Extracts from a speech delivered by Rt Hon Des Browne MP, UK Secretary of State for Defence - Modes of Security Coorperation: Confidence-Building, Partnerships and Alliances on 1 June 2008 at the 7th IISS Asian Security Summit, Shangri-La dialouge, Singapore

The UK has much history in this region and we retain important links with many countries, from India all the way to New Zealand, and still retain a sovereign foothold in the British Indian Ocean Territory. With some diffidence, I am going to offer a British perspective on why we see the Asia-Pacific region as so significant, I will look at some of the experiences and lessons that we in the UK have had, and I will comment on the emerging security architecture here.

Our experience of multilateral security cooperation has not always been perfect. Indeed, one of the British government's key foreign policy objectives is to support, reform and strengthen international institutions. This is not easy because of the vested interests and the different perspectives that come into play, but we have a clear objective of improving how such institutions work to meet the new broad challenges that we all face, not least in security.

This region is of real significance to the world and growing evermore so for many reasons, amongst them is that this region contains the world's fastest-growing economies. By 2020, three of the world's top five economies will be in Asia. As Senator Lieberman reminded us yesterday, there are over 1.5bn people living in democracies here, including the world's largest Muslim democracy. Indeed, the countries with three of the four largest populations are in this region. However, the region is also characterised, as we have heard, by its diversity in its politics, ethnicity and religion, and particularly in terms of the speed of change of economic growth and development. It also has diverse militaries and contrasting roles for defence within societies.

How does such a diverse and fast-moving region address its security challenges? This region's security architecture has long been characterised by multiple security and defence arrangements built for specific purposes with numerous strong bilateral relationships. For the UK, our key relationship has been through the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA).

Since 1971, together with our partners from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia, we have developed a multilateral military relationship that has built mutual confidence and helped maintain stability. For the UK, this is a very visible symbol of our continuing commitment to the region. As some have been discussing in detail in this conference over the last two days, we need to understand the security issues in the region in order to appreciate what the effective security architecture needs to look like. The challenges are wide-ranging, from global concerns on climate change and resource scarcity to managing trans-national terrorism and natural disasters so recently brought home to us all.

There remain some territorial issues between neighbours, concerns about nuclear management, the risk of fragile states, and issues of maritime security while a third of global

trade passes through this region's waters. These challenges are not just significant for the region but have global impact. The geopolitical landscape of Asia-Pacific is changing and, as Prime Minister Lee set out so clearly in his opening address, that change affects all of us.

In response, this dialogue is asking the right questions: how can emerging powers be folded into regional security architecture and what is the best way to design and change that security architecture? Where does our thinking take us? This weekend, it seems to me that a clear consensus has emerged about the need for new security architecture based on multilateral engagement throughout the region. You will need to develop structures that meet the diversity of your region's challenges; it is not for me to prescribe the ultimate shape of those structures but it may be valuable for you to learn some lessons from the European experience in developing multilateral institutions.

The UK's experience in Europe has been far from simple. The EU developed out of the ashes of the Second World War and, similar to ASEAN, has its roots in developing links through trade agreements. Separately, we also developed a formal defence structure, NATO, to bind US and Canadian support to protect Europe in the Cold War. The EU has developed over the past 50 years from its trade and economic origins to much more complex ideals of integration. With confidence and time came an aspiration to attain greater independent collective security. This saw Europe post-Cold War with two overlapping but independent bodies – both had an interest in European security but they were not particularly coherent.

Bosnia in the 1990s exposed this incoherence. Falling outside what NATO then regarded as its geographical remit, there was no consensus in NATO to act. The EU had experience of cooperation on economic issues and it had high political ideals and aspirations, but it did not have the structure or the processes to respond to a crisis in its own region. Despite 35 years of political dialogue and cooperation we could not act effectively when we needed to and it was a painful lesson. By the end of the 1990s, both NATO and the EU had involved in their form and had very different ideas of their roles compared to the start of the decade. I believe there are comparisons here for Asia-Pacific in terms of the difficulty of expecting regional forums to achieve a common approach in times of crisis.

Let me make another and further observation from Europe on the expansion of regional forums and bodies. Bodies to which the UK belongs are experiencing significant expansion, including both NATO and the EU. NATO has grown to 26 members in recent years. It was not possible to envisage 15 years ago that we would be operating in Afghanistan alongside the Czech Republic, Romania and Estonia. As the members of NATO and the EU increase, the diversity of nations involved increases and there is no doubt that decision making becomes harder.

Over the weekend, a number of people have made reference to the difficulty a pan-Asian security forum would face given the large number of nations involved. I have no doubt that that will be a major challenge but there are examples globally which show successful cooperation amongst large groups of countries. For instance, lessons may be drawn from our experience of our current operations in Afghanistan, in particular in Regional Command South where I was last week.

Moving back to Asia-Pacific, this is a region where the security architecture is still maturing and has come a long way in the last ten to 15 years. Confidence building through multilateral dialogue has firm roots in the region, springing from the framework or hub of ASEAN. ASEAN, which celebrated its fortieth anniversary last year, has been remarkably successful in prevent conflicts between its members. You should be very proud of that achievement and I trust that ASEAN will continue to be such a success. The original membership has evolved, as with the EU, and the purpose of the confidence building through trade has now broadened to include defence. The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) commenced in 2006, a new security cooperation charter is expected in the next year, and there is a goal of an ASEAN Security Community by 2015.

Focused on South East Asia, ASEAN has been a core around which new structures have developed. The challenge ahead is building these forums to forge rules-based organisations with effective decision-making processes that include the necessary players with the willingness to act when necessary. There are of course obstacles to progress in this area; the larger a regional body, the greater the confidence and inclusivity it will bring, but this may come at the cost of process, consensus and effect.

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) may actually struggle to solve real issues. We do, however, have some very positive examples of how the Asia-Pacific region is already tackling its own issues through what Minister Teo described as functional groups to meet bespoke challenges. The Malacca Strait Patrols (MSP) is a remarkable example of practical security cooperation on the ground between Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and now Thailand to great effect.

After the tsunami, the region, with external partners, delivered an urgent practical response. Nations, either individually or in multilateral groupings, have intervened on humanitarian ground in failing states and, at a political level, the Six Party Talks over North Korea have had a real security impact on the region. The lessons of inclusivity have not been lost on the region. Holistic dialogue in the Asia-Pacific region can only be the right path and the evolving security architecture will only grow and strengthen through openness and inclusivity.

A key value of these forums is in the network of relationships that are established within government and the improved understanding of each other for when times are right. This Shangri-La dialogue is another example of where this is achieved. How the structures and processes in the Asia-Pacific region evolve will be quite different from Europe but the platforms that already exist, the consultative bodies based on the ASEAN core and the ARF, are the right way to take this forward.

What is clear is that you will continue to break new ground as they do evolve. The ultimate decisions in these very challenging questions will be for countries of the region but I can assure you that the UK will remain fully engaged and ready to play its full part in supporting you on that road.