

WATCHING BRIEF: PINE GAP BASE

It is some years since public attention was focused on Pine Gap Base in central Australia. In this Brief, Friends will be reminded of the history and recent activities at this military base, and offered some ideas about possible action.

Background

Located near Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, Pine Gap is a satellite-tracking station operated jointly by Australia and the United States since 1970. From 1988 it has been known as the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap. It includes a large computer complex, many radomes and antennae, and 800 employees, mostly from US. It controls US spy satellites as they pass over one-third of the globe. Since the end of the Cold War it has been employed mainly on intercepting and recording weapons and communications signals from countries in Asia. Australians (including Members of Parliament) have minimal official access to the Facility.

The Facility has played a direct role in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan after 2001, including the use of military drones. In 2013 ex-CIA employee Edward Snowden revealed that the base was involved in the global surveillance program conducted by US intelligence agencies. This led the Australian Government to announce that it would investigate the implications for the privacy of Australian citizens.

Analysis and Comment

In a detailed report on 26 July 2013 (*Sydney Morning Herald*), Philip Dorling described Pine Gap as “the most secret place in Australia”. US agencies represented there include the National Reconnaissance Office, the National Security Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the US Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, along with all branches of the US armed forces. Australian governments have often stressed that the base helps monitor compliance with international arms control and disarmament agreements. However it has increasingly become part of US military strategy which emphasizes space-based intelligence collection, and signals intelligence and imagery.

Philip Dorling says:

Pine Gap is indeed a vital element in a US military intelligence and collection and targeting complex that can locate the origin of radio signals to within as little as 10 metres, immediately integrate that information with other data including satellite imagery, and relay targeting information to US and allied military units within minutes. Pine Gap’s role in minute-by-minute tactical intelligence collection is confirmed by numerous references to ‘real-time tracking and geolocation’ and provision of ‘extremely valuable intelligence’ to support operations to ‘capture or kill high value targets’.

He questions whether the way in which Pine Gap's activities are entwined with US strategies forecloses Australia's diplomatic and military options in relation to future crises. He fears we may be drawn into targeting that is against our national interest, and calls for greater public scrutiny of Pine Gap.

Professor Des Ball of the Australian National University has long been regarded as the most knowledgeable scholar on Pine Gap. In evidence before the Australian Parliament in 1999, he explained the way in which the base had expanded to cover satellite keeping, signals processing and signals analysis. In a recent ABC TV interview (*7.30 Report*, 13 August 2014), he raised concerns at what he described as "ethically unacceptable" work at Pine Gap, and called on the Government to rethink its support. In particular he pointed to:

- The killing of thousands of people (including civilians) by the use of military drones in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Iraq.
- The involvement of Australia (through Pine Gap) in a global network where intelligence and operations are essentially fused.
- The fact that Pine Gap has become increasingly a war-fighting machine rather than an intelligence collector.

Protest Action

Over the years there have been numerous protests (in some of which Quakers have been involved) at and about Pine Gap, especially about the role of the base in the nuclear weapons race, missile defence, and counter-terrorism. In 1983 there was a large protest by women; in 1986 the 'Close the Gap' campaign demonstrated there; in 2002 there was a protest against the impending Iraq war and missile defence; and in 2005 Christians Against Terrorism entered the base area and were subsequently acquitted on the grounds that they were unfairly prevented from arguing in court that Pine Gap was not an Australian defence facility.

Access to the base by Australian officials was tested in 1999 when a parliamentary committee (the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties) had to decide whether to extend the treaty that allows Pine Gap. Committee members were upset at being repeatedly denied access to the facility while their American counterparts were not. The report by the committee was scathing:

2.19 Our experience has confirmed the anomaly, perhaps highlighting it even more starkly:

- *a congressional committee voting on an annual appropriation is able to visit the Joint Defence Facility and receive a classified briefing; while*
- *the Treaties Committee, seeking to advise the community on whether Australia should be bound to an international obligation for the next ten years, is denied access to the facility and entrusted with less information than can be found in a public library.*

After the Australian committee eventually agreed to the treaty extension, subsequent Australian enquiries were granted visits more readily. The committee did, however, seek assurances that future briefings about Pine Gap would be given in greater detail by Ministers, even if the hearings had to be held in private.

Legislation passed in 2009 made Pine Gap a 'special defence undertaking and a prohibited area' - preventing access to the base or the photographing of it. Senator Scott Ludlam (Greens WA) said at the time that this was an over-reaction to the 2005 protest by the Christian group, and was entirely unnecessary given that the existing Crimes Act could deal with trespass.

Possible Action

Friends may wish to take up with Members and Senators of Federal Parliament the following questions:

1. What changes have been made to the operation of Pine Gap in recent years, and to what extent do these blur the distinction between intelligence gathering and war-fighting?
2. What steps have been taken to ensure that Australia can make independent judgments about becoming involved in conflicts in which our national interest may differ from that of the USA?
3. What are the current arrangements for Parliament and Australian citizens to scrutinize what is happening at Pine Gap?

A list of those politicians who are on the relevant Parliamentary committees (e.g. Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade; Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade; and Joint Standing Committee on Treaties) can be found at www.aph.gov.au

QPLC will be pleased to receive feedback on action taken, and on ideas for national response.

Canberra
August 2014

Sources

Wikipedia on Pine Gap www.wikipedia.org

Philip Dorling, 'Australian outback station at forefront of US spying arsenal' (*SMH*, 26 July 2013). www.smh.com.au

Des Ball, 'Pine Gap facility's operation ethically unacceptable' (*ABC TV 7.30 Report*, 13 August 2014) – reporter Dylan Wench. www.abc.net.au/news

Australian Parliament website – www.aph.gov.au