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AUSTRALIA

Richard Marles, Deputy Prime Minister; Minister for Defence, Australia

Well, can I thank the International Institute for Strategic Studies for hosting this valuable event, and can I thank you, John, not just for this event today but for your stewardship of the International Institute for Strategic Studies for more than three decades. And can I thank my good friend, Dr Eng Hen Ng, the Defence Minister of Singapore, and, through Eng, all the government of Singapore for hosting us in such a fantastic way in what is a truly remarkable country.

This time last year, I was here at the Shangri-La Dialogue, for the first time, as Australia's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence. It was just three weeks after the Australian Labor government had won the election and my speech was the government's first national-security address. I spoke about Australia taking its place in the world with confidence and renewed commitment to responsible, nuanced and effective statecraft, a determination to harness all arms of national power to not only ensure Australia's security but, crucially, to help shepherd our Indo-Pacific region through a profound period of strategic change and contest. I spoke about how Australia would invest more in our abiding ties with our Pacific neighbours, how we would revitalise our historically deep engagement with Southeast Asia, with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) at its core.

And importantly, my address came five months after Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, a brutal war that has meant we cannot take the security and prosperity of our region for granted. Some still dismiss Putin's war with a neighbouring state as an issue for Europe. Bizarrely, the Kremlin tries to depict its violent aggression against Ukraine as solidarity with developing countries against an alleged 'neo-colonialism' by the West.

But the simple truth is that a powerful state is using military force to impose its will upon a less powerful state, contrary to all international law and the UN Charter, which, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia has a special and a particular responsibility to uphold. The question that haunted me then and still does, a year on, is whether the war in Ukraine is a terminal spasm of Europe's imperial past, as one astute commentator noted, or a forewarning of the contest to come in a post-hegemonic world where states see opportunity to build a new order according to their preferences, including, if necessary, by military aggression. Putin clearly saw such an opportunity and determined that he would seize it.

Australia believes it is vitally important for our collective future that the world concludes from Ukraine's inspiring resistance that Putin's gambit failed and that the costs of military aggression far outweighed any perceived benefit. But the world will not arrive at this conclusion without effort and investment from us all. Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents a broader failure of the global system to deter the use of force in pursuit of strategic goals, and we must not allow this to become a dangerous new precedent for our own region.

A year ago, I observed that China is engaging in the largest conventional military build-up that the world has seen since the end of the Second World War, and this build-up is happening without an explanation of a strategic purpose. China is not providing our region or the world with any strategic reassurance.

To be clear, we value a productive relationship with China, and we have sought to stabilise this relationship after a difficult period. Indeed, that process began right here last year with my meeting with former Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe. Since then, both our foreign and trade ministers have visited China, and Prime Minister Albanese and President Xi met last November. Just yesterday, I met with my counterpart, General Li Shangfu, and, importantly, our defence dialogue with China has recommenced. These are important steps forward and we acknowledge that these are steps which China and Australia have taken together.

But it is also important that transparency and strategic intent and the purpose of military growth characterise the way nations operate in the Indo-Pacific and, for that matter, the world. With this in mind, last year, I underlined that the purpose of Australia's investment in new defence capability, including through AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom and United States), was a prudent and a necessary contribution to a sustainable and inclusive balance of power that both deterred conflicts, but also reassured states that they never needed to resort to force.

Australia's Defence Strategic Review (DSR), delivered in April, follows through on the commitments that I made a year ago. What the DSR, as it is known, seeks to do is to put in place a new strategic posture for Australia. At its core, the DSR recognises we must make investments in our defence capabilities now to defend Australia, to deter through denial any attempt to project force against Australia, and to protect Australia's economic connection to our region and to the world.

We also recognise that we must be able to contribute with our partners to the collective security of the Indo-Pacific and the maintenance of the global and regional rules-based order. Indeed, these are now articulated tasks of Australia's Defence Force. Our government views Australia playing its part in maintaining and building regional peace as being at the heart of why we have a defence force.

