

Australia's Secret Military Base: The Pine Gap "Stealth" Anniversary Party

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It all happened without much fuss, since fuss was bound to be the enemy. Dignitaries, guests and various partners lined up for a gathering at Alice Springs in Australia's Northern Territory on Saturday, commemorating the secret base's half-century.

The Alice Spring News Online described it, not inaccurately, as a "stealth party". The Convention Centre hosting the dinner was tight lipped throughout the week about the guest list. "Unfortunately the details of this weekend's event are not available for public release." [1] Not for residents in Alice Springs; not for the electors, or even the politicians. This would be an imperial, vetted affair.

A sense about how the base functions in a defiant limbo, one resistant to Australian sovereignty, can be gathered in various ways. The local federal member, Chansey Paech, whose constituency hosts the base, was not invited. Senator Nigel Scullion's query about the exclusion of media from the event was rebuffed by the Defence department, with the Defence Minister keen to hold the line against her own colleague. [2]

The Institute for Aboriginal Development (IAD), charged with supplying the indigenous "welcome to country" gathering at such bashes, seemed less than pleased to supply details. When the intrepid Alice Springs News Online dared ask, the CEO Kerry Le Rossignol responded with a dismissive "No comment".

On July 25, a Defence spokesperson insisted that,

"The Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap is proud to commemorate its 50th anniversary. However, celebrations are restricted to site personnel and invited guests only."

Power without perusal; might, without scrutiny.

The Australian press corps haven been subjected to a drip feed process over the years about what, exactly takes place at the US base, hungrily consuming morsels like indigent urchins. This is a "joint" facility in name only, but it does have Australian personnel running the low-grade coffee errands. Vassals have their uses, and should be reminded of them.

The Nautilus Institute for Security and Instability has been keeping a keener eye than most on this, notably through the eagle-eyed Richard Tanter. In an introductory overview on Pine Gap, its ongoing, updated report on the base notes the following:

"Pine Gap is perhaps the most important United States intelligence facility

outside that country, playing a vital role in the collection of a very wide range of signals intelligence, providing early warning ballistic missile launches, targeting of nuclear weapons, providing battlefield intelligence data for United States armed forces operating in Afghanistan and elsewhere (including previously in Iraq), critically supporting United States and Japanese missile defence, supporting arms control verification, and contributing targeting data to United States drone attacks.”[3]

The report pegs Pine Gap’s role to three operational functions, with the original one still being primary: a station for geosynchronous signals intelligence (SIGINT) satellites developed under the auspices of the Central Intelligence Agency. Originally, these were intended to focus on the testing of Soviet missiles. One estimate puts the number of radomes and satellite dishes at Pine Gap at 38.

The second features a function acquired in late 1999, when the base became a Relay Ground Station for detecting missile launches, including Overhead Persistent Infrared (OPIR) which now includes a Space-Based Infrared System (SBIRS).

The third is its interception function (foreign satellite/communications satellite), acquired in the first decade of 2000. The Nautilus report notes that two 23-metre dishes appropriate for COMSAT SIGINT Development (Sigdev) were installed within the 30-metre radomes at the end of 1999 and early 2000.

All this cut, dried and smoked material conveys the relevance of Australia’s continued geographical role as a dry goods merchant for Washington. It supplies the isolation and the means for the US imperium as officials in Canberra keep mum about the sheer extent Pine Gap operates. It also supplies the bloodied hand that assists US-directed drone strikes in theatres where neither Washington nor Canberra are officially at war. Australia remains America’s glorified manservant.

These are just a few points that have galvanised a small but vocal movement insisting on the closure of the base. Protests have also centred on disrupting, to use the words of James Brennan from Disarm, “the activities of the US war machine in Australia and on Aboriginal land.”[4]

At various stages, prosecutions on charges of trespass under the Defence (Special Undertakings) Act 1952 have also been mounted, though the effort in 2007 was laughed out of court by the presiding judge, Daynor Trigg, who deemed the statute “a bit of nonsense”. The defendants were duly acquitted by the Northern Territory Criminal Appeals Court, who quashed attempts by prosecutors to seek a retrial.

As late as last year, six self-proclaimed “peace pilgrims” received the attention of authorities for sporting musical instruments and pictures depicting war casualties onto the base.[5] Their fate may be similar to those in 2007: to make the charges stick, evidence on the function of Pine Gap would have to be adduced. The veil would be lifted; secrecy would abate.

What is more pressing for the Canberra apparatchiks is what a base like Pine Gap does in the context of spats with other powers which Australia shares ties with. The China rise is particularly problematic, given the teeth-gnashing belligerence being shown over maritime disputes.

Even as Chinese nationals purchase Australian real estate, tremors between Washington and Beijing can be felt as the base celebrates its half-century. A happy birthday it would have been, but only for some.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.alicespringsnews.com.au/2017/07/24/stealth-party-to-mark-50-years-of-pine-gap/>

[2] <http://www.alicespringsnews.com.au/2017/07/28/red-alert-pine-gap-stealth-dinner-is-on-tonight/>

[3] <http://nautilus.org/publications/books/australian-forces-abroad/defence-facilities/pine-gap/pine-gap-intro/>

[4] <https://www.facebook.com/ClosePineGap/posts/1224484947608934>

[5] <https://closepinegap.org/media/>

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