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IPAN People's Inquiry into the costs and consequences of Australia's involvement in US-led wars and the US-Alliance

The environmental costs of joint military exercises in Australia

The Australian ruling class is widely regarded as having an unequal, servile and obsequious relationship with the United States.

It continues a tradition of empire loyalty established under British domination, and clearly emerging during the WW2 switch from Britain to the US (Curtin, December 27, 1941). It has been expressed as "If this is US imperialism, let us have more of it" (Menzies, September 24, 1952), "All the way with LBJ" (Holt, June 1966), "We will go a-waltzing Matilda with you", (Gorton to Nixon, May 1969), John Howard's 1999 characterisation of Australia as the "deputy sheriff" of the US in the Asia-Pacific, and Turnbull's 2017 statement that the US and Australia were "joined at the hip".¹

Nor is this loyalty to an imperialist "friend" confined to the Liberal Party. Curtin had made it clear that Australia "now looked to America" after the fall of Singapore, and with the relatively mild exception of Whitlam, that slavish friendship has continued. Gillard was a vocal cheerleader for the US alliance, telling the US Congress in March 2011 that "In 1942, John Curtin – my predecessor, my country's great wartime leader – looked to America. I still do... You have a true friend 'down under'".

The proof of that pudding – an indigestible eating – came on 16 November 2011 when the US Marine Rotational Force Darwin was announced by Gillard during the Obama visit. This was to be the beginning of a permanent presence of US marines rotating through Darwin. It was to complement that permanent presence of US personnel at Pine Gap, and North-West Cape (the Harold E. Holt Communication Base, now operated under contract by the US weapons manufacturer Raytheon).

The current Labor leader of the Opposition, Anthony Albanese, also fell back on Curtin to pledge a strengthening of the "alliance" under a Labor Government. "The alliance was forged in World War II under Labor, and one of our greatest Prime Ministers, the proud West Australian, John Curtin – and we have deepened it each time we have been in government. Labor's support for the alliance will remain stronger than ever under a government I lead."²

¹ See [Vanguard: "Joined at the hip", or "under the thumb"? \(vanguard-cpaml.blogspot.com\)](http://vanguard-cpaml.blogspot.com)

² [US-Australia Relations Under A Biden Administration \(anthonyalbanese.com.au\)](http://anthonyalbanese.com.au)

What joint military exercises occur here?

We not only have the armed forces of a foreign nation permanently stationed on our soil, but we host joint military exercises with a number of “friendly” nations. We even extend to Singapore the right to conduct its own unilateral, single-nation military exercises. Singapore has conducted training exercises here since 1990³, but under the Australia-Singapore Military Training Initiative (ASMTI) it will have up to 14,000 troops training in Queensland over 18 weeks each year, necessitating an expansion of the Shoalwater Bay Training Area, as well as the creation of a new training area at Greenvale, near Townsville, Queensland.⁴

In addition to ongoing training exercises conducted by the ADF and the US marines in Darwin, there are a number of recurring joint military exercises held on our soil.

Exercise Pitch Black

The biennial Exercise Pitch Black began on 15–16 June 1981 between different RAAF units only. However, in 1990 Singapore was invited to take part, and from then on, the involvement of air forces from other countries escalated. The following nations have participated: the USA, France, Malaysia, Thailand, New Zealand, Britain, NATO, Indonesia, United Arab Emirates, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, and, for the first time, in 2018, India. Most of the exercises have been held over the Northern Territory, although RAAF Bases Amberley (Queensland) and Williamtown (NSW) were used in 2002. In the 2018 exercise, 131 aircraft and almost 4,000 personnel participated.

