

Talisman Sabre and Australia's Guam Connection

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The June 2007 Australia-United States Talisman Sabre exercise binds Australia into the US military expansion currently sweeping across the north-west Pacific Ocean. This increasing militarisation is anchored on the small island of Guam (known in the Indigenous Chamorro tongue as *Guåhan*), only four hours flight north of Cairns (east the Philippines) which the US claims as its own.

Guam's Apra Harbour is a homebase for the Pacific Command's (PACOM) Seventh Fleet of nuclear capable ships and submarines. Its Andersen Air Force Base is described in the official 36th Wing's mission statements as: "Provid[ing] a U.S.-based lethal warfighting platform for the employment, deployment, reception, and throughput of air and space forces in the Asia-Pacific Region". (1) PACOM has other forces throughout the region, particularly in South Korea and Japan (including Okinawa) but Guam plays a prominent role because it is the only US(-claimed) terrain in the north-western Pacific. (2) The Pentagon refers to the small island of Guam as its "tip of the spear" in the region. (3) It is the US's "hub for intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and strike operations" (4) for the entire north-west Pacific; its "unsinkable aircraft carrier". (5)

Recent AUSMIN (Australia United States Ministerial Consultations) (6) agreements have tied Australia inextricably to Guam. AUSMIN's announced purpose is to foster closer cooperation in intelligence matters and improve joint training and interoperability of their military forces, including in missile defence research. The key outcome of the AUSMIN 2004 meeting was to establish the Australian-United States Joint Combined Training Centre (JCTC) in which Shoalwater Bay plays a major role but is not the only facility. In 2005, AUSMIN signed a Memorandum of Understanding which specifically linked the Talisman Sabre exercises to Guam. The MoU states that the US needs to conduct exercises at Shoalwater Bay Training Area (SBTA) because it is "rebalancing its force presence in the Asia-Pacific region, including through the rotation of US strategic bomber aircraft through Guam". (7)

Under these agreements, Australia has become a major training ground for US troops and weapons systems operating in the north-west Pacific. The Australian Department of Defence describes SBTA as "Australia's most premier training ground"; (8) for the US Pacific Command (based in Hawaii) SBTA is "the primary training venue for [its] Commander Seventh Fleet as a Combined Task Force" in the region. (9) The Seventh Fleet is homebased on Guam. According to the Strategic Policy Institute at the Australian National University, Guam is directly linked to Shoalwater: "The more aircraft they base on Guam the more important it is for them to have access to the kind of large continental training areas Australia can provide". (10)

The US is developing a Global Strike Force on Guam and it needs the unique facilities only Australia can provide in the region to train them. While some bombing and targeting practice is carried out on Guam (e.g. urban bombing raids) and some training is conducted in the even smaller islands of the Northern Marianas to Guam's north, the US military recognises Shoalwater Bay as a major contributor to troop readiness: "Shoalwater Bay is the only place in Australia where air, land and sea forces can engage in joint, live-fire training exercises". (11) Shoalwater Bay Training Area, Lancelin Training Area, and Delamere Air Weapons Range are unique locations in the western Pacific for the US to conduct training exercises. The US Pentagon rates Australia highly for its ability to provide training arenas for its troops. As the commander of the US 7th Fleet, Vice Admiral Archie Clemens said in 1995 in reference to the Lancelin Defence Training Area in Western Australia (where the US can conduct ship to shore and air to ground bombing):

“You have to have places to drop bombs, you have to have places to shoot live weapons, places to fly planes over that make noise, places where you can actually test and exercise your capabilities. I think Australia in the future is going to be one of the places we'd like to exercise with the Australians, as well as with the US Navy. You now have some of the finest ranges in the Western Pacific which we cannot get anywhere else.” (12)

The majority of US troops, planes, ships and submarines which engage in military exercises such as Talisman Sabre in Australia are either homebased in Guam, are rotated to Guam, or transit through Guam from bases in Hawaii and the US continent. (13) Thus, the AUSMIN agreements have located Shoalwater Bay (along with other Australian facilities) directly within the training parameters of the US forces on Guam.

Although it plays a core role in Australia's contribution to US military expansion across the north-west Pacific, Talisman Sabre is only one of many exercises – some large, other small – which implicate and embed Australia into the Pacific Command agenda. In 2005-2006 alone PACOM organised and/or hosted 1,700 military exercises engaging a vast conglomeration of foreign military forces in the Pacific-Indian Ocean region. (14)

Since “September 11” the US, determined to ensure its dominance of the region should confrontation with China or Russia occur, has restructured its operation in the Pacific. The US strategy has moved away from siting land bases in foreign countries to developing jumping-off sites for its troops at bases provided by the host nations (e.g. Japan/Okinawa, South Korea, the Philippines).

