

AUSTRALIA'S REGIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Address by Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, to the Conference on Strategic Studies in a Changing World, Australian National University, 31 July, 1991

In December 1989 I delivered a Ministerial Statement on Australia's Regional Security. Stirring and unprecedented events have taken place since then, but they have not led me to alter in any significant way my analysis of Australia's security environment, or to doubt the general appropriateness of our responses to that environment.

The Global Background

In dealing in 1989 with broader global developments which help shape our immediate security environment, I referred to the decline of ideology as a global organising principle. Since then, that process has been intensified. The Warsaw Pact has been dismantled and the successor states in Eastern Europe have embarked on programs of economic reform of varying degrees of thoroughness. The Soviet Union, although having dreadful difficulty in making a clean break with past habits of mind, does seem headed in the same general direction.

That ideology has certainly not disappeared as a motivating force in the affairs of nations is clear from the ruthless suppression of the democracy demonstrations in China and the consequent leadership changes. And the recent Vietnam Party Congress was notable for the way in which, politically if not economically, it clung to traditional ideological verities. There are certainly plenty willing to argue that ideology still has a key role in sustaining the resistance to change of the remaining Asian communist regimes. But it is difficult to deny that Marxism-Leninism, at least as an economic system, has comprehensively lost to its mixed economy competitors the battle for the hearts and minds of national policy makers.

The collapse of the will and capacity of the Soviet Union to exercise the kind of authority it used to before 1989 makes a stark contrast with the decisive and extraordinarily effective diplomatic and military role played by the United States in the Gulf crisis. No other country has a breadth of authority and influence - military, political and economic - to be compared with that of the United States.

I do not want to argue that the world is now unipolar. In a strategic sense - with just over 50,000 nuclear warheads still in existence, 30,000 of them with the Soviet Union and 20,000 with the United States - it is still very much bipolar. And other states are moving from major power to great power status. Japan is already a global economic and financial superpower. The European Community would be a superpower of United States-like dimensions if it were to achieve complete political union. China and India have political, cultural and military capacity of very significant potential influence in Asia.

This new world is one in which the United Nations itself has become a much more important and effective player. The United States simply could not have gathered and maintained the level of support that it did in the Gulf had it not worked through UN processes, and appealed to the UN principle of collective security.

The reversal of Iraq's aggression does not mean that a collective international response can be guaranteed in all cases of violation of a country's territorial integrity. It is clear that many of the circumstances surrounding that aggression were unique. But the standards of international behaviour embodied in the UN Charter have been reinforced; a benchmark has been established to which the international community can be held in the future; and importantly, even if we cannot be certain that the collective security function will operate as effectively again, the potential aggressor can not be sure that it will not - and that can only increase the doubts and risks attached to international lawlessness.

The Major Actors in the Asia Pacific

In looking at the major actors affecting the security of the Asia Pacific region, one has to begin with the role of the United States, simply because the

continued strategic engagement of the United States in the western Pacific will be crucial to maintaining a stable security system in Asia for the foreseeable future, as it has been in the past. The nature and rationale of the United States role in our region have changed often enough, and are changing again with the end of the Cold War. But the important and, I think, enduring value of this role is the reassurance the United States "balancing wheel" provides to regional powers, allowing them to refrain from acquiring military force capabilities of a size that would themselves prove destabilising.

Still, any sensible formulation of policy should be based on an assumption that the United States will not continue to maintain its present level of security activity in the Asia Pacific region - that it will not be the all pervasive stabilizing influence it has been for so long. With the decline in ideological competition, United States attention to the region may become increasingly less concerned with geo-political security and more focused on economic differences with some of its Asian partners. It is likely that congressional pressure on the military budget will, over time, force additional cuts in the United States presence in Asia. Even before Mt Pinatubo, the probabilities were that Clark Field would close. Some cuts have already been made in the US forces committed to Japan and South Korea, as well as the Philippines, but they have been gradual, predictable and implemented so as to allow others to adjust and therefore preserve a stable political environment. It is important that they continue to be carried out in this way.

