

Australian spy base “critical” to Obama’s drone assassinations

Patrick O’Connor
22 July 2013

New revelations have detailed the key role played by the Australian Pine Gap intelligence facility in the illegal US drone assassination program in Central Asia and the Middle East.

According to reports published in the Fairfax Press yesterday, Washington is “critically dependent” on Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap for locating the targets marked for extrajudicial execution by President Barack Obama and his officials. A “primary function” of the facility, located in an isolated area of central Australia near Alice Springs, is to identify the “geolocation” of radio signals, including hand-held radios and mobile phones, throughout the “eastern hemisphere, from the Middle East across Asia to China, North Korea and the Russian far east”. This information then “feeds into the United States drone strike program and other military operations”, with “personnel sitting in airconditioned offices in central Australia directly linked, on a minute-by-minute basis, to US and allied military operations in Afghanistan and, indeed, anywhere else across the eastern hemisphere.”

US drone strikes, according to recent estimates by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, have killed more than 3,500 people, including at least 890 civilians. Countless more have died in US “counter-insurgency” and other covert operations. Drone strike casualties include American citizens, personally selected for assassination by President Obama, in blatant violation of the US Constitution as well as international law.

It is now clear that the Australian Labor government, under both prime ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, has been an active accomplice in these criminal activities, as part of its unconditional backing for the Obama administration’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, drone attacks in Pakistan, Yemen, and other countries, and violent interventions in Libya and Syria.

Pine Gap is one of the world’s largest satellite ground stations. Established in 1970, it nominally functions as a joint US-Australian facility, but is operated under American command. Winning the post of Pine Gap chief, the Fairfax Press explained, “is a step towards promotion into the most senior ranks of the US intelligence community”.

Earlier this month, National Security Advisor (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden confirmed that Pine Gap forms part of Washington’s vast and illegal electronic and signals intelligence global network. One of its functions comprises an NSA program codenamed X-Keyscore, which collects electronic data, separates it into streams of permanently storable phone numbers, email addresses, log-ins and user activity. (See “Snowden confirms Australian agencies involved in NSA global spying”)

Last month, Defence Minister Stephen Smith issued a statement on Pine Gap to parliament, declaring that the centre operated with the “full knowledge and concurrence” of the Australian government, but that this “does not mean that Australia approves every activity or tasking undertaken”. He went on to claim that the base “delivers information on intelligence priorities such as terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and military and weapons developments”.

In fact, as the Fairfax Press noted, “the Australian-American base’s direct support for US military operations is much greater than admitted by Defence Minister Stephen Smith and previous Australian governments ... Pine Gap’s capabilities are now deeply and inextricably entwined with US military operations, down to the tactical level, across half the world”.

The latest revelations by journalist Phillip Dorling are based on unnamed sources, including former Pine Gap

personnel. According to his account, the facility has the capacity to pinpoint radio signals anywhere on the planet to an accuracy of 10 metres. It then processes the data and provides targeting information to the US military “within minutes”. Other intelligence is relayed to assist with “combat and non-combat search and rescue missions”. Vast amounts of data are intercepted, with one former US Army intelligence analyst describing “manually sifting through hundreds of hours of collection”.

There are about 800 officials working at Pine Gap, Dorling reported, twice the number that were there 30 years ago. Personnel are drawn from across the Australian and American intelligence and military apparatus, including the NSA and CIA, as well as aerospace and defence contractors.

The facility has seen “a massive quantitative and qualitative transformation” over the past decade, and “especially the past three years”.

This transformation has been driven by the Obama administration’s “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific—its desperate attempt to maintain the dominance of US imperialism in the Pacific region through the encirclement of China. Under the auspices of the Labor government, Australia has been fully integrated into Washington’s aggressive diplomatic and military operations. Former Prime Minister Julia Gillard agreed in 2011 to open up a new US Marine base in northern Australia and to prepare for a stepped up US military presence in other facilities, including a drone aircraft station in the Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean. Undoubtedly, the revamped US-Australia alliance also involved secret agreements to step up US intelligence operations on Australian territory, at Pine Gap and other facilities.

As a result, the Labor government has placed the entire Australian population on the frontline of any US conflict with China. In the event of a US attack on Beijing, nominally Australian and joint intelligence facilities will immediately play a crucial combat role. One Australian defence intelligence source told Fairfax: “The US will never fight another war in the eastern hemisphere without the direct involvement of Pine Gap.”

It appears that the latest Pine Gap leaks reflect deepening alarm, within a section of the Australian ruling elite, at the implications of being corralled

behind a US military assault on China. Fissures have been generated within ruling circles by the strategic dilemma: whether to align Canberra with Washington, its long standing diplomatic and military ally, or Beijing, now its most important trading partner, as tensions escalate.

The Fairfax Press opined: “The bigger question, however, is whether Pine Gap’s deep and growing engagement with US military operations is something that has foreclosed Australia’s diplomatic and military options in relation to future crises and conflicts. Arguably, technological change has now given full expression to the desire of Harold Holt, the Australian prime minister who originally approved the Pine Gap project, to go ‘all the way’ with the USA.”

The response of the working class must be to fight for the shutdown of Pine Gap and every other military and intelligence base in Australia. This can only be carried out as part of the development of a new antiwar movement, based on the international unification of workers and young people in the US, China, throughout the Asia-Pacific and the world, in the struggle against the capitalist profit system itself, that is the source of militarism and war.

The author recommends:

US military bases in Australia: The role of Pine Gap
[29 May 2013]



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact