



Exercise KAKADU: Then and Now

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On 6 May 1993, an international fleet consisting of ships from four navies conducted a Fleet Entry into Darwin Harbour to commence the Fleet Concentration Period – Exercise KAKADU ONE. It inaugurated a new era of regional engagement for the Royal Australian Navy and indeed for the Australian Defence Force as a whole.



The international fleet, made up of vessels from five nations, conduct a formation entry into Darwin Harbour led by HMTS Sukhothai upon the conclusion of Exercise KAKADU TWO

That first exercise included 15 ships and submarines and 2,000 personnel, including Army and Air Force elements, from six participating and observing nations. The exercise also included electronic warfare aircraft, anti-submarine warfare helicopters, fighters and maritime patrol aircraft from Australia, New Zealand and Singapore, and clearance divers from Australia and Malaysia. In addition, the Royal Thailand Navy sent its training ship, HMTS *Makut Rajakumarn*, with 113 midshipmen aboard.

Over 15 days the participating units conducted exercises in damage control; communications

procedures; interoperability between air, surface and submarine assets; mine warfare; and explosive ordnance disposal. The then Maritime Commander Australia, Rear Admiral Robert Walls, AO, RAN, stated that the exercise “should demonstrate to all participants the capability of participating forces to operate to the highest level to which compatibility of equipment allows.”ⁱ



*The KAKADU sports day is an opportunity for participating personnel to build relationships in the spirit of friendly competition. Here, personnel from HMAS Toowoomba take on personnel from JS Akebono in touch football in 2010.*ⁱⁱ

KAKADU also indicated a shift in focus for the RAN as it was the first time that such an exercise sought to develop regional cooperation and interoperability rather than the specific defence of Australia. The Minister for Defence, Senator Robert Ray, stated that Australia’s Defence ties to the Asia Pacific Region were just as important as those to the USA. Developing those ties was an evolutionary process in which KAKADU would play a central part. It was an ambitious undertaking, but it set a new standard for regional engagement which continues three decades later.



*Japanese destroyer, JS Fuyuzuki, conducts an approach with Australian frigate HMAS Newcastle during Exercise KAKADU 2016.*ⁱⁱⁱ



The success of the first KAKADU was reflected in how quickly it expanded for the second iteration in 1995 as 5,000 personnel, 22 ships, 2 submarines and more than 35 aircraft from eight nations took part. The RAN's commitment to the exercise increased as did that of our regional neighbours; Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia all increased their representation, while the Philippines also sent observers for the first time.



Learning how to work together. SBLT Mohammad Izzat, RMN, LEUT Evan Park, RCN, and LSET Martin Kenny on the flight deck of HMCS Calgary during Exercise KAKADU 2018.^{iv}

The then Maritime Commander Australia, Rear Admiral Don Chalmers, set out how KAKADU contributed to regional security; "KAKADU is firmly in keeping with Australia's foreign policy – in particular that element of policy which seeks through regional engagement to have Australia contribute to viable forms of cooperative security based on relationships which reflect a greater sense of genuine partnership." He went on to say that at Kakadu "there has been a blossoming of acquaintances – an exchange of information, procedures and ideas. We have developed our ability to cooperate at sea."^v

Exercises conducted during KAKADU cover a wide range of maritime tasks; humanitarian

assistance and disaster relief, evacuation operations, search and rescue, aid to civilian authorities, counter-piracy, maritime strike and interdiction, maritime mobility and amphibious operations.

In recent years KAKADU has grown to be one of the largest joint exercises in the Indo-Pacific region. In 2018 it included 23 ships, 21 aircraft, a submarine and more than 3,000 personnel from 27 nations, and was conducted in three phases; a harbour phase, a force integration training phase, and a free-play phase. Over the years the exercise has included participants from as far afield as Canada, the UK and the United Arab Emirates giving KAKADU a truly global perspective.



Members of the joint boarding parties of the RAN patrol boat, HMAS Glenelg, and the Republic of Fiji Navy Ship Kikau after a successful training exercise as part of KAKADU 2018.^{vi}

Over three decades Exercise KAKADU has grown to become Australia's largest joint exercise with some thirty nations having participated at some time. And while those initial ideals of enhancing cooperation and interoperability remain, KAKADU has matured to strengthen security relationships across the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

ⁱ 'Major international exercise focused on regional cooperation', *Navy News*, 21 May 1993, pp 1-4.

ⁱⁱ RAN Image Gallery, 20100820ran8484535_049.jpg.

ⁱⁱⁱ RAN Image Gallery, 20160922ran8098978_269.jpg.

^{iv} RAN Image Gallery, 20180908ran8504132_070.jpg.

^v 'Kakadu series is unique, important', *Navy News*, 7 April 1995, p 4.

^{vi} RAN Image Gallery, 20180909ran8484535_033.jpg.