The main functions of Pine Gap

1. Pine Gap is a ground control station for signals intelligence satellites orbiting above the Earth. Most of the 38 antennas at Pine Gap are involved in controlling the satellites in orbit and downlinking, processing, analysing and communicating the intelligence collected by them, primarily for the U.S. military and the National Security Agency (NSA).

2. Pine Gap hosts a Relay Ground Station, which passes data from early warning infrared satellites that detect and track missile launches to command centres in Australia and the US.

3. Pine Gap has more recently developed the capacity to intercept transmissions from foreign communications satellites, enabling the collection of huge amounts of cell phone data. This data is used to help the US military to target drone assassinations.

There are many reasons cited to oppose the Pine Gap facility, including its role in targeting illegal drone attacks in countries where Australia is not at war, and the expanded capacity of the base to collect internet and telecommunications data from around the world. The role of the facility in assisting with mass citizen surveillance as part of the Five Eyes intelligence partnership (US, UK, Canada, New Zealand and Australia) was revealed in leaked documents of the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA), thanks to the former intelligence contractor Edward Snowden.

“We took Pine Gap because of the threat of nuclear war and we identified that Pine Gap was a target, and was effectively contributing to the war efforts of the United States.” - Senator Lee Rhiannon, who took part in the 1983 women’s peace camp at Pine Gap.

“These days Pine Gap has twice as many antennas as it did at the end of the Cold War, in a compound double its original size. Most importantly, far beyond its original mission, Pine Gap makes critical contributions to planning for nuclear war, missile defence of the US and Japan, US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and CIA targeted killings by drone” - Richard Tanter, Nautilus Institute and the University of Melbourne, January 2015.
What has it got to do with nuclear weapons?

The Pine Gap facility is vital to the war-fighting capabilities of the US military, including the operation of their nuclear arsenal. The SIGINT satellites would help strategic bombers defeat enemy radar to deliver nuclear bombs. The infrared satellites would detect enemy missile launches – and help target the remaining silos. This makes it a likely high-priority target for an enemy of the US and Australia, and vulnerable to a long-range nuclear missile attack.

The Australian government has been aware of Pine Gap’s vulnerability as a nuclear target for decades. Kim Beazley told a Parliamentary Committee a year after leaving office in 1997 “We accepted that the joint facilities were probably targets, but we accepted the risk of that for what we saw as the benefits of global stability.”

In his 2012 book, the Economics Editor of The Australian, David Uren reported that ‘defence thinking is that in the event of a conflict with the United States, China would attempt to destroy Pine Gap.’ Uren’s report was based on defence sources familiar with the classified Force Posture Review prepared prior to the 2009 Defence white paper.

The Australian Government has not openly acknowledged this threat, nor have the possible consequences of a nuclear attack been communicated with the 28,000 residents of Alice Springs.

A 1985 publication of the Medical Association for Prevention of War explored the impacts of a nuclear detonation from the air and ground. In the event of a ground burst with a south or south-westerly wind, Alice Springs would be enveloped in a plume carrying greater than the acute lethal radiation dose, and “everybody would die within twenty four hours.” Medical capacities would be unable to cope, and “very many people would die, untreated. Large areas of Central Australia would become uninhabitable.”

Is Pine Gap helpful for peace?

Australian Governments over the decades have claimed that Pine Gap contributes to the verification of arms control and disarmament agreements, however this accounts for as little as 0.3% of the facility’s activity. Besides, there are now no serious initiatives in nuclear arms control between the US and Russia.

Moreover, Pine Gap’s missile defence role is actually destabilising the delicate nuclear balance. The Relay Ground Station contributes infrared missile tracking data in real time the US and Japanese missile defence, ostensibly to defend against North Korean attacks. However China regards this defensive system as aimed at against it, and as a consequence is modernizing its relatively small nuclear deterrent force, and discouraging it from entering into disarmament talks.

In the fragile world of nuclear deterrence, efforts should be directed at total nuclear disarmament as opposed to indefinite upgrading and planning for nuclear war.

Banning nuclear weapons

When a treaty banning nuclear weapons is negotiated and enters into force, the Australian Government will be expected to sign onto it, given the catastrophic humanitarian impacts of the weapon and public support for a ban (84% according to a 2014 Nielsen poll).

For Australia to sign a new treaty banning nuclear weapons, the functions of Pine Gap should exclude assistance for nuclear targeting.

Further information:
www.icanw.org/au | www.nautilus.org
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