

US-Australia Biennial “Talisman Sabre 2021” Joint Exercise and Second Island Chain Security

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1. News Highlights

According to *Naval Technology*, the biennial “Talisman Sabre”,¹ a multinational military exercise organized by the US and Australia, was held in central and northeastern Queensland as well as off the eastern coast of Australia from July 14-31, 2021. This year, in addition to the US and Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, South Korea (first participation)², India, Indonesia, Germany and France (the last four countries joined as observers)³ also participated in the exercise. Although

the exercise scale was reduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with only about 17,000 troops, it involved the largest number of countries ever. The strategic objective of this joint exercise was to impede China’s military expansion and ensure regional security. At the tactical level, the exercise is designed to enhance interoperability between the US and Australian forces with activities like readiness preparations, amphibious landings, ground force exercises, urban operations, air combats and naval operations.

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1. “Australia and the US begin joint military exercise Talisman Sabre 2021,” *Naval Technology*, July 15, 2021, <https://www.naval-technology.com/news/australia-us-talisman-sabre-2021/>.
 2. “Korean Forces to Participate in US-Australian ‘Talisman Sabre’ Joint Military Exercise for the First Time” , *Yonhap News Agency*, 28 June 2021. <https://cb.yna.co.kr/gate/big5/cn.yna.co.kr/view/ACK20210628001300881?section=politics/index>.
 3. “US Army tests Patriot Missiles during Talisman Saber 21,” *Army Technology*, July 20, 2021, <https://www.army-technology.com/news/us-army-patriot-missiles-talisman-saber-21/>.

2. Security Implications

The “Talisman Sabre” has been the largest military exercise jointly organized by the US and Australia since 2005 and is considered a symbol of the US-Australian military alliance. The exercise, which covered the eastern coast of Australia and surrounding waters in addition to Hawaii in the United States, is important to the defense of the second island chain in the Western Pacific. With China’s military influence expanding into the South Pacific region, Australia-China relations continue to deteriorate, while the Biden administration in the US maintains a hardline attitude toward China. As a result, this year’s “Talisman Sabre” exercise still aimed to counter China’s expansion into the South Pacific while safeguarding the second island chain. The implications for regional security are as follows:

2-1. US and Australia expressed their common “anti-China” attitude

Australia was sanctioned by China in April 2020 with banning imports of

commodities such as coal and agricultural products as a result of Australia advocating for an investigation into the source of the COVID-19 virus in China. In addition, China’s “One Belt, One Road” financial assistance to South Pacific island countries in exchange for rights to build military facilities has caused Australia to be concern about regional security. As a result, Australia has turned to strengthening its relationship with its democratic allies in order to expand the frameworks for containing China. At the same time, Australia has added more depth to the joint exercises with the US to demonstrate a strong stance against China’s military expansion into the South Pacific for the defense of regional security.

According to reports from the Australian Broadcasting Company (ABC), Australian Defense Minister Peter Dutton confirmed that the country’s military had spotted the PLA Navy Type 815 recon ship “Uranus” during its passage through the Torres Strait⁴ to Australia with its Emissions Control (EMCON) mode fully activated; the ship stealthily monitored the

4. The Torres Strait is an international water located between Australia and the island of Melanesia in New Guinea. The narrowest part of the Strait is about 150 km; the Cape York Peninsula (the northernmost part of Queensland, Australia) to the south and the Western Province of Papua New Guinea to the north.

entire exercise in the northeast Australian water. During the previous “Talisman Sabre” exercises in 2017 and 2019, a PLA Navy ship was also present.⁵ This shows that China keeps paying close attention to US-Australian military cooperation in the South Pacific.

Although Germany and France were only participating as observers in this year’s exercise, it shows that Europe is becoming more concerned about Indo-Pacific security in the face of China’s military expansion. Through their actions, these countries are showing China they are willing to participate in US-Australian cooperation.

2-2. Strengthening defense of second island chain and security of Australian mainland

China’s recent deterioration in relations with Australia, India, Japan, Taiwan and neighboring countries in the South China Sea has extended its military threat from the first island chain to the

second. Since Australia’s northeast Pacific coast defense is closely related to the security of the southern end of the second island chain (Papua New Guinea), the US-Australia military alliance is an important factor in Australia’s security and regional stability. Therefore, the area of this year’s exercise was focused on northeast Australia to strengthen the security of its mainland and the second island chain.