The military investment of the Soviet Union in the region has grown through the 1970s and 1980s, but mainly in the deployment of army divisions on the border with China, and tactical aircraft in Siberia. The Soviet Pacific fleet, although it does not match - here or elsewhere - United States naval capability, is the largest of the four Soviet fleets. But the Soviet Navy's strategic role traditionally has been to operate as an extension of land-based defences and to support ground force operations. Its capacity for power projection - certainly as far south as Australia - remains quite limited. Generally, the Soviet Union has not been able to turn its more substantial military commitment to Asia to its economic or political advantage. With the partial exceptions of India, and Vietnam, the Soviet Union has had little success in building its influence in any lasting way, and its present parlous economic circumstances will continue to be an impediment to any

improvement of its standing in the region.

Partly as a corollary to these developments with the superpowers the three main resident powers of the Asia Pacific region will continue to loom larger. Japan's defence expenditure, although pegged by public policy at just on one per cent of GNP, is now the third largest in the world. It has been growing annually at the high rate of six per cent in yen terms and considerably more in dollar terms. Nevertheless, Japan alone could not defend itself against an all out attack from the Soviet Union. Its forces are geared to operate in tandem with those of the United States, and the United States-Japan Security Treaty continues to underpin Japanese and North Asian security. Even with all the agonised reappraisal going on since the Gulf, there is no sign at present that Japan's military inclinations extend any further abroad than playing a role in UN peace-keeping operations.

Unlike Japan, China is a nuclear power in its own right, dependent on neither the United States nor the Soviet Union. Its influence in the Asia Pacific region will always be weighty, given its size, economic potential and determination to count for something in the affairs of the world. But despite its internal uncertainties after June 1989 and its willingness defend its claimed borders and perceived prestige, there continues to be no sign that China will become an aggressive power. Its military posture is land-based and essentially defensive, its navy is suited only to coastal operations and its airforce is primarily defensive. At the same time, the modernisation of China's armed forces is continuing, and their reach and effectiveness will grow.

India continues to be the most under-rated of the likely great powers. It already has very significant military capabilities, which make it unquestionably the predominant power in South Asia. That capability has been developed to date for quite legitimate purposes, even if considerations of prestige have also played a part. Its capacity to project power into the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia is considerable, but should be seen against the need to protect a 7 500 kilometre coastline and to guard against possible threats from the north, rather than constituting a direct security threat to Australia. The size and capability of India's forces have created more than a little interest among the countries of South-East Asia, but in all my recent discussions around the region I have heard no-one argue for more than a watching brief in

this respect.

The Overall Security Environment

The security picture in Australia's most immediate neighbourhood, South-East Asia, is relatively favourable. Most of the countries in the region, for all that some have persistent internal problems, are more likely than not to continue down the path of nation building based upon participation in the global economic system and a generally pro-Western foreign policy outlook. Indo-China has been something of an exception, but even here there are ever-growing signs of a more outward-looking economic orientation. Burma remains the country most obstinately resistant to change, but is now being subjected to a degree of pressure even by the ASEAN countries, who now see in its repressive military and bloodied but unbowed population a potentially significant source of regional instability.

With growing prosperity, overall stability and regional cooperation, several countries have begun to look more broadly at their notions of security, especially the importance of maritime areas. What is important about the changes of force structure that flow from this, such as Indonesia's improvement of its naval capabilities, is that they are appropriate and expected, and no more than what Australia has put in place, adjusting capabilities to circumstances. Australia's own defence expenditure has, after all, in recent years been roughly equivalent to that of all the ASEAN countries combined.

