

# US-Australian military exercise rehearses for gunboat diplomacy in the Pacific

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10 May 2001

Tandem Thrust 2001, a major US-Australian military exercise, is now underway in Shoalwater Bay, the Australian military's training area near the north Queensland town of Rockhampton. The character and scenario of the exercise highlight the preparations being made by the US and Australia for colonial-style invasions in the Pacific.

The primary aim of Tandem Thrust is to rehearse the integration of significant portions of the Australian navy, airforce and army under the command of the US Seventh Fleet. The “pre-scripted events and assumptions” are that the US and Australian navies rapidly combine together to conduct an overwhelming “force projection” somewhere in the Pacific. The target nation is assumed to have a relatively well-equipped, conventional military. The objective of the intervention is to wipe out its airforce, establish control over strategic shipping lanes and deploy ground forces to secure key facilities and evacuate civilians.

At least 15,000 American, 12,000 Australian and some 1,000 Canadian military personnel are taking part, making it the largest combined nations' military exercise in the region. The US Navy is providing the aircraft carrier *Kitty Hawk*, with some 80 aircraft on board, the amphibious assault ship *Essex* carrying a 1,700 strong marine expeditionary unit and the state-of-the-art command ship of the Seventh Fleet, the *Blue Ridge*. Accompanying them are two Aegis guided missile cruisers, a destroyer, a nuclear submarine, as well as refueling ships, heavy equipment transports and support vessels.

A large proportion of the Australian navy has been assigned to Tandem Thrust—eight warships, a new Collins class submarine and 12 support ships. Heading the Australian naval contingent are its two new troop transports, each carrying 450 troops drawn from two

army brigades. Hundreds of aircraft will take part, including US airforce F-15 fighters and B-52 bombers, Australian F-111 and F/A-18 fighter bombers, troop transports and helicopters and, in its first operational test, the unmanned US spy plane, Global Hawk.

The “enemy” is being provided by Canadian, Australian and US warships and jet fighters and a motorised Australian army brigade.

The war-games began last week with the assembly of the combined naval flotilla. From May 12-24, “free-play war-fighting” will take place, with the US-Australian task force seeking to destroy the opposing force. Operations included will be a parachute drop of special forces and paratroopers behind enemy lines, a marine amphibious landing to secure a beach-head and the disembarkment from sea of troops and equipment. The exercise will conclude with six days of live-firing tests, during which a decommissioned US warship will be sunk off the Australian coast.

Tandem Thrust was first staged in 1992, in the aftermath of the Gulf War against Iraq, as an annual US-only exercise to practice joint operations involving the different arms of the military based in the Pacific—naval units, marines, army and air force. An Australian ship took part in 1995 in an observer capacity. A decision was subsequently made to transform Tandem Thrust into a combined US-Australian exercise, staged every two years. In 1997 it took place in Shoalwater Bay and in 1999, on the US colony of Guam. Each time, the scenario has explicitly involved an intervention into another country.

By contrast, major Australian training operations in the late 1980s and early 1990s were based around combating a “low-level”, or guerilla-type, enemy force that had landed on Australian territory. Such training flowed from the limited geo-political role assigned to

the military. The mass opposition that developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s to Australia's participation in the Vietnam War left a legacy of public sentiment against involvement in any future US-led wars. While the ANZUS treaty with the US formed the cornerstone of defence policy, Australian imperialism increasingly relied upon regional alliances and ties to represent its strategic and economic interests. In 1995, Australia signed a military pact with the Indonesian regime of Suharto without consulting its US ally.

Vast changes in recent years, particularly since the Asian economic crisis of 1997-98, have shattered this perspective. South Pacific states such as Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji are on the brink of collapse, both economically and politically. Indonesia and the Philippines are marked by unstable central governments, explosive social tensions and growing ethnic and religious conflicts that are disrupting the economic exploitation of the archipelagos. Malaysia shows signs of descending into a similar state.

In this climate, the Australian government has lurched toward a policy of aggressive intervention to defend its interests in the region. In 1999, to ensure that the country retained its stake over oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea, the government dispatched 5,000 troops to occupy East Timor following the collapse of Indonesian control. The intervention saw the reassertion of the centrality of the US alliance. The Australian military's ability to conduct such an operation ultimately hinged upon the technical and logistical assistance of the US navy and airforce.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard summed up the thinking of his government when he described Australia in late 1999 as America's "deputy-sheriff" in the Pacific.

The government's recent *Defence 2000* white paper, issued last December, called for the re-fashioning of the military as a mobile, interventionist force, capable of carrying out two Timor-style operations simultaneously. The paper emphasised the importance of the US alliance and the ability to access US military technology and support.

American political and military leaders have stressed the price Australia will be called upon to pay for such US assistance. Last November, US Pacific Commander, Admiral Dennis Blair, implied the

country would be expected to play an active military role in any American conflict with China over Taiwan. Moreover, Secretary of State Colin Powell declared in February that the new Bush administration expected Australia to "play the leading role" in protecting the interests of the major powers in Indonesia.

Tandem Thrust embodies the two aspects of Australian military policy outlined in the *Defence 2000* paper. While training its forces and testing its equipment for operations in pursuit of its own immediate regional aspirations, Canberra is signalling it will function as the junior partner of the United States in potentially larger scale conflicts.



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