In the exercise, the US 38th Air Defense Artillery Brigade and 94th Army Air and Missile Defense Command used guided missiles to destroy drone targets in the Shoalwater Bay Training Area in Queensland, Australia. It was the first time the US launched the Patriot III (PAC-3) medium-range surface-to-air missile on Australian soil and the first launch of Patriot missiles in the southern hemisphere.⁶

In response to the threat of a possible invasion from the Pacific Ocean in

5. Andrew Greene, “Chinese spy ship returns to waters off Queensland ahead of Defence’s largest war-fighting exercise,” *ABC News*, July 14, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-14/chinese-spy-ship-returns-to-australian-waters/100289192>.

6. “US Army tests Patriot Missiles during Talisman Saber 21,” *Army Technology*, July 20, 2021, <https://www.army-technology.com/news/us-army-patriot-missiles-talisman-saber-21/>.

northeastern Australia (Queensland and Northern Territory), and to enable sea denial and control of the enemy, the US Marine Corps demonstrated the firepower of High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) during an exercise at the Shoalwater Bay Training Area by coordinating live fire with the USS Rafael Peralta (DDG-115) on July 18. At the same time, Royal Australian Air Force F/A-18 Hornets and Marine Corps UH-1 Huey helicopters also conducted joint live fire with AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters.⁷

It is worth noting that on July 31, the last day of the exercise, the Australian Army, the US Marine Corps, the British Marine Corps and the Japanese Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade conducted their first joint amphibious landing exercise in Ingham of northeast Queensland, Australia.⁸

3. Trend Observation

In observing the US-Australia “Talisman Sabre” military exercise, this article provides two trends for reference:

3-1. US and Australia to deploy advanced missile systems near second island chain

In August 2019, the US called on Australia to deploy new land-based long-range weapons to counter China’s growing military power, but Australians rejected the deployment of US medium-range missiles on its soil due to the possible tensions with its neighbors.⁹ However, as the perceived threat from China increases, the US and Australian forces completed the first PAC-3 anti-missile live fire in Australia during this exercise. The live fire covered key airfields and supply depots for the US for agile deployment in the South Pacific to intercept Chinese missile attacks in this area. This also validates the

7. Dzirhan Mahadzir, “Admiral: Talisman Sabre Proves U.S., Allies Can Create Pacific Naval Force in Days,” *USNI News*, July 29, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/07/29/admiral-talisman-sabre-proves-u-s-allies-can-create-pacific-naval-force-in-days>.

8. Wu Cishan, “US, Japan, UK and Australia Jointly Practice Amphibious Landing for the First Time” , *Newtalk News*, July 31, 2021. <https://newtalk.tw/news/view/2021-07-31/613365>.

9. “Australia Rejects Deployment of US Intermediate-Range Missiles” , *Wall Street Journal*, August 5, 2019, <https://cn.wsj.com/articles/ 澳洲拒絕部署美國中程飛彈 -121564972810>.

intercept capability of the PAC-3 system in Australia.

According to the *Stars and Stripes* news, the US military is scheduled to conduct at least two large-scale missile defense exercises in the Pacific range near Hawaii with PAC-3 missiles and the Navy’s Standard 6 missiles starting from August this year. This fully validates the US’s current anti-missile capabilities to protect the west of Guam, the second island chain and the first island chain.¹⁰

3-2. Strengthening strategic defense link between second island chain and first

The Australian government has decided to strengthen its national defense capabilities in response to growing Chinese aggression and the COVID-19 impact on global supply chains. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced

a weapon development program on March 31 this year, citing the “changing global environment” and the need for enhanced defense capabilities. A\$1 billion will be invested in 10 years to produce new long-range hypersonic missiles in cooperation with the US defense industry.¹¹ Australia’s close military cooperation with the US will not only ensure that the military industry meets the technological needs of its own and the US, its “most important military partner,” but will also enhance its research and development capabilities and ensure that the supply chain is not interrupted by global changes in the event of war, so that Australia can have a large number of missiles ready in the face of military conflicts.¹²

In addition to protecting its own military industry, Australia’s development of advanced missile systems is in line

10. William Cole, “Pacific Missile Range Facility Plans Two Major Tests,” *Stars and Stripes*, July 23, 2021, https://www.stripes.com/theaters/asia_pacific/2021-07-23/pacific-missile-range-tests-kauai-2256217.html.

