



Joint Press Conference With Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs Stephen Smith, and Australian Defense Minister Joel Fitzgibbon

John D. Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State

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FOREIGN MINISTER SMITH: ...with my colleague Joel Fitzgibbon, the Minister for Defense, today's AUSMIN consultations. And very pleased to formally welcome Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Deputy Secretary of State, Ambassador Negroponte. And Joel and I have been very pleased to welcome the Secretary and the Ambassador to Australia, and we've been very pleased to take part in the AUSMIN consultations today, which have been very positive, very productive.

Can I start by making a point that I made when I was in the United States in January? The alliance between Australia and the United States is fundamental to Australia's Defense security and strategic arrangements. It is the bedrock of our security and strategic arrangements. It's fundamental, it's long-term, it's enduring, and it is, of course, indispensable. And so the AUSMIN talks that we've had today have effectively been business as usual, so far as the business of the alliance is concerned. The alliance transcends both governments and administrations in both Australia and the United States.

Now we've obviously had a wide-ranging strategic discussion, both globally, but also regionally. We've touched upon Iraq, where we discussed the implementation of the Rudd Labor government's election commitment to withdraw the Overwatch Battle Group from Iraq, in cooperation with the United States administration and other administrations - in particular, the United Kingdom.

We spoke about the difficult situation in Afghanistan and our long-term enduring commitment to seek to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan, but also to build Afghanistan as a nation. We indicated that so far as Iraq is concerned, we continue to give consideration to a contribution that we can make in a non-military area, whether that's capacity-building, humanitarian assistance, or building a nation state through infrastructure and the like.

And the same is true of Afghanistan, and the Cabinet is currently giving consideration to the capacity-building and the development assistance in respect of both Iraq and Afghanistan.

These days a conversation about Afghanistan also has to include a conversation about Pakistan. And we very much hope that following a relatively peaceable election in Pakistan, that the political parties in Pakistan can now cooperatively form a government to enable democracy to take hold in Pakistan, but to also enable the Pakistan government to begin combating terrorism and extremism in Pakistan.

We had a very good conversation about our own region: about Asia and the Pacific. And we underlined and reinforced the new Australian government's commitment to a greater engagement in the Asia-Pacific. And I detailed some of the conversations I had yesterday in the Solomon Islands.

I also made this point, which the Australian government believes very strongly. That just as Australia's engagement in Asia and the Asia-Pacific is important, so is the engagement of the United States in our region, in Asia, in the Asia-Pacific.

And we completed today's conversation by agreeing to meet again in the United States, hopefully at a comparable time next year, but certainly in the United States next year.

Now my colleague Joel Fitzgibbon will go through some of the Defense matters raised. I will toss now to Secretary of Defense Gates for his opening remarks, I'll then ask Joel to make a few remarks, and then I'll toss to Ambassador Negroponte, and then we'll take your questions. We've probably got all up about twenty minutes. Secretary?

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE GATES: Let me first thank [coughs] Ministers Fitzgibbon and Smith for hosting this ministerial. On behalf of Deputy Secretary of State Negroponte, the United State government, and all the citizens of America, I want to thank the people of Australia for their friendship, not just in recent years, but over many decades.

My first trip abroad as a senior US official in 1982 was to Australia, so it is particularly gratifying to be the most senior US official to call on this new government here in Australia.

Our meetings today proved once again that our friendships endure across generations and across different administrations in both of our governments. The bonds of unity that grew from our common heritage and have been strengthened on battlefields around the world are every bit as strong as they have ever been. We meet at a time where our nations face many uncertainties across the globe. But as Prime Minister Rudd wrote a few years ago, an appreciation of complexity is not a recipe for inertia. Quite the opposite, as you can see from the communique.

We appreciate Australia's principal leadership in the region: in the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, and most recently in East Timor. We also appreciate Australia's global leadership. Our governments will continue to work on ways to advance our shared interests on a number of fronts: the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, fighting terrorism across the globe, countering proliferation, coordinating humanitarian relief and strengthening our ties in many other areas.