Exercise Hamel

Exercise Hamel is a biennial training exercise for Australian brigades and has been used to prepare them for deployment in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the 2016 exercise, 600 US marines from Darwin joined 8,000 ADF personnel. In the 2018 exercise, NZ troops and more than 800 US military personnel participated alongside 6,000 Australian soldiers. Indiana Army National Guardsmen traveled nearly 9,000 miles to join in, with other soldiers from the 76th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 10th Regional Support Group, based at Okinawa, Japan; U.S. Marines from the III Marine Expeditionary Regiment, also based in Okinawa; U.S. Marines from the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines, 5th Marine Regiment, based at Camp Pendleton, California; and exercise support from U.S. Army Pacific and the 25th Infantry Division, both based in Hawaii. Cultana in South Australia and Shoalwater Bay in Central Queensland are most commonly used, although other training areas such as Mt Bundy in the NT and adjacent maritime areas are also used.

Exercise Vector Balance Action

This is a combined military activity between Australian and US forces held in Western Australia. It is run every two years.

Exercise Black Dagger

³ [Marking 30 Years of Singapore military training in Australia | Department of Defence Ministers](#)

⁴ [Home : ASMTI : Department of Defence](#)

This occurs twice a year and involves US and Australian air forces and ground troops in “a training exercise designed to foster increased interoperability between Australia and the U.S.”⁵

Exercise Talisman Sabre

Alternating with Exercise Hamel, Talisman Sabre is the largest of the combined military exercises on our soil. The inaugural exercise was held in 2005. The combined militaries often exceed 30,000 troops. For the first time, in 2015, 500 NZ and 40 Japanese troops took part. In 2017, Japanese, NZ and Canadian forces were embedded with the US and Australians. In 2019, there were more than 34,000 personnel participating from 18 countries, including Australia, United States, UK, Canada, Japan and New Zealand. Others were present as observers.

What environmental issues are raised by joint military exercises on Australian soil?

There are three potential issues associated with joint military exercises: destruction of environment and threats to species caused by movement of troops and heavy military vehicles across the landscape and by the use of real weapons in war games exercises; problems of ballast discharge by visiting vessels; and soil contamination and introduction of pest species on military vehicles and equipment.

The last two of these involve quarantine and biosecurity. The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) was established in 1908 and exercises the function of border quarantine. Within the Department of Agriculture and Water Services (hereinafter Agriculture) is the Biosecurity Services Group which advises AQIS. In 2018, the Inspector-General of Biosecurity published the report *Military biosecurity risk management in Australia*⁶

The report refers to some of the general threats to biosecurity posed by the presence of foreign armed forces in Australian waters and on Australian soil:

- ... military aircraft, vessels, vehicles, equipment and personnel kits provide pathways into Australia for exotic pests and diseases and present special biosecurity risks. Military equipment and conveyances operate in many different international environments and frequently land or arrive in Australia at non-first points of entry. Equipment and conveyances can be specialised and complex, making them difficult to inspect. (p. 6)
- Military airfields are not normally staffed by biosecurity officers, limiting Agriculture’s ability to conduct on-arrival biosecurity inspections. Agriculture and Defence should collaborate to permanently station at least one biosecurity officer at

⁵ [U.S. Air Force bombers integrate with RAAF in Exercise Black Dagger \(pacom.mil\)](https://www.pacom.mil)

⁶ [igb.gov.au/Pages/completed-audits-and-reviews.aspx](https://www.igb.gov.au/Pages/completed-audits-and-reviews.aspx).

the busy RAAF Base Amberley to improve biosecurity risk management and service delivery. (p. 7)

- Foreign defence forces usually bring their own conveyances and equipment, providing multiple pathways for the introduction of biosecurity risk material. Exercises may involve beach or parachute landings, where Agriculture cannot provide normal biosecurity border inspection and clearance, and other arrangements must be made. (p. 12)
- Volumes of military arrivals can be high. Defence does not routinely record vessel and cargo arrival data/information for foreign defence forces that enter Australia. (p. 13)
- Agriculture records non-compliance with biosecurity requirements during exercises and reports this to planners following an exercise. (p. 16)
- Between July 2016 and December 2017, biosecurity breaches were twice as high for naval vessels as for all commercial vessels. This was mainly due to foreign naval vessel breaches. (p. 24)
- ...the rate of missed inspections for foreign naval vessels (18 per cent) was much higher than for Australian naval vessels (3 per cent). (p. 24)
- Numbers of biosecurity officers at some military first points of entry are limited, sometimes leading to difficulties for Agriculture in sufficiently resourcing military inspections. (p.28)
- ... the movement of Australian and foreign military assets and personnel into Australia will continue to pose biosecurity risks and ongoing training will be required for both Australian and foreign forces. (p. 35)

Both AQIS and Agriculture are well aware of the risks to biosecurity of the entry of foreign troops to Australia.⁷ They cannot eradicate the risks, but will do their best, within resourcing constraints (for example, the 2018 federal government's cut to biodiversity staff⁸), to prevent breaches or to report on them when they are discovered.

