore, 'must be to help the Australians clear their own minds, and chiefly through the High Commission in Canberra, to jolly them along as much as we can'.[97]

British hopes of 'jollying' the Australians were certainly misplaced. The following month, the Australian Foreign and Defence Committee of Cabinet (FAD) agreed in principle to a more radical set of proposals. These included a further reduction in the Australian ground force element in Singapore: after April 1975 the only troops remaining would number up to 150 men, comprising technical aid, training and exercise personnel, and their support. More importantly, however, was the proposal for the withdrawal by 1976 of the Australian air force element (1,500 men) from Butterworth with the exception of a small group for technical assistance programmes.[98] While the FAD committee instructed Barnard to consult with Australia's allies on these proposals, there appeared little evidence to London that there was much flexibility in Canberra's position. One FCO official commented that 'the situation is indeed pretty discouraging and the rats certainly seem to have eaten at Mr Barnard's position since Lord Carrington left Canberra'.[99] The same official noted in another despatch that he was 'afraid that the reasons for the present Australian action … [lay] in the determination of the Left Wing of the ALP to dismantle the Five Power Arrangements'.[100]

[96] TNA, FCO 24/1553, Note of Discussions by DUS(P) in Australian Department of Defence, 5 Feb. 1973; BHC Canberra to FCO, telegram 192, 3 Feb. 1973.
[97] TNA, FCO 24/1553, Note of Discussions by DUS(P) in the Australian Department of Defence, 5 Feb. 1973.
[98] NAA, A5931, CL 285, Decision 392 (FAD), 29 Mar. 1973; Submission 231, Apr. 1973.
[99] TNA, FCO 24/1555, Wilford to Aiers, 10 Apr. 1973.
[100] TNA, FCO, 24/1555, Wilford to Sykes, 16 Apr. 1973.

Between April and July 1973, London put intense pressure on the Whitlam government to have some of the proposals overturned. In April, Carrington went so far as to make a veiled threat to Whitlam during the latter's visit to the United Kingdom, that Britain 'might find it impossible' to remain in Malaysia and Singapore unless Australia retained its ground contribution to FPDA.[101] Malaysian, Singaporean and New Zealand reactions were also negative, if more restrained.[102] Like the British, those governments had no wish to see the FPDA collapse. Although Malaysian foreign policy under new Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak had increasingly shifted, at least publicly, towards a more neutralist line, no one in Kuala Lumpur believed that the neutralisation of Southeast Asia would be achievable in the short term. Until such time as this state was realised, Razak felt that 'countries in the region are free to enter into defence arrangements with outside powers'.[103] Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, for his part, viewed neutralisation with suspicion and remained a strong proponent of a continuing Western politico-military presence in Southeast Asia as an important balancing factor in maintaining regional stability.[104]

In the end, this combined British and Commonwealth pressure produced some results. On 2 July, the Australian Cabinet agreed to postpone any decision on the actual time of withdrawal of Australian Mirage squadrons from Butterworth, but made it clear that it would bring the matter up for review before March 1975.[105] Cabinet would not budge on the question of the Australian participation in the ANZUK brigade, however, and sanctioned the FAD's earlier decision to withdraw all Australian ground forces from Singapore by April 1975, with the exception of the small contingent noted.[106] While these decisions on troop withdrawals were taken to appease the left-wing section of the ALP, which had forcefully demanded the withdrawal of Australian forces from Southeast Asia, both Whitlam and Barnard were also inclined to question the erstwhile bedrock of Canberra's foreign and defence policies — the assumption that the stationing of British troops in Australia's neighbourhood represented a vital national interest.

By May 1974, all Australian ground combat elements had returned to Australia and a further 480 personnel engaged in ANZUK logistic and administrative support were withdrawn by the end of the year as British and New Zealand forces took over their duties. The withdrawals, however, did not signify the Whitlam government's intention to 'dismantle' the FPDA. Labour's view was that there was a clear distinction

[101] TNA, FCO 24/1556, Douglas-Home to British Embassy Washington, telegram 988, 30 Apr. 1973.
[102] TNA, FCO 24/1555, BHC Wellington to FCO, telegram 234, 11 Apr. 1973; Watts to Hickman, 9 Apr. 1973; NAA, A5931, CL285, Cabinet Submission 491, 2 July 1973.
[103] TNA, FCO 24/1553, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and neutralisation proposal for Southeast Asia, January 1973. It is worth noting that in 1971, Razak was instrumental in getting the ASEAN foreign ministers to adopt a declaration of Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). See ibid; Ahmand Mokhtar Selat, 'New directions in Malaysia's foreign policy: From Tunku to Abdullah Badawi', in *Malaysia's foreign relations: Issues and challenges*, ed. Ruhanas Harum (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 2006), p. 16; Alf Parsons, *Southeast Asian days* (Brisbane: Griffith University, 1998), p. 111.
[104] Michael Leifer, *Singapore's foreign policy: Coping with vulnerability* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 64; Narayan Ganesan, *Realism and interdependence in Singapore's foreign policy* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 42.
[105] NAA, A5931, CL 285, Cabinet Decision 823, 2 July 1973.
[106] Ibid. These 150 remaining servicemen were not be assigned to ANZUK.