Above all it is clear that we agree on both the challenges we must face together and the solutions we must forge together. As has been the case for many years, the United States has no better partner and no stronger ally than Australia. Thank you.

FOREIGN MINISTER SMITH: Thank you, Secretary. Joel?

MINISTER OF DEFENSE FITZGIBBON: Thanks very much, Stephen. I thank the Secretary for his kind remarks. I don't intend to go over the same ground as Stephen, but simply support all those words he's put forward. Like the Foreign Minister, I'm really delighted to have the opportunity, so early in our time in government, to so fully engage in dialogue with our friends, our partners, and our allies. I personally found - I'm sure Stephen also found - the dialogue today highly valuable across a range of foreign relations and Defense issues.

On Defense specifically, we progressed today a number of initiatives which will further develop our cooperation and enhance national security, both here in Australia and, of course, in the United States.

As Stephen indicated I was also pleased to have yet another opportunity to discuss the way forward in Afghanistan and, more specifically, some of the concerns that we've been raising recently about access to NATO documentation and access for Australia into the various forums where future strategy in Afghanistan are likely to be

discussed and I look forward to working with the Secretary and his team in Bucharest in April.

Today we further strengthen the relationship and the friendship and, of course, the reliance. And can I say I was delighted and privileged and honored to be part of it.

FOREIGN MINISTER SMITH: Thanks, Joel. Ambassador?

DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE: Thank you very much, Minister Smith, and thanks to you and Minister Fitzgibbon for your hospitality and for the very useful talks we had today. It's a pleasure to be back in Canberra and to be able to participate in the nineteenth AUSMIN meeting that has taken place since 1985. While this is not the first meeting we've had since the Australian elections - I had the pleasure of meeting Foreign Minister Smith in Washington last month - holding AUSMIN so early in the Rudd Government's tenure underscores the depth and bi-partisan support on both sides for the United States-Australia alliance. The United States will host the next AUSMIN in 2009, which of course will be after our own political transition.

Perhaps you've noticed that political fever has come early to the United States this election year. None of us knows in which direction that fever will break, but we do know the next US administration will take office able to depend on one fixed and firm fact, which is that Australia is an ally on whom we can indeed rely. And that is because our alliance is based on more than a common language or a long history of shared struggles, it is based on bedrock values and a closely shared worldview.

And in fact our talks today were global in scope. We discussed how to promote democracy, development and human rights in places like Burma. We talked about efforts to de-nuclearise [sic] the Korean peninsula through the Six-Party Talks process. We discussed how we can deepen our engagement with Indonesia as a democratic partner and promote prosperity and counter-terrorism throughout South-East Asia. We talked about our cooperation in Iraq and Afghanistan and how to fulfill our commitment to strengthen the rule of law in those countries.

An important area of growth in our alliance is Defense trade. Last year President Bush submitted the US-Australia Treaty on Defense Trade Cooperation to our Senate for ratification. The treaty will create opportunities for technology transfer between our countries that will support the enhanced military cooperation Secretary Gates mentioned, and reap the important economic benefits for our industries.

We covered much more in what was, for me, a stimulating and productive day. I'd like to close by again thanking our Australian counterparts for their hospitality, their counsel and their enduring friendship. Thank you.

FOREIGN MINISTER SMITH: Thanks very much, Ambassador. Just, can I say that the - I should have mentioned earlier - the communique I think has already been distributed, so you'll have that available to you. I see heads nodding.

And can I also indicate that, for the purposes of the meeting, the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mullen, and the Chief of the Defense Force Air Chief Marshal Houston joined us, and we are also joined by Admiral Keating, Commander of the US Pacific Command.

