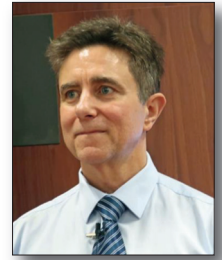


Pine Gap: an historical perspective on Australia's intelligence-sharing partnership with the United States in a time of political change



A paper based on an address to the Institute on 30 July 2019 by

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The Australia-United States Joint Defence Facility at Pine Gap near Alice Springs in Australia's Northern Territory, was established in 1970. Mr Rosenberg explains what the facility does, providing an insider's perspective on the intelligence-collection operations; and why the facility is located at Pine Gap. He emphasises that, since 1980, intelligence collection has been an equal partnership between Australia and the United States and concludes that Pine Gap is likely to remain a part of the United States-Australia intelligence partnership well into the future.

Key words: Australia; intelligence collection; Joint Defence Facility; National Security Agency; Pine Gap; United States.

Perhaps no other relationship in Australian history has been as controversial as the presence of the Joint Defence Facility at Pine Gap just outside Alice Springs. Established by a treaty signed in 1966 during the short time when Harold Holt was Prime Minister², it became operational on 19 June 1970 with the launch of its first satellite, codenamed *Rhyolite*.

For Australians, Pine Gap has always been shrouded in secrecy, with misleading initial claims that it existed to conduct 'upper atmospheric research', a vague term that avoided disclosing its true mission: using satellites to intercept wireless transmissions from the former Soviet Union.

Opposition to Pine Gap began early in its history, with concerned citizens protesting about Canberra's lack of access to the intelligence gathering going on there. Around 1980, though, this situation changed when Australian officers were given equivalent roles to United States personnel and the position of Deputy Chief – to be held by an Australian – was established, commencing the joint American-Australian leadership structure at 'The Base', as it is known internally.

Protests would continue, however. Fears held included that Pine Gap (and Alice Springs) was a target for America's nuclear-armed adversaries; there were claims that it was being used to direct drone strikes that were causing civilian deaths; and a further claim that its intelligence-gathering role in the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 caused many more civilians to be killed. Nevertheless, The Base continued to quietly perform its role, gaining in size and importance as satellite technology became increasingly more complex.

Unsurprisingly, Pine Gap maintains a low profile and remains unknown to many Australians, particularly younger generations, although information about it is readily available on the internet. And it appears in news stories from time to time, most sensationally when former U.S. National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden exposed the U.S. National Security Agency's domestic surveillance programme – a development that launched a worldwide debate about the legality of governments seeking to access individual personal and/or telecommunications information. It is, therefore, important that Australians know more about Pine Gap: its purpose; what it does; what it does not do. In this paper, I shall endeavour to answer these questions.

The Joint Facility And The Intelligence Benefit

Pine Gap is an intelligence-collection facility located in Alice Springs. In the news, it only appears occasionally, usually during publicised protests against its presence. These tend to occur when rumours link its capabilities to an offensive military action involving civilian casualties. These rumours, in turn, cause journalists or conspiracy theorists to express concern over Australian culpability in this action. Intelligence from Pine Gap, however, is not used in isolation, and The Base has no capability or responsibility in making decisions to initiate offensive strikes.

Although it is sometimes reported that innocent civilians have been killed in operations such as drone strikes, the information and intelligence contributed by Pine Gap in any such scenario is used to minimise harm and eliminate the unnecessary deaths of non-combatants. To achieve this goal, electronic intelligence normally is fused with human intelligence, overhead imagery, and any other available source of relevant information.

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²<https://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/treaties/1966/17.html>

In fact, most of the signals intelligence collected at Pine Gap is associated with weapons testing and communications systems, and, although The Base supports military operations, it only has a passive role in collecting signals intelligence. It does not play a tactical role in any offensive military missions and its target countries are all outside the *Five Eyes* intelligence-sharing community of the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and their territories. Pine Gap conducts surveillance on countries that produce weapons that may be used against the United States and Australia, such as Russia, China, Iran and North Korea, or on communication systems that might help to identify individuals who pose a threat, such as those in a terrorist network.

Pine Gap also may be tasked to collect signals that are a threat to the United States or Australia, such as communication signals linked to the Iraqi leadership prior to, during, and after the initial Gulf War in 1991; weapons-related signals, such as radars, that are used to guide surface-to-air missiles into their targets; and telemetry on board weapons undergoing testing and development. The Base was on the frontline of intelligence collection during the fall of South Vietnam, the end of communism in some regions, the two wars in Iraq, the Balkans conflict, Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda, the war on terror, and the emergence of Islamic State.

