

US Marines' deaths highlight secretive military exercises in Australia

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The catastrophic crash of a US military plane, which killed three American Marines on Sunday and injured 20 more, has underscored the conduct of extensive and almost continuous military exercises in northern Australia.

The Osprey, a tiltrotor transport aircraft, favoured because of its versatile takeoff and landing capabilities, crashed on Melville Island, around 100 kilometres north of Darwin, the capital of Australia's Northern Territory.

The governments involved, in Australia and the US, have claimed that the causes of the crash remain unknown. There have been several accidents involving Ospreys over recent years, raising speculation of a mechanical fault.

The official statements and almost all the media coverage have said the Marines were engaged in "a routine training exercise." What that entailed has been left entirely unelaborated.

In fact, it appears that the Marines were participating in Predators Run, annual military exercises involving the US and Australian militaries, together with contingents from Indonesia, the Philippines and East Timor.

The general downplaying of the exercises was contradicted by an article in the Murdoch-owned *Australian*. In passing and without further comment, it described Predators Run as "one of the biggest multilateral combat simulations undertaken in the Territory."

Unusually, the Defence Department did not issue a press release promoting the exercise before it began, and there was virtually no coverage in the corporate media. The one exception was an article in the *Northern Territory News*, which gave some indication of the scale and focus of Predators Run.

The article said the operations would involve 2,500 troops, operating in Darwin Harbour and around the Tiwi Islands, which include Melville. The entire population of

Darwin is just 130,000. The Tiwi Islands, home primarily to indigenous people, have just 2,350 residents.

The troops were to include 750 Australian personnel and 500 US marines, with the remainder made up of contingents from the participating regional militaries.

Australian Army Brigadier Nick Foxall told the *Northern Territory News*: "Predators Run is going to be a very important exercise for us. We're moving from a land-based organisation to a maritime-based organisation... As a result, we'll be moving into that environment, operating around the Tiwi Islands and in Darwin Harbour."

The article noted the "new strategies" underpinning the Australian army's operations. That was a reference to the Defence Strategic Review (DSR), endorsed earlier this year by the Albanese Labor government, which emphasised a shift in the army's prospective operations from land-based fighting, such as in the Middle East and Afghanistan, to littoral and maritime combat.

US Marines Commanding Officer Colonel Brendan Sullivan said this new focus made the Northern Territory (NT) an "ideal training ground." Sullivan stated: "The thing that makes littoral operations so challenging is that it occurs in the air, on the land and in the sea at the same time. And that's what operating here in the NT and the Tiwi Islands offers us."

The clear implication is that the exercises involve simulations of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific, which would inevitably involve maritime and air combat, together with land operations centred around control of islands and coastlines. That is in line with the US-led war drive against China, which is supported entirely by the Australian government.

Predators Run followed last month's Talisman Sabre exercises. Also largely based in the Northern Territory, the biannual war games were the largest in history, involving 34,000 troops from 14 nations. In addition to testing advanced missiles and developing logistics

networks, Talisman Sabre included a mock invasion of the Australian territory of Norfolk Island in the Pacific Ocean.

There is every reason to suspect that the Tiwi Islands are playing a similar role in the Predators Run operation.

Talisman Sabre also resulted in casualties, with four Australian soldiers dying after their Taipan helicopter crashed into waters off the Queensland coast.

In reporting on the latest Marine deaths and recalling the fatalities during Talisman Sabre, the *New York Times* noted: “[I]n both cases, the aircraft went down during the kinds of joint exercises that have become more common, more intense and more complicated in recent years as the United States has stepped up its military tempo in the Indo-Pacific in an effort to deter Chinese aggression in the region.”

The gratuitous and false reference to Chinese aggression typifies how the US has justified its own massive military build-up in the Indo-Pacific, aimed at preparing for war against Beijing. But the *Times* clearly indicated that the accidents during Talisman Sabre and Predators Run are bound up with the nature of the exercises themselves. These are not “routing training exercises” but “combat simulations,” as the *Australian* described them, with the dangers they inevitably entail.

The extent of the war preparations, and northern Australia’s centrality in those plans, were highlighted in a lengthy article on the United States Naval Institute (USNI) website. It noted: “What began with 250 American Marines and sailors at Australia’s ‘Top End’ 12 years ago has grown into a Marine air-ground task force of 2,500 that spends its seven-month rotation spread across Australia and the western Pacific.”

The article cited Colonel Brendan Sullivan, head of the Marine deployment, who said it “is at the cutting edge of Force Design 2030... We are actually realizing Force Design 2030 capabilities right now in a forward-deployed unit west of the international date line.”

Force Design 2030 is a plan outlined in 2020 to prepare the Marines to be a key force for a war with China. In the 2020 document, Marine command explicitly noted the new US defence doctrine that “great power competition,” centred on Russia and China, not terrorism, was the primary threat to US national security.

As a consequence, the Marines would need to operate alongside the navy in far-reaching combat operations. Force Design 2030 sketched out a series of requirements clearly aimed at preparing such a war. They included developing enhanced Marine strike capabilities, the ability

to operate within enemy range of fire, and the capacity to sustain combat operations for an extended period. A list of insights in the chilling document begins with: “The individual/force element which shoots first has a decisive advantage.”

The document featured as one of its key recommendations: “We will need to conduct full-scale, empirically based experimentation of the future force in realistic maritime and littoral terrain. Our experimentation must be deliberate and iterative, informed by both threat developments and technology advancements.” As Sullivan’s comments make plain, that is now occurring in northern Australia.

Speaking on Talisman Sabre, Sullivan told the USNI: “We are practicing at the end of that, seizing key terrain and exercising key terrain, and then exercising all-domain command and control. We are leveraging and feeding joint and maritime ‘sensor-and-effector’ networks, (and) that’s enabling us... to execute fires and sea control activities.”

The USNI added that Predators Run would be the “culminating exercise as the unit becomes a littoral combat brigade.”

All this is occurring behind the backs of the population. Without even the fig leaf of a democratic mandate, the Labor government has transformed a substantial swathe of the continent into a testing ground for war with China. That underscores the fact that if conflict does break out, the government and the entire political establishment will support the US war to the hilt.



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