Building on the work we have undertaken over the past 12 months, next year the Australian government will release our inaugural National Defence Strategy, which we have committed to updating biannually. In developing this strategy, we will continue to be guided by these principles. All of us here know we live in an interdependent world and that to address the challenges we face we must work together. As Singapore's Prime Minister Lee set out at the Boao Forum in March, we need to reinforce the resilience of the region by building a 'dense mesh of cooperation and interdependence'.

But we also know that interdependence can be weaponised for strategic leverage, and interdependence does not preclude, as once supposed, the devastating prospect of conflict between trading partners. That is why the subject for this session is so important. We must develop models for cooperative security that do not rely on past assumption and which can adapt to changing strategic circumstances.

In delivering the keynote address, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese made clear our region is not a 'backdrop for the ambition of others' and that the future of the region is not 'somehow a foregone conclusion'. We have our own agency in building our own security. For Australia, the first model for cooperative security is ASEAN and its related East Asia Summit and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus architecture. No other mechanism brings together the critical group of states that are prerequisite for any durable strategic equilibrium in our region. And although Australia is not a member, we will always invest in the core meaning and efficacy of ASEAN centrality.

ASEAN is a necessary condition for regional security, but the strategic challenges we now face mean that smaller groupings can help complement the central architecture of ASEAN. Regional states, including Australia, can play an important role through smaller groups of countries committed to larger goals. In fact, we have been doing this for a long time. The Five Power Defence Arrangements have been contributing to regional security since 1971. For Australia, these groupings are aimed at achieving specific objectives.

AUKUS is a capability and technology partnership. It will not have, and nor will it seek, the normative functions that ASEAN rightly exercises. The Quad is another model for cooperation that is focused on practical engagement beyond defence. Meeting in Japan two weeks ago, Quad leaders reaffirmed their commitment to a region where all countries, large and small, have the agency to decide their future and to shape our region.

Some would seek to frame groupings like AUKUS and the Quad as 'blocism' which somehow diminish ASEAN. To the contrary, they show how small groups of countries can work together in support of

principles and objectives we all hold so dear. The challenge is to ensure these models of cooperation are not competitive with ASEAN but rather complementary. And this idea is at the heart of Australia's regional engagement.

The Albanese government has taken major steps in the last 12 months when it comes to getting Australia's hard-power equation right. In doing so, Australia's defence strategy is contributing to our regional security and prosperity. Our government, led by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, myself and our Foreign Minister Penny Wong, has also made engaging with you all, our regional friends and partners, a priority. In announcing the AUKUS nuclear-powered-submarine deal, we made more than 60 calls to regional and other world leaders, and in the days leading up to and following the Defence Strategic Review we made similar calls, while our diplomatic network was active in briefing counterparts across the globe. While it is for individual countries to judge how successful that effort was, what must be completely clear to all is that the intent on our part is to be as transparent as possible about what we are doing, the way we are doing it and why, because a secure region requires balance, and balance requires transparency.

So, while we will make difficult decisions to enhance our hard power, this will be underlined by diplomacy, which is why this year's Dialogue and those following are so important not just to Australia's strategic posture but that of our region. The Shangri-La Dialogue is diplomacy at its best. Diplomacy is not measured by the volume with which friends agree. Rather, its measure is in how tensions are navigated. Substantive discussion always matters, because we live in an age where the world needs diplomatic excellence. For Australia, diplomacy will always be the front line of our engagement with the world, and we will always seek to use diplomacy to create pathways for peace.

Thank you for having me.

Dr John Chipman, Director-General and Chief Executive, IISS

Thank you, Richard, firstly, for your kind words about me and the Shangri-La Dialogue, but, importantly, for the three key points that I noted down: that methods of security cooperation need to be developed that do not rely on past assumptions; secondly, that smaller groupings can help to complement the central architecture of ASEAN; and thirdly, if I may put it this way, another vital epigrammatic point, that a secure region requires balance and balance requires transparency. Thank you for that strategic thought.