Now, when I was in the United States and did a press conference with the Secretary of State Rice, we had this, I thought a very, very, very nice touch, which is called 'Two plus Two'. This is something you could never bring to Australia, but I'm going to do my best to try and MC things, so I'll toss to my left first and then toss to my right. I'll do our guests first and then the home base journalists second. And we'll try and do it in an orderly fashion. Up the front?

QUESTION: It's Christen Roberts with Reuters. And the question is for our Australian ministers here. The previous administration considered the possibility of a missile Defense system with the United States and Japan. I'm wondering, are you interested in pursuing this, and whether you are concerned at all about the impact it would have on your relationship with China?

MINISTER OF DEFENSE FITZGIBBON: Of course missile Defense is always a matter of conversation within AUSMIN and it's important for us to maintain the confidentiality of those discussions, and I'm not sure that there's anything I can add to that here today.

QUESTION: given the recent US demonstration of their abilities in that arena, with the recent satellite shootdown - has that played any role in your decision-making in that arena?

MINISTER OF DEFENSE FITZGIBBON: All I can say to our American friends, and in particular to Secretary Gates is that, we watched their activity, in terms of bringing down the satellite, with great interest. And can I say, Bob, nice shot.

[LAUGHTER]

FOREIGN MINISTER SMITH: Can I answer the second part of the question by saying that one of the things that Australia was grateful for, and I'm sure this was shared generally in the international community, was that the United States administration in advance let us know what it was proposing to do in terms of bringing down the satellite, let us know what the rationale for that was, to minimize debris and to minimize the chance or potential for toxic materials to get into our own atmosphere.

And I think the sharing of that information was - It was gratefully received, but it was also, I think, very valuable in terms of the international community understanding that particular issue.

Over here? Michelle?

QUESTION: You spoke about Cabinet looking at capacity building for Afghanistan, would this involve troops or would it involve some sort of other aid?

FOREIGN MINISTER SMITH: No, when I talk in terms of capacity building, there I'm referring to, if you like, the non-military aspects. We have no proposal to increase the thousand or so troops that we have in Afghanistan. Joel and the Chief of the Defense Force announced during the week some changes to that configuration, which the Defense Minister may well wish to add to. But when I talk about building capacity, it's in this context.

There are a whole range of areas in the globe where either an international force, which may or may not have Australia's involvement, is required to bring law and order, peace and stability. But it can't be law and order and peace and stability for peace and stability's sake. In very many cases, whether it's the Solomon Islands, East Timor, or Afghanistan, or Iraq, we have to help grow the nation. We have to help nation-build.

So when I talk in terms of capacity for Afghanistan, I'm talking about the capacity of Afghanistan to manage its own affairs, whether that's the training of police officers, whether that's the training of the judiciary, whether that's the training of the bureaucracy. But also humanitarian assistance and then infrastructure: the building of roads, hospitals and schools.

These are the capacity-building things which a nation state needs: the full trappings of democracy, to enable its own citizens to get the best out of what a nation state can provide.

But on the troops matters, whilst there's been a slight change to configuration, it's a substantial contribution in southern Afghanistan in some of the most difficult fighting area, we're not proposing to add to the numbers that we currently have.

Up the front?

QUESTION: This question is for the Australian ministers. Should the United States be concerned that Australia's growing economic ties with China will affect its relationship with the United States? And what concerns to you have about China's increasing military and that effect on the region?

FOREIGN MINISTER SMITH: Well, I think Australia's economic engagement with China is only beaten by the United States' economic engagement with China. We had a very good conversation about China. And from Australia's perspective, if you look at the area to... to the North... and the significant nation states that we have...

The United States - the fundamental bedrock, as I've said of our security, strategic and Defense arrangements through the alliance.

Japan - for many years our closest friend and supporter in the region, with whom we have a long-standing economic partnership and a security and strategic partnership with.

With China - we were one of the first nation states to recognize China thirty-five years ago with a One China Policy and diplomatic relations. And that, that relationship has grown, very strongly economically, largely off the back of minerals and petroleum resources.

