

Talisman Sabre . . . or a case of sabre rattling?

Talisman Sabre (TS) is a series of major joint US /Australian military exercises conducted every two years. These exercises are designed “to ensure preparedness for any future deployments, and the continued readiness to protect and support Australia and its national interests, and to ensure Australian and US Forces can work together safely and efficiently”.¹

However there are serious concerns about the exercises and their impact on the threats we face.

Talisman Sabre 2009: what happens, where, when?

From 6–25 July 2009, approximately 15,000 US and up to 8000 Australian troops will take part in exercises at several locations, primarily in Queensland and the Northern Territory. The major location is the Shoalwater Bay Military Training Area, near Rockhampton in central Queensland.

The exercises include land, sea and air combat. They will involve approximately 1650 armoured and other vehicles, live fire exercises, infantry manoeuvres, approximately 50 aircraft, and many naval vessels, including a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier and a nuclear-powered submarine.



Talisman Sabre 2005: Department of Defence photo

By contrast, the Defence Department claims that Talisman Sabre — with its 23,000 troops, 1650 heavy vehicles and bombings — will leave “no footprint”, and that all disturbances will be rehabilitated.³ Such a claim stretches credibility.

The naval use of sonar is a particular risk for marine mammals. In 2007, the US Navy claimed an exemption from the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and the right to conduct whatever tests it chose.⁴

Risk to the environment

Shoalwater Bay Military Training Area is a Commonwealth Heritage listed region adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef. Its heritage listing refers to its “national importance to . . . ecological and biological processes of the coastal and coastal hinterland environment”.

The area covers Ramsar listed wetlands and tidal mudflats, with a large variety of plants and animals, including threatened species. Several species of turtles, a large dugong population and many different fish and marine mammals are found there.

Such is the ecological importance of Shoalwater Bay that Minister for the Environment Peter Garrett rejected a proposal for a rail line and coal port there, in 2008, on environmental grounds.²

The greenhouse impact

Heavy military vehicles use extremely large quantities of fossil fuel: Australia’s military forces use approximately 420 million litres of fuels annually.⁵

The Government has not disclosed how much fuel will be used at TS “because of the potential to reveal valuable intelligence information about the preparedness of the participating forces”.⁶

Regardless of the reason for such secrecy, the reality remains that war and preparations for war release large quantities of greenhouse gases. Climate change, in turn, is likely to lead to increased armed conflict.



More impacts of the Talisman Sabre military exercises

The economic impact

The 2009 TS exercises have been officially costed at around \$48 million, in addition to ongoing ADF personnel and equipment costs for the duration.⁷

With “many planning uncertainties” noted, it is possible that the final cost will be significantly higher.

Risk of nuclear accident or terrorist attack

Every nuclear reactor, including those that power US Naval vessels, carries a risk of accident or sabotage. Although the risk is generally low, the consequences of such an event could be enormous, especially with a terrorist attack on a ship's reactor.

While nuclear accident emergency plans exist, the history of the nuclear accidents that have occurred globally is that there is often confusion on the part of authorities as to how to respond, and an automatic reassurance that any danger has been contained.

- **See MAPW's fact sheet *Nuclear Ship Visits to Australia* for more information on these risks.**

References:

1. Department of Defence.
<http://www.talismansaber09.co.au/faqs.html>
2. <http://www.petergarrett.com.au/614.aspx>
3. Department of Defence.
<http://www.talismansaber09.co.au/faqs.html>
4. See Senate Estimates 11/06/2009, for more detail on the RAN use of sonar.
5. Senate Estimates, 25/02/2009
6. Senate Estimates, 8/04/2009
7. Senate Estimates, 25/02/2009

Strengthening the alliance . . .

Talisman Sabre, and other US–Australian joint military exercises, are designed to strengthen the alliance between the two nations. However the degree to which such strengthening has the potential to reduce, rather than enhance, our security is of increasing concern.

Australia's role as a close and obedient ally of the USA, a nation that has engaged in illegal warfare, has helped to undermine the essential role of international law in preventing armed conflict. In addition to the illegal and destabilising invasion of Iraq, Australia remains mired with our ally in a war in Afghanistan that has no end in sight, no exit strategy and an extremely heavy civilian toll.

Of further concern is Australia's quiet compliance with US nuclear weapons policies. While no nuclear weapons will be included in the TS exercises, Australia still accepts without question the “neither confirm nor deny” policy, under which we do not know whether weapons of mass destruction enter our ports on visiting US warships.

. . . and our reliance on warfare

Preparations for warfare divert enormous human, technological and natural resources. They also divert our attention from finding peaceful solutions to the threats we face, and undermine efforts to this end. The greater our military might, the more we rely on it for “security”.

Genuine security can be achieved only by regional and global cooperation, and the building of goodwill between nations.

Talisman Sabre: ignoring the real threats

The 2009 Defence White Paper stated that there is no major military threat to Australia: “Australia will most likely remain, by virtue of our geo-strategic location, a secure country over the period to 2030”.

By contrast, the threats posed by climate change, environmental degradation, resource depletion, weapons of mass destruction (especially nuclear weapons), and crippling poverty are very real, and are already increasing tensions globally or regionally. War and its preparation make all of these problems worse.

Talisman Sabre is addressing threats that do not exist, while aggravating those that are rapidly advancing.