This “lily-pad” strategy involves a series of in-host-country facilities to service expanded military bases in territories which the US considers to be its own. The US military is manoeuvring so that it will increasingly operate according to a “Pacific Strategic Triangle” concept which links Guam, Hawaii and Alaska – all of which are US territories. (15) The Pentagon's perspective is that within the US's ‘Global War on Terror’ “Guam offers proximity and valued status as an American territory. ... [because] the military does not need to secure permission to engage in operations from the island – a concern, particularly during crises for forces utilizing operating platforms in non-U.S. territories”. (16)

This ambition has resulted in a US military expansion on Guam. In September 2006, the US Pacific Command (PACOM) released plans for a military build-up on the island: including the relocation of 8,000 Marines from Okinawa; a Marines Corp base and training area; extending Andersen Air Force Base; refurbishing Naval Base Guam to enhance its capacity to transit nuclear air craft carriers; and building an Army base at Radio Barrigada for a Patriot Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) task force. The BDM facility, expected to be constructed by 2012, will give the Army the capacity to intercept and shoot down incoming missiles aimed at the critical military assets on Guam. (17)

An ideal location for the US's Global Strike Force, Andersen Air Force Base will homebase B-52s, and rotate 48 F-22 and F-15E fighter jets, state-of-the-art B-1 supersonic strike aircraft, B-2s “flying wing” Stealth bombers from US bases in the continent and Alaska. In addition, there will be ten Global Hawk unmanned spy planes homebased in Guam. (18) Guam already homeports three nuclear-powered Los-Angeles-class fast-attack submarines at Naval Base Guam on Apra Harbour, and more are scheduled for 2008. (19) The port is being modified to enhance its Nuclear Aircraft Carrier (CVN) transient operational capability. The US Navy currently has five of its eleven aircraft carriers in the Pacific, and intends to bring this to six by 2010. The Pentagon plans to have 60 per cent of its Navy's global fleet in the Pacific arena.

Guam, however, is *not* US territory. Guam was entered onto the United Nations' List of Non-Self Governing Territory by the US in 1946, but the US is *only* the “administering power”. Since then the US Pentagon has always anchored its strategy around the aspiration to make Guam the hub of its forward position close to the Asian continent. The result has been that the US has been holding Guam's Indigenous Chamorro peoples hostage to its military ambitions for over 60 years.

In 1950, the US unilaterally signed what is known as the Organic Act which unilaterally granted Guam's residents US citizenship (long desired by an element of Guam's community) *and* guaranteed the Indigenous Chamorro peoples the right to an act of self-determine regarding their political status. The Act guaranteed that this right would be reserved for Chamorro. Granting US citizenship to the residents of Guam seems like a good thing until one realises that while the people of Guam (including the Chamorro) are American citizens they do not have the right to vote in Congress or to elect the US President. They are, in fact, US citizens without the rights enshrined in the American Constitution. Guam is described by Washington as being an "Unincorporated Territory", again a status which sounds beneficial until one realises that the "unincorporated" aspect of that title means that Guam is a non-entity within the parameters of the US, for no such designation exists within the context of the US constitution. The US has yet to uphold its promise of guaranteeing the inalienable right of the Indigenous Chamorro to an act of self-determination. The UN has failed in its commitment to the Second International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism. (20)

The impact of Guam's political history has been "political subjugation" and a "situation of uncertainty, neglect and inattention to our basic human, civil and political rights", according to Chamorro rights activist Hope Alvarez Cristobal. (21) If the planned military expansion in Guam goes ahead, then Guam's 160,000 residents will experience a population explosion expanding it by about 35,000 strong. With control over Guam's immigration, the US has increased that portion of the Guam population most likely to vote in local elections for local governments which favour the US military presence. The abrupt population increase, expected to start in 2008 and culminate in 2014, will put intense pressure on Guam's infrastructure – and with a large portion of its population already living in poverty, many of which are Chamorro, local citizenship-based resistance is growing. (22)

Talisman Sabre implicates Australia in the increasing militarisation in the north-west Pacific, particularly of Guam. If Guam is the US's "tip of the spear" then Australia's role is to prepare the hand that throws the spear. Australian citizens must ask whether they are willing to acquiesce to that enforced role.

This paper is based on a public talk given by Dr Zohl dé Ishtar hosted by Shoalwater Wilderness Awareness Group at the Keppel Bay Sailing Club, Yeppoon, Queensland, Australia on 19 April 2007. It is presented here in recognition and honouring of the Indigenous Chamoru peoples of Guåhan (Guam) in the belief that the day will come when they will enjoy their inalienable right to an act of Chamorro self-determination.

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