There is one standout loophole, however: the US refuses to allow Australian inspection of its vessels, military equipment and personnel. We are in the invidious position of having to train US personnel to do the job for us, and to trust that they will do it to the standards of exactness and thoroughness required to protect our biosecurity.

The Inspector-General of Biosecurity, in her report quoted above, says:

- The US Government claims sovereign immunity—the right to refuse entry by the Australian Government—over its military conveyances. Agriculture manages potential biosecurity risks by advising US defence forces involved in exercises or visiting Australia on biosecurity requirements and training US personnel in managing biosecurity risks. (p. 6)
- (Agriculture) also trains select US defence force and US Department of Agriculture staff in Australia's biosecurity inspection requirements and accredits them as

⁷ See: [Arrangements for vessels invoking sovereign immunity - Department of Agriculture](#)

⁸ See: [Vanguard - Communist Party of Australia Marxist Leninist \(cpaml.org\)](#)

‘Agriculture-approved inspectors’ (AAIs). AAIs can inspect US sovereign-immune aircraft and goods—previously inspected offshore by Agriculture biosecurity officers—entering Australian training grounds from US sovereign-immune vessels. (p. 7)

- The US invokes sovereign immunity on all its State aircraft, ships and amphibious craft. To manage the biosecurity risk posed by these craft, the Australian and US governments have agreed that Agriculture staff train US Embassy and US Department of Defense reservists and select active duty personnel as AAIs to inspect *most* sovereign immune US military assets. Agriculture also trains US Department of Agriculture (USDA) personnel as AAIs to undertake and certify inspections. (p. 17 – our emphasis on “most”)
- ... the US defence forces are solely responsible for meeting all Australian biosecurity requirements. (p. 17)
- Agriculture has provided the US military with guides to help it understand and meet Australian biosecurity requirements. These advise how to prepare and clean certain vehicles and equipment such as rolling stock (trucks, trailers, vehicles), airframes (helicopters or tilt-rotor aircraft), vessels (hovercrafts) and personnel kit (pack and webbing). (p. 19)
- For US sovereign-immune aircraft and vessels, Agriculture-approved inspectors (AAIs) inspect crew health status, vessel sanitation, stores and waste management. If AAIs find low-risk biosecurity material during inspection, they have the area cleaned and re-inspected or report the findings to Agriculture. AAIs report all high-risk material to Agriculture for direction on management. (p. 28)

With all due respect to Agriculture personnel charged with training US AAIs, the US’s protection of its “sovereign immunity” is an affront to Australian sovereignty and an unacceptable risk to our biosecurity.

Environmental destruction

The movement of tens of thousands of troops, with their military vehicles, must cause damage to areas of native vegetation, and to wildlife, in designated training areas. This is also true of flora and fauna subject to live aerial bombing practice. There are also the attendant social disruptions imposed on Australian citizens living close to training areas. Cattle growers near Shoalwater complain about stock being scattered following C-130 low flight operations.⁹

The Shoalwater Bay Training Area (SWBTA) a heritage-listed military installation at Byfield Road, Byfield, Shire of Livingstone, Queensland, Australia. It is a large, relatively undisturbed and intact natural system with a wide variety of coastal landforms and a high level of biodiversity. It contains a diverse range of marine and coastal wetland landscapes,

⁹ [50 fed-up graziers break silence on Shoalwater safety concerns | Morning Bulletin \(themorningbulletin.com.au\)](https://www.themorningbulletin.com.au)

vegetation types and ecosystems. It was added to the Australian Commonwealth Heritage List on 22 June 2004.¹⁰