11. Nick Perry, “Australia to Build Guided Missiles to Boost Defense Capacity,” *AP News*, March 31, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/world-news-australia-scott-morrison-new-zealand-114bfafef0d4d917792e0fa1f3f148a5>.

12. Zhou Hongwen, “Australia Announces Home-made Missiles to Counter China in Alliance with US” , *The Liberty Times*, April 1, 2021. <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/world/paper/1440540>.

with the US Indo-Pacific strategy and has two important long-term strategic considerations:

a. Securing second island chain

The development of a new missile system may help strengthen the security of the second island chain. On November 30, 2020, Australia and the US signed the 15-year “The Southern Cross Integrated Flight Research Experiment” (SCIFiRE) project to jointly develop a long-range, air-launched hypersonic weapon to enhance the Royal Australian Air Force’s long-range strike capability in response to possible military threats from China.¹³ The launch of US PAC-3 missiles in Australia during this “Talisman Sabre” exercise is just the beginning. Since Australia at the southern end of the second island chain is yet to have a US missile defense system deployed, its missile deterrence capability can be strengthened and expanded to

the second island chain if an advanced missiles system can be self-developed or obtained from the US.

In addition, because the southwestern islands of Japan range across about 1,200 kilometers and connect to the Philippines, the end of the first island chain, Japan’s Ministry of Defense intends to deploy the Ground Self-Defense Force missile units on Ishigaki Island, Okinawa Prefecture in 2022 with a force of about 500 to 600 troops to counter the expansion of the PLA Navy. This is the fourth island in the southwest of Japan to have missiles deployed after Amami Oshima of Kagoshima Prefecture, Okinawa main island and Miyakojima — all are quite close to Taiwan. The planned deployments of Australian advanced missile systems in the Northern Territory and Queensland¹⁴ will support the US and Japanese units in the first island chain, so then the missiles

13. Wang Guanglei, “Australia and US Jointly Develop Air-launched Hypersonic Missiles to Counter Russia and China, *Youth Daily News*, December 2, 2020.

<https://www.ydn.com.tw/news/newsInsidePage?chapterID=1293902>.

14. To expand mutual cooperation with the US military, Australia announced that it will spend A\$747 million to upgrade four military bases in the Northern Territory, including Robertson Barracks, Kangaroo Flats Training Area, Mount Bunday Training Area and Bradshaw Field Training Area. The upgrades also allow the Australian forces to conduct joint training exercises of larger scales with the US Marine Corps in Australia. Reference: “Australia to upgrade four northern military bases for strengthened joint combat capability with US” , *The Liberty Times*, April 28, 2021. <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/world/breakingnews/351372>.

in the first and second island chains will be able to support each other in suppressing China’s military expansion in the Western Pacific.

b. Emphasis on first island chain defense

To Australia, the importance of stability in the Taiwan Strait and the security of the first island chain is more critical than ever. According to a report titled “Australia and the Growing Reach of China’s Military”, published on August 9 by the Lowy Institute, an Australian think tank, China’s medium- and long-range missile development will cause an imbalance of air and naval power in the Western Pacific. So Australia needs to strategically prepare for the worst-case scenario of China invading Taiwan and

gaining control of the first island chain, in which US allies in the Indo-Pacific, including Australia, would face direct Chinese military threats.¹⁵ Although there is no direct Chinese military threat to the Australian homeland, China is actively developing long-range missiles, long-range bombers and a blue-water navy that make Australia’s geopolitical advantage less dependable, and the threats would be much greater than the potential Japanese invasion in World War II. Therefore, Australia’s possession of a large number of advanced long-range missile systems not only ensures the security of its mainland and the second island chain, but also indirectly suppresses China’s attempts to control the first island chain.

15. Thomas Shugart, “Australia and the Growing Reach of China’s Military,” Lowy Institute, August 9, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/australia-and-growing-reach-china-s-military>.