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Honing Elite Skills for Hostile Environments

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Australia's elite soldiers are sharpening a lethal blend of skills to operate in the world's most dangerous environments, as demonstrated during Exercise Talisman Sabre 2025. From urban combat to cyber warfare, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) is adapting to modern threats in the Indo-Pacific. This article explores the training evolution, its strategic importance, and the challenges of maintaining readiness.

At Queensland's Townsville Field Training Area, ADF special forces showcased advanced tactics alongside allies from the United States (US) and Japan. Major General Paul Kenny, head of Special Operations

Command, told Defence News, “We’re training for high-intensity conflict—urban, littoral, and cyber domains—because that’s what the future demands.” The exercise included scenarios mimicking contested cities and maritime choke points, with troops mastering drone operations, electronic warfare, and precision strikes using the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS). These skills reflect the 2023 Defence Strategic Review (DSR), which prioritized versatile, tech-driven capabilities to counter threats like China’s growing naval presence.

The training’s intensity stems from real-world stakes. With tensions rising over Taiwan and the South China Sea, Australia’s forces must be ready for rapid deployment. Sergeant Lisa Thompson, a signals specialist, described the shift: “We’re not just soldiers; we’re tech operators, medics, and strategists all at once.” Her team neutralized a simulated cyberattack during the exercise, a skillset vital as adversaries increasingly target digital infrastructure. Yet, the ADF faces a recruitment crisis, with only 80% of its 69,000 personnel target met, per a 2025 Senate report. Critics argue the government’s defence budget, at 2.1% of gross domestic product (GDP), falls short of the 3.5% allies like the Netherlands advocate, risking gaps in training and equipment.

The ADF’s focus on hostile environments signals a shift from counterinsurgency to peer-level conflict readiness. However, underfunding and bureaucratic delays threaten to undermine these efforts. As global threats escalate, Australia’s ability to sustain this elite edge hinges on robust investment and policy clarity. Will the nation equip its forces to dominate in hostile arenas, or let fiscal caution weaken its resolve?