In a 2012 thesis on environmental management at the SWBTA, Wen Wu notes :

Major environmental impacts of military training (e.g. traffic, bombing, live firing and vehicle manoeuvres) include: soil erosion and compaction; landscape change; water and waste pollution; noise and air pollution; disturbance of flora and fauna; ecosystem and environmental destruction; and impacts on human health and safety (Cuddy et al., 1990; Ramos and de Melo, 2005; Rao, 2005; Ramos et al., 2007a).¹¹

Wen Wu concludes that military activities at the SWBTA accorded well with environmental management objectives, although he adds the qualifier that “The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) currently indicates no serious impacts, but the future is less certain, as stated by interviewees.” He adds: “The ADF also needs to focus continuously on the potential impacts of the common concerns stated in relevant documents and interviews (e.g. fires, underwater bombings, oil spills, feral animals, shore birds, exotic species, marine mammals and coastal zones), as detailed in Appendix 6. An example noted by several interviewees is the increasing possibility of fire in dry seasons, as discussed in Section 5.3.2. If the intensity of military activities increases at SWBTA, will the ADF EMS still be effective if there are longer dry seasons and less rainfall, especially in the context of climate change? Interviewees have stated that increased military use of SWBTA is a possibility.”¹² (EMS = Environmental Management System).

The CSIRO released a study of fire management practices at the SWBTA in 1998.¹³ At that time, the joint US-Australian Exercise Kangaroo military training exercises, begun in 1974, were drawing to a close and the larger Talisman Sabre exercises had not yet begun. The study noted that “fire management was initially biased towards the requirements for grazing rather than military training or conservation. Recent changes have been introduced to better address the military requirements of decreasing risk and disruption to exercises...”

In October 2018, a large fire originating in the SWBTA caused smoke hazards over Central Queensland.¹⁴

In 2020, the Mayor for Livingstone (which includes the SWBTA) criticised the ADF for its failure to more effectively manage bushfires at the SWBTA following a massive fire which burnt out large areas of the training area and resulted in the loss of houses in the adjacent areas.

¹⁰ See [Shoalwater Bay Military Training Area - Wikipedia](#)

¹¹ [Microsoft Word - Thesis Final Wen Wu.docx \(unsw.edu.au\)](#) p. 19

¹² *Ibid* pp 170-71

¹³ [DOCUMENT- \(csiro.au\)](#)

¹⁴ [Large fire in military area causes smoke hazards over CQ | Tweed Daily News](#)

The use of live bombs in joint military exercises damages Australian flora and fauna. US F/A-18E Super Hornet jets taking part in Exercise Black Dagger training runs outside Townsville use live Mk-82 High Explosive bombs.¹⁵

An agreement between the US and Australia, signed in 2005, allows US bombers to practice live bombing raids in the NT, over the Delamere, Bradshaw and Mt Bunday training areas. In September 2020, in one of the latest such exercises, two US Air Force bombers, a B-1B Lancer and B-2 Spirit aircraft flew from Guam and Diego Garcia, respectively, and dropped both live and inert munitions on the training areas.¹⁶ It was part of a combined task force with the Marine Rotational Force-Darwin and Australian Defence Forces. Although the US bombers did not land in Australia, a squadron of KC-135 Stratotankers from the 909th Air Refueling Squadron at Kadena Air Base, Japan flew to Darwin, Australia to support the bomber presence.¹⁷

Mishaps can be expected, and according to a former Prime Minister, the best we can do is to hope for minimal damage. In August 2005, a U.S. Marine Corps fighter jet dropped a bomb and damaged a building in an accident. The bomb, dropped by an F/A-18 Hornet, exploded near a control tower and damaged facilities at Delamere Air Weapons Range - attached to the RAAF Base Tindal near Katherine.