The security outlook for the South Pacific is different again. Developments in Papua New Guinea will continue to have a particular significance for Australia's security, requiring a sustained and sensitive Australian policy response. The South Pacific region as a whole is unlikely to pose any major strategic problems for Australia over the next ten years or so. A number of the island nations do confront economic, environmental, cultural and demographic pressures which will place increasing strain on their political systems. But neither of the superpowers, nor any of the major Asian powers, are seeking a substantial role there. And while there is a possibility that we will see over this period, in some of the island nations, a renewal of the political tensions which have been evident over the last few years, few if any

would seem to have broader regional security implications.

Overall, security developments in the Asia Pacific seem likely to confirm the region's multipolar characteristics, characteristics which it possessed even when the adversarial relationship between the superpowers was at its most intense. If those countries with a significant capacity for independent action - including Vietnam, Indonesia and Australia - are added to the greater powers described, the range and variety of interacting and intersecting interests is considerable. Growing economic prosperity means that other countries in the region increasingly have the means to acquire a greater military capability to defend their own interests - old and new, real and perceived.

The Asia Pacific has its share of major neuralgic trouble spots: the issue of Bougainvillean secession in the South Pacific; Cambodia in South-East Asia; competition between India and Pakistan in South Asia; and tension, although abating, on the Korean peninsula. Undefined boundaries in the South China Sea have led to conflicting territorial claims from littoral states over the Paracel and Spratly Islands.

But not all the news is bad. In our region, just as in the world at large, it is increasingly being recognised that seemingly inevitable or intractable conflicts are capable of being addressed by cooperative strategies. We have seen with Cambodia how the efforts of the Cambodian factions themselves, ASEAN, the five permanent members of the Security Council and the other members of wider Paris Conference on Cambodia - not least ourselves - have all played a part in nudging that problem closer to a solution. There is now a concerted effort being made, through "workshops" sponsored by Indonesia, to address the problems of the South China Sea. And there is a much greater momentum evident than was the case two or three years ago toward arms control and disarmament measures, which can only be achieved through cooperative action.

One should not of course see the security of our region solely in military terms, focusing on the rise and fall of powers, great or otherwise, and arms races real or potential. There are other, non-military, threats to security of which our region has a fair share. Some of these, such as problems of maritime passage and seabed boundaries, refugee and population flows are

not new but are still of serious concern to some states. Some other concerns, such as the spread of contagious diseases and the consequences of environmental changes, also impact on national security - although perhaps not so much in terms of the direct threat they pose, but rather in terms of the benefits to security that flow from countries engaging in cooperative efforts to solve such problems.

Australia's Policy Responses: The Multidimensional Approach

It should be clear from my description of the global and regional environment that there is no more immediate threat to the physical integrity of Australia than there was in 1989. A realistic and valid security policy for Australia is not to be built by straying into the by-ways of imaginable although scarcely credible dangers. But, although Australia's security environment might not be threatening, it is complex and fluid, and we can do much to improve and safeguard it. The prescriptions are essentially still those sketched out in the 1989 statement.

We can best shape an effective national security policy not through military capability alone, nor by diplomatic or politico-military means alone. The most effective regional security policy for Australia remains a multidimensional policy, in which all components of Australia's network of relations in the region work together to help shape an environment which is favourable to Australia's security interests.

Trade and investment, for instance, can create substantial and mutually beneficial links. I would not suggest that economic links preclude or necessarily inhibit security tensions. But they create opportunities which, if used imaginatively, can result in significant regional cooperation. The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation process, now well and truly consolidated, notwithstanding its exclusively economic focus, shows how new connections can be built up in the region.

Australia's development assistance programs - to the extent at least that we can maintain credible levels of expenditure - contribute to our national security interests in a variety of ways, reducing the political disaffection caused by economic deprivation and creating economic linkages with and a

degree of respect for Australia. Similarly, Australia can demonstrate its neighbourly credentials, and build further networks of inter-dependence, by helping deal with the various 'non-military threats' to regional security such as environmental degradation, trade in narcotics, population flows and contagious diseases that I mentioned earlier.