And to the West, India - I made the point when I first became Foreign Minister that we need to do more to increase our relationship, to better our relationship with India.

All of those nation states we can have relationships with that don't adversely impact on any of the other relations. It can be, as I've heard the Secretary himself put it, it can be win-win.

So we can have a very good economic relationship with China which doesn't adversely impact upon our relationship with the United States. On the contrary, we encourage the United States to have a good, positive, constructive dialogue with China.

Just as when I was in Japan I encouraged Japan to do the same thing with China, and the same when I've spoken to Indian representatives. We think this can all be win-win.

So far as China is concerned, a couple of weeks ago I met, in Australia, with the Chinese Foreign Minister, Mr Yang. I made the point to him, in the course of our bilaterals, that China, in the course of the modernization of its military, needs to be open and transparent about that. And the more open and transparent it is with individual nation states in a bilateral sense, but also with the international community, then the better understood China's modernization of its military will be.

I think openness and transparency and a constructive dialogue is very important in that context.

QUESTION: Max Blenkin from Australian Associated Press to Secretary Gates. I'm not sure if procurement issues were discussed, but if we made a sufficiently compelling case, would you sell us an F22?

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE GATES: The problem that we have with F22s is that we have a statute in the United States titled 'The Obey Amendment' that precludes the United States from selling F22s to any foreign country. So while we, in principle, have no objection to it, until the statute is changed, we are not able to sell it to any country.

MINISTER OF DEFENSE FITZGIBBON: And can I just add to that, the Secretary and I did have a discussion on this issue, and he was very helpful in guiding me in terms of how I might best approach the United States government on this issue.

Look, the Australian government doesn't have any view about whether the F22 should be or should not be part of the mix, but we do want the opportunity to consider the F22 in the air combat capability review.

And the Secretary was very helpful in pointing out that it's not just the administration we need to approach, it actually the Congress, and the Congressman he made mention of - we've agreed that I should both write to him and to the Congressman he referred to.

QUESTION: ...Sir, rightly or wrongly, the victory the Labor Party here in Australia was viewed in the United States largely as an Australian repudiation of the Howard government being too close to the US. Since Labor has come into government, we've seen a draw down of the troops in Iraq, you've just said you have no intention to sending additional combat troops to Afghanistan... Why should the United States not view this as a chilling in the Defense relationship, in particular between the US and Australia?

FOREIGN MINISTER SMITH: Well, I wouldn't necessarily share your analysis as the reasons why the Howard government was defeated. I know this is, a sort of a, if you like a two-nation crowd, so I won't be too politically pejorative. But if I just make this point, you know, we've seen in recent days that even Cuba believes in generational change. I think the problem for the previous government, there was no generational change. That's the first point.

Secondly, it wasn't so much the relationship between Australia and the United States. As both the Ambassador and I have - and the Secretary - have said, the alliance relationship transcends a Labor or Liberal government here, or a Democrat or Republican administration in the United States. It's served both nations very well for fifty to sixty years. It was forged at the moment of Australia's greatest peril, in the context of World War II.

We took to the last election a specific election commitment to remove, by the middle of this year, our combat troops from Iraq. Because our view was that that was the appropriate disposition of those forces. That was a long-standing election commitment. It was understood by the United States administration. And as I said when I was in the United States, it was effectively taken as read.

And because we have been so clear about that issue for a long period of - a substantial period of time - and also implemented it logistically in full cooperation with the United States, it's essentially been one of those matters that has now passed us by.

When it comes to Afghanistan, I wouldn't be quite so underwhelming about the Australian contribution to Afghanistan. Over a thousand troops, in some of the toughest area - and I make no bones about saying that... that... that there are other nation states whose contribution is not nearly as profound in as nearly hard fighting areas. And in addition to that, we certainly aren't contemplating a draw down, we're not contemplating an increase, but we're also giving consideration to those nation building attributes that I spoke about previously.