At the time, Prime Minister John Howard said: "Things like this will always happen; we hope not very frequently and we hope not any more dangerously," he told Melbourne Radio 3AW in August. "But the idea that you can conduct any kind of military exercise without some kind of potential for mishap is unrealistic."¹⁸

In 2013, US jets dropped bombs on the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park during Talisman Sabre exercises. Two American fighter jets "dropped four unarmed bombs into Australia's Great Barrier Reef Marine Park when a training exercise went wrong, the U.S. Navy said, angering environmentalists.

"The two AV-8B Harrier jets launched from aircraft carrier USS Bonhomme Richard each jettisoned an inert practice bomb and an unarmed laser-guided explosive bomb into the World Heritage-listed marine park off the coast of Queensland.

"The jets from the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit had intended to drop the ordnances on the Townshend Island bombing range, but aborted the mission when controllers reported the area was not clear of hazards.

¹⁵ [US fighter jets join Australian aircraft to drop bombs in military drills in Townsville | Daily Mail Online](#)

¹⁶ [US bombers conduct long-range strike training in the Top End - Defence Connect](#)

¹⁷ [US bombers conduct long-range strike training in the Top End - Defence Connect](#)

¹⁸ [US bombers to train in Australia - Wikinews, the free news source](#)

“Graeme Dunstan, who is among the environmentalists and anti-war activists demonstrating against the joint exercises, said the mishap proved that the U.S. military could not be trusted to protect the environment.”¹⁹

The Lancelin Defence Training Area is a 25km long coastal strip of sand dunes and limestone approximately 150kms north of Perth. It is used by the Australian Navy and Air Force for live firing exercises, but also by visiting US Navy jets from aircraft carriers undergoing maintenance. US Navy aircraft sometimes relocate to RAAF Pearce so that they can maintain operational flying expertise while the carrier’s flight deck is out of service. This flying training includes use of the Lancelin Defence Training Area for bombing practice.

The reaction of locals is a mixture of amused observation and concern for wildlife. On a recent Facebook post after a bombing exercise by HMAS Anzac last February, comments ranged from “That’s a bloody big crayboat!” (crayfishing is a notable Lancelin industry), to “Poor fish” and “Poor wildlife”. Perhaps more significant was the following: “I just hope all the bombs go off. I found one on the Rockingham Salt Lake a few years ago (*sic*) right next to the land Yacht club.”²⁰

In 2002, the Australian government proposed to expand the Lancelin DTA at the request of the United States. It was proposed that an additional area of land of approximately 36,500 hectares be acquired for a period of at least 50 years.

A report in Global Security made clear the reasons for the US interest:

The US has been interested in using the Lancelin Defence Training Area (DTA) for quite some time. In 1995 the commander of the US 7th Fleet Vice Admiral Archie Clemins inspected the Lancelin DTA with a view to its future use by US forces. Clemins told The West Australian that traditional US Training grounds around the world were disappearing and Australia was an attractive option. Vice-Admiral Clemins has spoken with Australian military officials about training here and personally inspected Lancelin during a recent visit to Perth. "One of the greatest things we lost in the Philippines were (bombing) ranges to train," he said. "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."²¹

Fortunately, the expansion did not get the required environmental approvals and was dropped. However, a current proposal is for the establishment of a 4800 hectare

¹⁹ [U.S. drops bombs on Australia's Great Barrier Reef Marine Park - CBS News](#)

²⁰ [\(20+\) Lancelin - Posts | Facebook](#)

²¹ [Lancelin Defence Training Area \(DTA\) \(globalsecurity.org\)](#)

underwater training range in the sea adjacent to Lancelin DTA, featuring underwater detonations of up to 5kg in strength. It is not clear yet whether this will be available for the training of foreign forces.

Conclusion

The risks to the Australian environment and to our biosecurity from joint military exercises held in Australian waters and on Australian soil are publicly acknowledged by the Departments of Defence and Agriculture. Environmental Impact Statements and Environmental Management Systems are thoroughgoing and will minimise environmental risk, but they cannot guarantee to eliminate it. In particular, the US cannot place its sovereign rights above those of our own. Until it waives its sovereign immunity, it should be precluded from participating in joint military exercises here.