

Militarising Australia: Talisman Sabre and the US Military Build Up

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Deemed the Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations strategy, the military method is a US Marine special, still spanking new, featuring “the amphibious landing of troops on islands for seizure and capture as part of a forward projection of sea and airpower aimed at the mainland.”

That particular [description](#) comes from Bevan Ramsden, an active member of the coordinating committee of IPAN, the Independent and Peaceful Australia Network. IPAN has been decidedly concerned about what it sees, rightly, as an enthusiastic, boisterous build-up of US military forces primarily in the Northern Territory and ambling across the continent and along the shorelines.

The Australian Defence Department [adds](#) to Ramsden’s overview in a discussion of Talisman Sabre, a joint US-Australian military exercise conducted since 2007.

“TS19 will be the eighth iteration of the exercise and consists of a Field Training Exercise incorporating force preparation (logistic) activities, amphibious landings, land force manoeuvre, urban operations, air operations, maritime operations and Special Forces activities.”

On this occasion, Talisman Sabre had a new addition: Japan’s 1st Amphibious Rapid Deployment Regiment, which joined in beach landings alongside Australian, US and British forces on July 16. Australian commander Major General Justin “Jake” Ellwood was notably [impressed](#) by the showing. And a sight it proved to be: some 34,000 troops, 200 planes and 60 naval vessels.

What the Australian Defence Force cannot shy away from is that it remains, ultimately, an annex of the US military machine. In a [report](#) from the Headquarters, Joint Operations Command (HQJOC) from April, an acknowledgement is made that TS19, “is focused on enhancing the readiness and interoperability of ADF Defence elements and exposing participants to a wide spectrum of military capabilities and training experiences.” It is presumed, and never challenged, that such exercises are “in support of Australia’s national interests” begging the question whether any state should ever be so utterly interoperable with foreign military forces.

The US imperium was keen, using Australian facilities, to test the EABO in scenarios which envisage a concept of island seizure and, in the [words](#) of the official website of the US Marines, “distribute lethality by providing land-based options for increasing the number of sensors and shooters beyond the upper limit imposed by the quantity of seagoing platforms

available.” The integration of the Marines into the broader operations of the US Navy is an essential feature of this move. This would, in turn, deny access to enemy vessels and aircraft, making the target of this clear: any power keen to challenge US power in the Pacific. As James Lacey, who teaches at the Marine Corps War College [suggests](#),

“the Marines will help ensure that the US Navy retains its freedom of manoeuvre throughout the Pacific, while curtailing China’s ability to get much beyond its littorals.”

What a lovely future confrontation this promises to be.

The TS19 show was also a display of military plumage and provocation. US Marine Colonel Matthew Sieber [made](#) the aim of it clear:

“to walk away having strengthened that relationship [between participants] and to demonstrate to our would-be partners or adversaries the strength of that alliance.”

The scale of TS19 has proven hefty, comprising whole swathes of the country. An important feature of this is not to frighten the locals, who might be put off by the sheer scale of it all. Do not, for instance, give the impression they are living under the cloud of occupation.

“Welcome,” [comes](#) the jolly opening to the Australian Defence Department’s information site, where “you will learn about TS19, the importance of the exercise to preparing out military, how we involve the community and protect the environment.”

The Defence Department leaves [us this impression](#) of movement and deployment across the country, and even then, struggles to make the monster innocuous:

“Large convoys will be on the roads from June to August 2019 and includes Australian, US and New Zealand military vehicles travelling from across Australia and converging at Rockhampton and Shoalwater Bay Area.”

To reassure environmental activists and residents, TS19 emphasises a lack of “live fire activities”, something seen as a marked improvement. In other words, no underwater detonations or demolitions, naval gunnery and aerial bombardment; in place of that, dummy ammunition would be used, with added pyrotechnics to give effect. But as Friends of the Earth Australia [noted in May](#), this would not be the case at Shoalwater Bay, nor various lead-up or follow on activities. These “are not assessed as part of Talisman Sabre because they fall outside of the official exercise dates.” Hair splitting operatives will eventually get to you.

Even since Talisman Sabre became a regular feature of joint Australian-US operations, a nervousness among activist circles has grown. What, for instance, are the neighbours to think about such displays of force? The Chinese People’s Liberation Army, for instance, was very [keen to monitor](#) TS19 activities with a general intelligence vessel, known as the Type 815. This was a repeat performance from 2017, when a Type 815 AGI also kept an eye on

the Talisman Sabre exercises.

More broadly speaking, protests against the US military juggernaut Down Under remain skimpy, with efforts of resistance confined to conferences intended to raise awareness. The latest word from Washington is a [promise](#) to build more than a quarter of a billion dollars-worth of naval facilities in Darwin and its environs, a move that delights more than alarms. In 2015, for instance, a solitary stand [was made](#) by Justin Tutty off Lee Point, Darwin, a modest effort that led to his arrest. Two other protestors made their way to the Shoalwater Bay live-firing range in a disruptive effort. This year, IPAN intends holding a national public [conference](#) in Darwin from August 2 to 4 with the theme “Australia at the Crossroads: Time for an independent foreign policy.” It promises few converts, given the continuing presence of the faithful at such gatherings.

More common, and creepily voyeuristic, is the spectator element of such exercises, the weak-at-the-knee individuals aroused by displays of power. Ready your deckchairs and chilled chardonnay and observe the proceedings unfold. That, at least, is how the owners of beach land at Stanage Bay, Ivonne and Fred Burns, saw it. In the [words](#) of Ivonne Burns, “It’s incredible just to watch it all... to see it all happening before your eyes, in your own backyard.” Or not, if Washington’s adventurism gets out of hand, leaving Australia with more than just a bloody nose.

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Featured image: An Australian M1 Abrams tank during Exercise Talisman Sabre 2015 (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Jordan Talbot)

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