The facility is jointly led by the Chief, an American, and the Deputy Chief, an Australian, who share the equivalent executive rank. A phrase often quoted to describe the shared decision-making at Pine Gap is that everything is done with the 'full knowledge and concurrence' of the Australian and United States governments. Both countries can equally and equitably task Pine Gap to collect signals intelligence, but the bulk of the tasking comes from the United States as its military is larger and has a greater global presence. In spite of this, both countries have equal access to signals intelligence collected by the Pine Gap satellites, regardless of which country has tasked the collection, a situation that has existed since the 1980s when Australians were granted access to The Base's signal processing centre.

This level of intelligence sharing has produced an enduring relationship – there are no secrets within the walls of Pine Gap regarding any signals intelligence collected by the Pine Gap satellites, a situation that has fostered a trusting, collaborative and co-operative environment between the two countries at Pine Gap. It is at the heart of Australia's intelligence-sharing partnership with the United States.

The mission also comes at an incredibly low financial cost to Australia, last disclosed as \$14 million in 2011-2012³. For that small amount, Australia's security benefit is immense – Australia may task Pine Gap to collect information on anything it believes is

necessary for its security. Some information may be unique to Pine Gap, and so The Base remains a crucial part of Australia's defence strategy.

The Need For Satellites

When Pine Gap was initially constructed, its mission was to collect intelligence from the Soviet Union, the United States' most powerful adversary in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The Soviet Union was a closed landmass to the West that spanned 11 time zones. Electronic intelligence from the interior of the Soviet Union was typically only accessible by aircraft overflying its airspace, or, alternatively, developing satellite technology that could more safely collect data and relay it down to the ground site without risk to personnel or aircraft. The U2 spy plane frequently overflew the Soviet Union, taking photographs and utilising electronic eavesdropping equipment, but when Francis Gary Powers was shot down on one of these missions on May Day 1960, the United States realised it needed an alternative to the U2 or risked more shoot downs. Satellites could close the intelligence gaps with the Soviet Union by safely collecting electronic signals, transmitting them to a ground site, analysing and interpreting them, and presenting the results to intelligence planners. Importantly, the capability of satellites was needed, because weapons testing primarily occurred well within the border of the Soviet Union. Collecting signals intelligence associated with these tests was a main objective of Pine Gap.

The Decision To Select Alice Springs

So, why select the small town of Alice Springs in remote inland Australia to host the ground site for such new, sophisticated satellites?

Politically, the choice of a location in Australia to host the ground site for the satellites, from an Australian perspective, was wise, as it would help to solidify the post-World War II alliance with the world's most powerful country. From a United States perspective, Australia was a trusted ally. There was already a defence agreement in place between the two countries, both countries being signatories to the ANZUS Pact of 1951⁴. More importantly, Australia had signed the United Kingdom-United States of America Signals Intelligence Sharing Agreement in 1956⁵, making Australia a member of the eventual *Five Eyes* community. This treaty formed the basis for signals-intelligence sharing between the two countries, but, as most Australians know, the bedrock of the alliance with the United States goes much deeper than simply signed agreements. It has been an historically supportive, continuing and enduring relationship between the two countries – one that is ever present in spirit and kinship, the countries having gone

³<https://www.smh.com.au/technology/australian-outback-station-at-forefront-of-us-spying-arsenal-20130720-hv10h.html>

⁴<https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/anzus-treaty>

⁵<https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/the-five-eyes-the-intelligence-alliance-of-the-anglosphere/>

into battle together and its soldiers having died alongside one another as brothers-in-arms.



The Australia-United States Joint Defence Facility, Pine Gap
[Source: Pine Gap]

Australia's geographic location on the opposite side of the globe to the United States also played a significant role in the selection of Alice Springs to host the new ground site. A ground site on the Australian land mass could maintain 24 hours a day/7 days a week coverage of a satellite that can see into the western part of the Soviet Union. This is not possible from the continental United States as Russia is on the other side of the globe.

But Australia had many more hospitable places for the Americans to construct its ground site, so why choose Alice Springs? Firstly, it is an established town with schools, organised sporting activities, entertainment and an infrastructure that could support the Americans who moved there, particularly families with children. It is also remote and isolated and had a relatively low population in the late 1960s – around 6000 to 7000 people. From a security perspective, this was acceptable to the United States government, because a location with few people would constitute less of a security risk than would a location with many people, as the latter would more readily enable a person who posed a risk to The Base to blend into the crowd. The relatively low population made the detection of threats more likely, *e.g.* of someone setting up an operation to tap into the beam being transmitted down to the ground site by the satellites; or of someone who might be there to collect information about The Base or about the people who work at Pine Gap.

