Huge Talisman Sabre war games blacked out by Australian media

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7 August 2025

The biannual Talisman Sabre exercises in Australia concluded on August 4 having begun on July 13. With this year's iteration, what began in 2005 as joint bilateral war games between the US and Australia took on the character of a full-fledged dress-rehearsal for war against China involving all the major imperialist and regional powers.

Almost 40,000 troops from 19 countries participated in what were the largest military exercises in Australian history. Aside from the sheer number and range of nations represented, Talisman Sabre involved some of the most potent offensive weaponry in the world, including US long-range missile systems that have never before been present in the region.

Despite this, the vast majority of the Australian population would have no idea that Talisman Sabre even took place. The exercises were subjected to a near total media blackout. That itself underscores the reality that what took place was the preparation for war, which the powers-that-be are aware could provoke widespread popular opposition.

An article previewing the war games last month in the *Wall Street Journal* was far more extensive and forthright about the purposes of Talisman Sabre than anything that has appeared since in the Australian establishment press.

The *Journal* bluntly declared that Talisman Sabre was "meant to send a message to China" of US preparedness to fight a war in the Indo-Pacific, then cited top American military officials making the same basic point.

While the *Journal*, in keeping with US propaganda, presented Beijing as the "aggressor," it boasted of the offensive capabilities being rehearsed in Talisman Sabre, noting that they would aid in a conflict fought over Taiwan, i.e., right up to the Chinese mainland.

That is in line with the Trump administration's ratcheting up of the longstanding US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific against China, which is viewed as the chief threat to the global economic dominance of US capitalism.

Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth has railed against China, while raising the prospect of "imminent" conflict over Taiwan. The Trump administration has demanded that US allies in the region massively boost their military spending and that countries such as Japan and Australia commit their military assets to a war with China in advance.

Journal's blunt outline of the purposes of Talisman Sabre, the little coverage in the Australian press has presented particular aspects of the military exercises in isolation.

A number of the articles appear to have been prompted by the disruption to sections of the population caused by Talisman Sabre. One, for instance, noted that yachtsmen had been instructed to stay away from Queensland's Shoalwater Bay, because the US and Australian militaries were conducting massive live fire exercises there.

For obvious reasons, regional papers particularly in Queensland and the Northern Territory, reported on a number of Talisman Sabre exercises, because they involved the besieging and takeover of entire towns.

As the exercises began, police social media posts instructed residents in Sydney not to be concerned if they saw military helicopters flying at low levels above Australia's most populous city. One operation in Sydney Harbour, in which British commandos descended from a helicopter and stormed a ferry against mock terrorists, appears not to have been reported by any of the major corporate publications.

Defence industry publications, whose primary audience consists of military insiders, have hailed the scale of Talisman Sabre and drawn particular attention to the unprecedented deployment of highly potent US weaponry.

At the conclusion of Talisman Sabre, the US army revealed that its Dark Eagle hypersonic missile system had been transferred to Australia for the exercises—the first time it had been stationed outside of US territory. The hypersonic missiles travel at five times the speed of sound. They have a range of 1,700 miles.

Dark Eagle was first test fired in December last year. At the time, the *Army Recognition* publication noted that it "offers the longest reach of any land-based strike system currently in the U.S. inventory.

"The weapon's warhead is engineered to deliver immense destructive power, capable of neutralizing heavily fortified military installations, command centers, and critical infrastructure with pinpoint precision. This makes the missile a decisive asset in scenarios requiring rapid engagement of high-value, time-critical targets."

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Dark Eagle would fulfil the role repeatedly raised in US strategic and think tank documents planning a war with China, of wiping out Beijing's military capacities as rapidly as possible in the event of a conflict.

The stationing of such a system in Australia should have been headline news, but again it has largely gone unreported.

The extent of the secrecy was underscored by a report in the *Stars and Stripes* defence publication, which noted that there was "no indication" that the weapon was actually fired in Australia—in other words, it might have been.

The article cited Lt. Gen. Joel Vowell, deputy commander of US Army Pacific who stated that the American military was working with its Australian counterpart on a plan to station Dark Eagle in Australia. The prospect of Australia acquiring or hosting hypersonic missiles has previously been floated, but never has the Australian Labor government made so definite a statement as Vowell.

During Talisman Sabre, the US army also fired its Typhon missile system, with a range of up to 2,500 miles, for the first time outside the continental United States. A missile successfully struck a target off the Australian coast.

The HIMARS, or the M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, was also used for the first time in Australia. The missile system, carried on trucks, is hailed for its maneuverability and has been used extensively in the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

The missile capabilities would play a critical role in a war in the Indo-Pacific, enabling the US to implement its program of "area denial," by striking Chinese vessels including at long range.

Naval warfare was a heavy feature of Talisman Sabre. The US George Washington Carrier Strike Group and the America Expeditionary Strike Group were deployed and participated. So too did the British Carrier Strike Group in the first visit by a UK aircraft carrier to Australia since 1997.

During Talisman Sabre, the Australian and British Labor governments signed a 50-year treaty, dedicated to escalating their military cooperation, particularly targeting China.

The deepening of ties and military "interoperability" between the various US allies was a central focus, with troops from Japan and South Korea taking part in live-fire exercises and the major European imperialist powers France and Germany also participating.

For the first time, an exercise was held outside of Australia in the strategically-critical Pacific country of Papua New Guinea. The US and its partners, particularly the Australian Labor government, have pressured, hectored and bullied the impoverished Pacific states not to develop their ties to China and to instead commit their territories to Washington's conflict against it. As in World War II, the Pacific states would be crucial in a regional war.

While couched in terms of "deterrence" and opposition to Chinese "aggression," Talisman Sabre makes clear that these US talking points are an inversion of reality. There is no question that a Chinese or Russian-led military exercise of a similar scale in South or Central America would be viewed as something approaching an act of war against the United States.

Talisman Sabre also pointed to the extent to which Australia has been placed on the frontlines of the US preparations for conflict, including by a vast expansion of US basing arrangements and a domestic military build-up by the federal Labor government, building on the actions of its predecessors spanning almost 15 years.

The US is already in a de facto war with Russia in Ukraine and is sponsoring the Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, as part of a broader regionwide offensive targeting Iran. However, American imperialism is also preparing to open a new and even more catastrophic front in what increasingly has the character of a global war.

The media blackout of Talisman Sabre is a backhanded recognition of growing anti-war sentiment and an attempt to prevent its development. When the plans for Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines from the US, at a cost of $368 billion, were revealed in 2023, they provoked substantial shock and anger.

Last Sunday, a day before Talisman Sabre officially concluded, as many as 300,000 people marched across Sydney Harbour Bridge to oppose the Israeli genocide and the complicity of the Labor government, in one of the largest demonstrations in the country's history.

Talisman Sabre and the plans for war against China expose the bankruptcy of any perspective of halting one or another imperialist crime, including the genocide, by appealing to the governments that are responsible to change course.

The turn by the imperialist powers to militarism and war, threatening a global conflagration, can only be answered by building a unified movement of the international working class based on a socialist and revolutionary program to abolish the outmoded capitalist system that is the root cause of war and threatens humanity with catastrophe.

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