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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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16.07.2019

Talisman Sabre: US and Australia prepare for war with China

Up to 34,000 military personnel from the US, Australia, Britain, New Zealand and Japan arrived in northern Queensland this week for the biannual Talisman Sabre war games which began on Thursday. Delegations from India and South Korea are observing the exercises, while 18 other nations from across the Indo-Pacific were invited.

The military drills have been treated as a non-event in the corporate press and by the state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Only a handful of articles have appeared, all of them treating the war games as routine and providing few details of their purpose.

To the extent that there has been any consternation in the media, it has been over the presence of a Chinese navy vessel, reportedly sent to international waters near northern Australia to monitor the exercises. Journalists and pundits have warned against “Chinese spying,” and have uncritically repeated statements from Australian Defence Force representatives, who have declared they will take unspecified “counter-measures.”

The silence of the media and all of the official parties, including the Greens, is aimed at keeping the population in the dark about the real purpose of Talisman Sabre: to drill for an offensive US-led war against China that would rapidly threaten a global nuclear conflagration.



The USS Ronald Reagan in Brisbane [Credit: @TalismanSabre Twitter]

The first Talisman Sabre exercise was held in 2011. The same year the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard agreed to integrate Australia into the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia"—a vast US military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific region directed against China.

The military drills have been based upon the Pentagon's AirSea Battle doctrine, under which conflict with China would involve a massive military bombardment, accompanied by the blockading of key shipping lanes in the Pacific through which the bulk of Chinese trade passes. Talisman Sabre has largely focused on preparations for imposing such a naval blockade around the straits of Sunda, Lombok and Malacca.

This year's exercises are being held amid open diplomatic and economic clashes between the US and China, and the emergence of flashpoints around the world for a broader conflict.

For the past year, the Trump administration has been imposing trade war measures on China that are unprecedented in the post-World War Two period. In US and Australian foreign policy circles, there is an increasingly open discussion of the need to counter growing Chinese influence in the Pacific, and internationally, including through military means.

In line with this ratcheting-up of tensions, the 2019 Talisman Sabre exercise is the largest that has been held. The drills were already the second-biggest war games in the world.

An official statement on the "opening ceremony" of Talisman Sabre last Monday reported that Defence Minister Linda Reynolds "said the exercise was designed to enhance combat readiness and interoperability between the Australian and United States Armed Forces."

Reynolds' reference to "combat readiness" made clear that the exercises are about preparing for war.

This year, Talisman Sabre is reportedly focusing on rehearsing US plans for the invasion and seizure of an island in the Pacific that would be a base for amphibious operations throughout the region and for sustaining an attack on land positions. Such an operation would also be aimed at taking control of shipping lanes. The most obvious targets are Chinese-controlled islets in the South China Sea, which could provide a base for launching operations against key military bases in southern China.

This is based on a new "operating concept" developed this year by the US navy and marines dubbed "expeditionary advanced base operations." Brigadier General Stephen Liszewski, director of operations for the Marine Corps, told the US *National Defense* magazine in May that this was "all about distributing lethality across the battle space in support of a larger maritime campaign."

Liszewski said such a base could "be used as a forward arming and refuelling point for aircraft from the joint force." According to *National Defense* it "could also be used as sensing platforms to collect intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance information, or as strike platforms to achieve sea control."

The *Marine Times* noted that the tactic was first tested by the US Marines in exercises in the Pacific in March this year. It bluntly declared: "That fighting concept, known as expeditionary advanced base operations, or EABO, will see Marines spread thinly across the vastness of the Pacific Ocean, operating from small bases—a tactic that will help Marines stay alive in a high-end fight with China."



A soldier participating in a HIMARS drill [Credit: @TalismanSabre Twitter]

A crucial part of the plan is known as HI-RAIN. This involves rapid artillery raids conducted by HIMARS rocket launchers transported by C-130 military aircraft. Such raids will be trialled during Talisman Sabre.

US Army Major Daniel Graw, Division Assistant Fire Support Coordinator, 3d Marine Division, told *Defence Connect*: “What we are demonstrating is the capability of the US Marine Corps, US Air Force and US Army to come together with different aircrews and different HIMARS units, quickly build a plan, deploy on C-130s, travel great distances by air, land, rapidly deliver long-range precision fires against enemy targets, and depart their firing location prior to detection.”

Among the US military assets participating in the games is the Strike Group, led by the U.S. Nimitz-class supercarrier USS Ronald Reagan. The USS McCampbell, an Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer, is also participating, along with the USS Wasp, USS Green Bay and USS Ashland, which make up the Wasp Amphibious Ready Group.



HIMARS exercises [Credit: @TalismanSabre Twitter]

In a particularly provocative move directed against China, Japan was invited to dramatically expand its participation in this year's exercises. It has sent a helicopter destroyer, JS Ise, and tank landing ship, JS Kunisaki, to take part. Japan, which invaded China in the 1930s and 1940s, has been encouraged to remilitarise by Washington to as part of its confrontation with Beijing.

Successive militarist governments in Tokyo have deliberately ratcheted-up tensions with the Chinese regime, including by stoking disputes over unoccupied rocky outcrops in the East China Sea. At the same time, they have moved to scrap nominally pacifist clauses in the country's post World War II constitution, in a clear threat of war against China.

The silence of the Australian media and political establishment on the preparations for conflict in the Indo-Pacific makes clear that the entire ruling elite is committed to militarism and war, amid the deepest crisis of world capitalism since the 1930s.

The media, the intelligence agencies, and all of the official parties, including the Greens, have sought to overcome mass anti-war sentiment by covering up the threat of conflict and waging a McCarthyite campaign against supposed Chinese influence in Australia.

The immense dangers revealed by Talisman Sabre underscore the critical importance of the fight being waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Parties around the world to build an international anti-war movement of the working class directed against the source of conflict, the capitalist nation-state system.

15 July 2019