And when it comes to Afghanistan, I think it's very clear - both from our conversations today, conversations that Minister Fitzgibbon has had with the Secretary in Edinburgh and in Vilnius, and conversations I had in the United States with the administration - that we are at one in believing that Afghanistan needs to have both a combat or military effort and the international effort, particularly from NATO countries, needs to be greater, but it also needs to have those capacity-building matters that I referred to.

QUESTION: Daniel Flitton from *The Age*. Question for Secretary Gates. There's quite a bit of optimism at the moment about the effects of the Iraq Surge operation, in terms of adding extra security in that country; is there an active consideration of a Surge-style operation for Afghanistan? And will there be calls for further troops from

countries such as Australia for such a deployment?

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE GATES: Well, we've actually, from the American standpoint, have added forces both last year and this year in anticipation for the fighting season. We extended a brigade of the Tenth Mountain division shortly after my first visit to Afghanistan, and then added another brigade in the spring. We've announced in the States that, beginning this spring, approximately 3200 marines will be deployed to Afghanistan for about seven months, at least until early winter. About 2000 of those will engage in combat and about - and the remainder will be engaged, we think, in training the Afghan army and police.

So I think that we have, both last year and this year, dug deeply and tried to make sure that any offensive, in a military sense, was, a NATO offensive, was an offensive on behalf of the Afghan government.

I've been pretty outspoken over the last few weeks about the need for other NATO allies to also dig deep and to meet the needs that have been articulated by the ISAF commander in Afghanistan.

One thing I want to be clear on: individual countries have met the individual commitments that they have made in Afghanistan. The commitment that has not been fulfilled is the commitment made by the leaders of the alliance to provide the ISAF commander with what he needed to be successful.

So it is this broader requirement that the leaders of NATO agreed to that has not been met, and where I have been hopeful that other members of the alliance can find the wherewithal and the political will to provide additional forces.

I think that there have been some plus-ups on the part of some of our allies. We hope that others will step up. My assumption is that if someone is going to make a dramatic announcement of an increase or a change in their posture in Afghanistan they're likely to take advantage of the Bucharest summit to do that. So we will be looking forward with great anticipation to that meeting.

FOREIGN MINISTER SMITH: Now, we're getting tight on time, but I promised a gentleman in the front a question.

QUESTION: Dimitri Sevastopoulo of Financial Times. Just to get back to the F22, can you tell me where is the threat to Australia that would require you to have an F22? You said you were interested in at least being able to consider... Is it China? And if not, who?

MINISTER OF DEFENSE FITZGIBBON: Oh look, I don't think it's appropriate for me to be talking threat, but I'll just make one simple point. There is no question, and there is no challenge to this proposition, that the key to Australia's Defenses is to maintain the air superiority we enjoy to our North. And on that basis we have to make absolutely sure we make the correct decisions as we plan for both the near- and long-term future.

That's why the new Australian government are concerned about some of the decisions made by the former government which have, which seem to have lacked strategic guidance, in other words had shades of ad-hoc about them. There's been a lot of criticism about some of those decisions, so we made a commitment pre-election to hold a capability review, we are currently undertaking. It will be complete by the end of April, and of course the results of that capability review will feed into the white paper that we'll develop this year, which I announced yesterday.

QUESTION: [Inaudible] ...not an interest in the F22 a signal to China that you are concerned about them? Because the aircraft is primarily an air-to-air superiority aircraft?

MINISTER OF DEFENSE FITZGIBBON: No. It's simply, it simply expresses the Australian government's determination to ensure that when we make these very important decisions, that every area of capability available is part of that mix.

FOREIGN MINISTER SMITH: Okay, I'm going to do a great Australian tradition, it's called 'We're out of time, we're gonna pull stumps'. Thanks very much, everyone. Thank you. Thanks.

[APPLAUSE].

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