

Top-level US visit to Pine Gap highlights Australia's role in war planning against China

Mike Head, Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Senate in Queensland
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A little-reported six-day visit by senior US military commanders late last month particularly focussed on the US satellite surveillance and missile guidance facility at Pine Gap in central Australia.

Two days of talks were held with military and intelligence officers at Pine Gap, one of the most important American war bases globally. That underscores the accelerating preparations for war against China, with Australia as a key launching platform.

This points to the reality behind the increasingly incendiary comments by Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Defence Minister Peter Dutton about preparing for war, and the response of the Labor Party, which has criticised the Liberal-National Coalition government for not moving fast enough to acquire missiles, drones and other weaponry.

For fear of triggering popular opposition, the top-level US delegation's trip to Pine Gap, just 20 kilometres southwest of Alice Springs, was kept out of official press releases. No coverage appeared in the major Australian corporate media outlets.

However, the US military chiefs involved spoke to the *Financial Times* of London, a newspaper of the corporate elite, about the war capabilities being expanded at Pine Gap.

The head of the US Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral John Aquilino, who last year declared that war against China was “much closer than most think,” described Australia as an “extremely high-end partner.”

Referring to Pine Gap, Aquilino said enhanced visibility in space would help counter Chinese hypersonic weapons. “The ability to identify and track and defend against those hypersonics is really the key,” he said.

Aquilino heads the largest US command, comprising some 380,000 military personnel armed with warplanes,

warships, submarines and the latest weaponry. His visit sent a threatening pre-election political message against any wavering from the bipartisan commitment to these preparations.

According to the Australian Defence Department press release, the purpose of his visit was “to demonstrate unequivocally the strength and depth of the Australia–United States Alliance.”

Accompanying Aquilino, the head of the US Space Command, General James Dickinson, said Australia was a “critical partner” in space warfare, including to monitor Chinese space operations. “This is the perfect location for a lot of things we need to do,” he told the *Financial Times*.

Casting aside the façade that such operations are purely defensive, the deputy head of the US Cyber Command, Lieutenant General Charles Moore, openly referred to offensive capabilities. He said digital convergence between the US and Australia gave the US the “potential to perform offensive operations” and an “asymmetric advantage” over China, which lacked such global reach.

Behind the backs of the Australian population, and with the complete support of the Labor Party, the Liberal-National Coalition government has allowed Washington to undertake a major expansion of the Pine Gap facility.

Authorised by Australian governments, both Labor and Coalition, since it was established in 1970, Pine Gap has long given the US military satellite coverage of a wide swathe of the world, including China, Southeast Asia, East Asia, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific.

Now, with its 40 or so giant domes and access to more powerful satellites, the base is being more closely integrated into the Pentagon's preparations for hi-tech warfare against China including the use of long-range hypersonic missiles and space weapons being developed

by the US.

The danger of nuclear conflict is rising. The US is testing highly manoeuvrable and virtually undetectable hypersonic missiles that can travel at more than five times the speed of sound, while saying China is doing the same, with missiles that can be launched from space.

Writing in the *Saturday Paper*, Brian Toohey reported that Pine Gap now had at least four advanced satellites connected to it. “From Pine Gap, a vast volume of military data is fed into the US war fighting machine in real time,” he noted.

The satellites intercepted “a huge array of electronic signals for intelligence analysis,” as well as from weapon systems, such as surface-to-air missiles, anti-aircraft artillery, fighter planes, drones and space vehicles. Added capabilities now allowed the satellites to detect and track the heat from spacecraft, as well as from missiles and military jets.

American National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed in documents published in 2013 and 2017 that Pine Gap plays a critical role in assisting US military operations, including identifying targets for missile attacks and drone assassinations, and in NSA programs to collect electronic data on people around the world.

As part of the US-led “Five Eyes” global intelligence network—including Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand—intelligence agencies have high-level access to the NSA data, including on Australian citizens, which could be used to target opponents of the US war drive.

One Australian government after another has shielded Pine Gap’s activities. In 2009, the last Labor government made it a crime, punishable by up to seven years’ imprisonment, to enter the base’s perimeters, fly over it, or acquire “a photograph, sketch, plan, model, article, note or other document of, or relating to” Pine Gap.

As part of the Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia to confront China, the Gillard Labor government also offered Darwin as the site for annual rotations of US Marines, plus northern airfields for extensive use by American long-range bombers, and ports for more visits by US warships and submarines.

These facilities, now being expanded, thoroughly integrate Australia into US war plans. As a result, any war or military attack by Washington—whether against China or Russia, or in the Middle East—automatically involves Australia.

Last September’s AUKUS military pact between the governments of the US, UK and Australia was an historic

step toward a confrontation with China. AUKUS initially featured the supply of nuclear-powered long-range attack submarines to Australia, and the construction of bases in Australia for such submarines, including those from the US and UK.

On April 6, the AUKUS leaders—Morrison, Biden and Boris Johnson—went further. They announced they would develop hypersonic missiles and subsurface robots, and site such missiles in Australia.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is the sole party standing in the May 21 federal election opposing the explosion of militarism and war, including Australia’s frontline participation in the US-led war drive.

As we say in our election statement, only a unified anti-war movement of the international working class—including Chinese, American, British and Australian workers—can halt the reckless US-led plunge toward a nuclear catastrophe.

We call for the repudiation of the US-Australia alliance and all military basing arrangements with the US and other countries. The military-intelligence apparatus must be disbanded, and the vast resources—more than \$600 billion this decade—being squandered on war preparations reallocated to urgently needed social programs throughout Australia and the Indo-Pacific region.

These demands raise the necessity for the working class to seize the reins of power. Workers’ governments have to be established to reorganise society along socialist lines as part of the fight for socialism internationally. Register for the ICFI’s international online May Day rally this weekend to join this crucial struggle.

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