We can also significantly enhance our security by private and public efforts in the exchange of people and ideas. People-to-people activity has long been accepted coin in international diplomatic currency, but there are few countries for which the coin has more value than Australia. The cultural gap between Australia and the region, and the image problem with which we are still - often unfairly - dogged, can create real problems for our overall national security. Mutual understanding, like the other strands of this multidimensional approach to security, is no guarantee of peace, but mutual ignorance is a greater risk.

The essential point is that, instead of seeing the region essentially in military terms and acting accordingly, as Australia did for so many years - looking out nervously, behaving defensively and turning anxiously to Britain and the United States for reinforcement - the only possible and sensible course for Australia to take is to engage with our region in the most direct and comprehensive possible way. We have to go on utilising all the dimensions of our external policy - as we have been in recent years - to shape a welcoming regional environment.

Australia's Policy Responses: Military, Politico-Military and Diplomatic Strands

Of course, the more traditional means of safeguarding national security must continue to bulk large in our thinking. Our defence planning assumes - on the basis of geographical necessity rather than any foreseeable political developments - that any attack on Australia must come from or through the north, and Australia, accordingly, is building up its capability to detect, intercept and engage any attacker in the air and sea gap to the north of the continent. It is important to appreciate that this capability - sophisticated and flexible as it is - is relevant not just to the defence of Australian territory but to the security of the region as a whole. Australia's possession of significant

military power contributes to the strategic stability of our neighbouring regions. At the very least, we provide a secure south for South-East Asia, and a secure west for the South Pacific.

Our politico-military capability is also important. There is no reason to be coy about the status conferred by the possession of military power, a status which improves our ability to exercise leverage across many fields and makes us an attractive security partner for our neighbours and our allies. In particular, Australia certainly should not be embarrassed about using its politico-military capability to advance its own and the region's security interests through defence cooperation. A specific example of where our capabilities are very well suited to assist the growing interest of the countries of South-East Asia and the South Pacific is maritime surveillance, particularly as their interest grows in the exploitation and conservation of maritime resources. Again, our involvement in the FPDA is one that manifestly brings benefits to all participants: it is an involvement which might over time evolve to embrace other regional participants, or be capable of at least partial replication elsewhere.

One of the principal benefits of defence cooperation, bilateral or multilateral, with any of the countries in our immediate region is that it helps stake a claim for active Australian participation in the gradually emerging sense of community - of shared strategic and security interests - in South-East Asia. It is just too early to say what sort of regional security concepts might emerge and with what sort of support and participation. The important point for Australia is that we be actively associated with the process.

Regional Security Dialogue

A vigorous debate has already begun - the starting point probably being the July 1990 ASEAN PMC Meeting in Jakarta - on the security future of the wider Asia Pacific region, and it is one in which Australia has been playing a major part. There is a general recognition of the fluidity and dynamism of the Asia Pacific strategic environment - of the diminished authority of some powers and the greater relative authority of others; of the crisscrossing interests of powers in the region; of the dramatic economic growth that is likely to throw up new powers with broader security horizons; and of the

number of trouble-spots throughout the whole of the region where competing interests could be engaged.

The essence of Australia's contribution to this debate is the argument that it is time to think in terms of a cooperative rather than a confrontational approach to regional security. We simply cannot act as if we were in a time warp, with all the verities of the Cold War period still applicable. We need to think in terms of regional security being guaranteed not just by a series of bilateral regional alliances with the United States - from Japan in the north to Australia in the south - although those links would remain a vital component of regional stability. We should aim to build an interlocking web of contacts, dialogue arrangements and cooperative strategies.

One outcome of this kind of web-building process might be the emergence over time of new security structures. For example, narrowly based existing defence cooperation structures like the FPDA could well evolve and expand. But the emphasis at this stage should simply be on dialogue, rather than trying to force the pace in any institutional way. This was the clear consensus at last week's ASEAN PMC in Kuala Lumpur, and it is an approach with which Australia is completely comfortable.