between the arrangements and the stationing of Australian forces in Malaysia and Singapore. Australia's policy was to emphasise 'aspects of the FPDA such as training programmes, combined exercises, defence aid and other activities in defence co-operation'. Indeed, Defence officials acknowledged the 'pressures on our own policy' should the British 'contemplate complete withdrawal from the Arrangements' and were concerned that they should have 'plenty of notice' of any such thinking in London. Accordingly, Canberra hoped that British public statements would not 'equate or establish a close connection' between the arrangements and force deployments.[107]

The promised Labour defence review on the Mirage squadrons did not take place in 1975. By the end of that year, as a result of a domestic constitutional impasse, the Whitlam government was dismissed and a new Liberal-Country Party Coalition government under Malcolm Fraser installed in Canberra. The outcome for the FPDA was that the Fraser government agreed to leave the two RAAF squadrons in Malaysia. It also decided that an infantry company would be deployed on a three-monthly rotational basis and that RAN ships would pay frequent calls to Singapore.[108]

Nonetheless, as the Heath government feared, the ALP's reappraisal of Australia's military commitment to Southeast Asian defence did indeed impact negatively on the FPDA by triggering a chain reaction both in Britain and New Zealand. In 1974, a new Labour government in London decided to withdraw the British ground contribution to the FPDA by 1976. Faced with a difficult economic situation, Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced that 'our 1968 decision to withdraw our forces from Southeast Asia should now be carried out'.[109] In 1975, following the Australian and British example, Labour Prime Minister W.E. Rowling announced his decision to bring the New Zealand battalion home within the next two years.[110]

Conclusion

In October 1972, the FCO reappraised Commonwealth policy in the lead-up to Britain's entry into the EEC. It argued that in the post-accession period London's relations with individual Commonwealth members should be refashioned according to their respective importance to British interests. The principal goal was the preservation of close relations with Britain's former dominions of Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Next, in terms of importance, came a small group of nations which included India, Malaysia and Singapore.[111] The FCO paper was in line with previous government policy. Since coming to power in June 1970, Heath had been careful to maintain close relations with the major Commonwealth countries in spite of his

[107] NAA, A1838, 696/1/9 part 26, Defence Planning Division Brief, Australian Talks with British Defence Minister, William Rodgers, 21 May 1974.
[108] See Hugh Smith, 'Defence policy', in *Independence and alliance: Australia in world affairs 1976–80*, ed. P.J. Boyce and J.R. Angel (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 49.
[109] Wilson quoted in Philip Ziegler, *Wilson: The authorised life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1993), pp. 159–60.
[110] This decision was reversed by Rowling's successor and National Party leader, Robert Muldoon; David McCraw, 'From Kirk to Muldoon: Change and continuity in New Zealand's foreign-policy priorities', *Pacific Affairs*, 55, 4 (1982–83): 646, 657. The New Zealand battalion would eventually be withdrawn in 1989.
[111] Ashton, 'British government perspectives on the Commonwealth', p. 91.

determination to enter the EEC. One of the main reasons for the Conservative government's decision to deploy a token military force in Southeast Asia as part of a multilateral defence arrangement with Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore was the desire to uphold these Commonwealth connections. British officials saw such efforts to maintain the relationships as particularly important given Heath's concurrent attempts to deepen Britain's links with its Western European partners.

However, while London may have seen Southeast Asian defence collaboration as a possible means of reconciling its growing European engagement with the maintenance of close Commonwealth ties, Canberra was beginning to question the value of such arrangements in a rapidly changing Southeast Asian strategic environment. Clinging to the last vestiges of the 'forward defence' policy thinking, the Australian government welcomed the British decision to maintain a regional military presence and agreed to be a signatory to the FPDA. Canberra policy-makers, however, were cautious about the level of Australia's commitment to the arrangements, believing that it should accord with the country's regional interests and aims.

With the significant reductions in American forces in South Vietnam throughout the 1970–72 period, however, Australia's 'forward defence' strategy and its military deployments in Southeast Asia appeared increasingly outmoded. As a result, the McMahon government began reassessing the benefits of the FPDA to Australia, examining plans for an eventual disengagement from Malaysia and Singapore. In the end, McMahon was unable to decide on a course of action that would radically transform Australia's strategic posture in the Malaysian region. This step came only with the change of government in December 1972 and Whitlam's decision to begin the immediate withdrawal of Australian forces from the area. Heath's hopes that close links with Australia could be maintained through mutually supportive defence collaboration had proved unfounded. In the early 1970s a British military presence on mainland Southeast Asia became increasingly immaterial to Australia's own foreign policy interests.