From the town's perspective, Pine Gap has provided a 'second-stream' economy to Alice Springs, helping the town to grow and prosper with the millions of dollars spent each year by Americans who moved to Alice Springs, and by locals who were hired to work at The Base or in support jobs. Regardless of protests against Pine Gap throughout the years, the town of Alice Springs has always supported The Base's presence due in part to the economic support provided to the town by Pine Gap and to the good relationship that

continues to exist between the townspeople and the Americans.

Politics And The Future Of Pine Gap

The leadership of the United States and Australia will determine the future direction of Pine Gap. The current agreement permitting Pine Gap to remain operating now requires one country to give the other three-years' notice⁶ to terminate operations at the joint facility. Previously, the facility's presence had been renewed at ten-year intervals⁷. Only once in its history has there been serious consideration by the Australian government of terminating the operations at Pine Gap – during the prime-ministership of Gough Whitlam in the early 1970s.

As communications technology advances and broadens, and the use of various social media platforms expands, lawmakers and the laws that govern communication intelligence may not always be able to keep pace with these rapid changes in how people communicate. This includes the oversight processes in place to regulate potentially intrusive communications surveillance.

When Edward Snowden released information showing that the U.S. National Security Agency was collecting what appeared to be excessive communication information on its own citizens, possibly in violation of United States law including the fourth amendment to the Constitution, public outrage and mistrust of the National Security Agency by United States citizens and some federal lawmakers reached a climax. Pine Gap, however, was not a part of this domestic eavesdropping as the satellites do not collect communications information from the United States, Australia or other *Five Eyes* member countries or territories – directives and agreements limit its use of satellites to collecting electronic signals from outside these territories. In the 18 years the author worked inside operations at The Base, Pine Gap adhered to these agreements; and there were no plans in place that had been made known to the workforce to change the *status quo*.

Politically, this is the correct course for Pine Gap as it would be untenable for either country to utilise the Pine Gap satellites to collect communications from citizens or residents of either country. To do so would violate the very directives and agreements in place to prevent that from happening. In addition, it is highly unlikely that either country would allow individuals from the partner country to access communications information from its own citizens at Pine Gap. Preventing Pine Gap from collecting communication signals from United States and Australian citizens and residents has historically contributed to maintaining the trusting relationship that exists at Pine Gap, and this is unlikely to change.

⁶<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/treaties/1966/17.html>

⁷<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/treaties/2000/27.html>

Conclusion

The political and strategic relationship between the United States and Australia historically has been strong, enduring and based on long term goals. This has been true regardless of who has been prime minister or president. The relationship always has been stronger than one individual. Indeed, for almost five decades behind the scenes, Pine Gap has been helping to strengthen the ties that bind the United States and Australia as allies. Looking to the future, leaders will come and go in both countries. At any given time, though, the leaders of the day would be wise to value and to continue the special relationship at Pine Gap as it benefits the security of both countries.

So, Pine Gap's future seems assured, regardless of any individual leader's foreign policy ambitions. The United States and Australia will continue to need the intelligence collected by the satellites. Although no one can guarantee whether Pine Gap will still be there in 10 or 20 years, the satellites designed today are, and in the future will be, 'future-proofed', *i.e.* designed to detect signals the intelligence community is expecting, even while the technology to transmit these signals is yet to be developed. In short, Pine Gap is likely to remain a part of the United States-Australia intelligence partnership well into the future.

The Author: David Rosenberg, an engineer, mathematician and electronics intelligence analyst, was a United States National Security Agency officer

for more than 20 years. From 1990 to 2008, he was posted to the Joint Defence Facility, Pine Gap, where he was responsible for identifying, evaluating and reporting the military capabilities of countries that posed potential threats to the United States. He established an advanced training programme for new analysts in the signals intelligence community and managed teams that evaluated the function, capabilities, performance, and vulnerability assessment of all types of radar and weapon systems, such as surface-to-air missiles, ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and associated countermeasure tactics and techniques. Subsequently, he wrote *Pine Gap: the inside story of the NSA in Australia* (Hardie Grant: Richmond, Victoria, 2018) and was a Technical and Creative consultant to the Netflix/ABC television series, *Pine Gap*, 2018. [Photo of Mr Rosenberg: Colonel J. M. Hutcheson MC]

Further Reading

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