



MINISTER FOR DEFENCE

STEPHEN SMITH, MP

QUESTION WITHOUT NOTICE

ASEAN-PLUS DEFENCE MINISTERS' MEETING

19 OCTOBER 2010

I thank the Chief Whip for his question and acknowledge from the outset the role he played in the last Parliament, from 2008, in arguing very strongly that Australia having an association with the ASEAN Defence Ministers was most important and arguing for the outcome that we saw last week, the ASEAN-Plus Defence Ministers Meeting.

This is a most important strategic development for Australia, which works very well to suit our long-term peace and security interests in our own region, the Asia-Pacific. Australia, of course, has been a longstanding friend and supporter and dialogue partner of ASEAN. This is yet another piece of the ASEAN related architecture which serves and suits Australia's interests very well.

In Hanoi last week, in the company of the Chief of Defence Force and the Secretary of the Department we attended, for the first occasion, the so-called ASEAN-Plus Defence Ministers Meeting. The 'plus' includes effectively those countries that will be included in the expanded East Asia Summit: the United States, Japan, China, India, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand and Russia. This puts in the peace and security cooperation, in the stability cooperation and in the military and defence cooperation areas, all of the key players in our region. It puts into the same room at the same time the capacity for Australia to have a conversation about peace and stability and security in our region with all the players there at the same time.

At the end of this year, we hope, at the East Asia Summit, that the proposed expansion of the East Asia Summit by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers will be accepted by the East Asia Summit to see a comparable mechanism occur, at Foreign Ministerial and at Prime Ministerial and Presidential level.

Australia was asked by the Defence Ministers-Plus meeting to jointly, with Malaysia, chair an expert working group on maritime security.

As an island continent, maritime issues and maritime security are of course very important to Australia - in the traditional sense, in terms of freedom of international sea lanes, but also, regrettably, in the modern sense, for example in relation to the recent development of piracy in our general region.

We are very happy to co-chair that expert working group with Malaysia, one of our five-power defence arrangement partners. Of course, the issue of the South China Sea was raised at that meeting, amongst other potential maritime or other territorial disputes, and I repeated, both at the meeting and publicly, Australia's position on that matter. If there are maritime disputes, we want those issues to be resolved amicably and peacefully between the parties concerned, and often there are more than two. We want that resolution to be effected in accordance with international law, the Law of the Sea.

From time to time, of course, these disputes, these issues, do raise tensions and concerns in the region, which is why it is appropriate for these matters to be considered regionally, as they may well be in the future, appropriately, in the ASEAN-Plus Defence Ministers Meeting context.

I also took the opportunity, in the course of that meeting in Hanoi, to have a number of bilateral meetings with my counterparts, including US Secretary of Defense, Mr Gates. We both agreed on the importance of this development in terms of defence ministers meeting. But he also, as I indicated to the House the other day, underlined the importance in a different context of the forthcoming NATO ISAF Lisbon summit on transition so far as security arrangements are concerned in Afghanistan.