The kind of dialogue to which I am referring is both process and outcome, facilitating progress and at the same time cementing it. Dialogue partners can exchange views on threat perceptions, for example, and in doing so arrive at shared assessments which, optimally, reduce their sensed insecurity and check any trend to competitive arms acquisition. Dialogue in this way itself builds confidence. Among the most important of the dialogue processes presently under way are the ASEAN PMC itself and the conferences and seminars hosted this year in Bali, Manila and Kuala Lumpur, with another soon in Bangkok. An imaginative new specifically focused dialogue process is the workshop series on the South China Sea being sponsored by Indonesia.

Part of the subject matter of a new regional security dialogue, and what I have been emphasizing in a number of my own recent discussions, should be the possibility of specific new confidence building measures. Confidence building measures are basically arrangements designed to produce a sense of assurance and a belief in the trustworthiness of states and actions they undertake. CBMs

aim to reduce or eliminate mutual misunderstandings, suspicions and fears by making security needs and military intentions explicit, by creating processes to defuse situations at an early stage, and generally to create a greater degree of interdependence and mutual confidence in the conduct of nations' affairs.

Much attention has been devoted in recent years, in UN reports to the Secretary-General and in academic studies - and no doubt already at this Conference - to the theme of confidence building. CBMs tend to be listed in three main categories. In the first place there are those dealing with openness and predictability in a military context - for example, publication and communication of military data; clarification and publication of defence doctrines; and prior notification of military activities. Secondly, there are those related to other military matters - for example, exchanges and visits; and the establishment of consultative mechanisms, verification of procedures and dispute settlement mechanisms. The third type of CBMs deal with broader political, economic and social matters - for example formal agreements respecting sovereignty, independence and territorial independence; the normalisation of diplomatic relations; establishment and utilisation of multilateral forums (ASEAN itself is in this sense a CBM); the establishment of economic cooperation mechanisms; and the undertaking of joint economic development projects.

There are a number of specific CBMs which might, even at this early stage of the regional security dialogue process, be considered feasible and desirable in our region. I listed some of them at last week's ASEAN PMC Meeting in Kuala Lumpur:

- . some existing agreements such as those covering incidents at sea between the Soviet Union and the United States, and the Soviet Union and the UK, could be expanded to include at least some other countries, and possibly developed into a multilateral instrument;
- . greater transparency in military arrangements could be achieved through the exchange of data among the major powers of the respective military budgets, doctrines and future forward projections;
- . military exercises could be made less potentially provocative by allowing

representatives of other countries to be present as observers, especially land exercises which, unlike naval exercises in international waters, require permission to be observed. Joint exercises could be increased in frequency;

. measures to prevent the proliferation of nuclear and chemical weapons, and vigorous discouragement of the spread of ballistic missiles and other advanced weapons systems and technologies in the region are obviously important;

. we could seek a cooperative approach to security of sealanes and sealines of communication, with the enhancement of capabilities and maritime surveillance, safety and search and rescue operations; and

. we could seek agreement on a number of environmental security issues, including preservation of reefs, programs for regional seas and coastal areas, forests, satellite monitoring of land use and degradation, oil pollution and hazardous wastes.

It should be apparent how many of these specific ideas fit snugly within the various elements of the multi-dimensional approach to Australia's regional security spelt out in the 1989 Statement, and which I have described again here today. Some of them have a specifically military flavour; others are politico-military or straightforwardly diplomatic; others again - like the environmental CBMs - take one off into areas of intergovernmental activity which have not traditionally been thought of as having any relevance to security at all.

A number of these particular initiatives will take some time to come to fruition, or even to be seriously considered in international forums. But the path that Australia has been taking for some years now in its approach to regional security - and which was described in detail in the 1989 Statement - is very much now the path on which just about every key country in our region, and beyond, that is capable of affecting our security, is now treading with us.

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