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Pine Gap drives US drone kills

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Central Australia's Pine Gap spy base has played a key role in the United States' controversial drone strikes involving the "targeted killing" of al-Qaeda and Taliban chiefs, Fairfax Media can reveal.

Former personnel at the Australian-American base have described the facility's success in locating and tracking al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders - and other insurgent activity in Afghanistan and Pakistan - as "outstanding".

A Fairfax Media investigation has confirmed that a primary function of the top-secret signals intelligence base near Alice Springs is to track the precise "geolocation" of radio signals, including hand-held radios and mobile phones, in the eastern hemisphere, from the Middle East across Asia to China, North Korea and the Russian far east.

This information has been used to identify the location of terrorist suspects, which then feeds into the United States drone strike program and other military operations. The drone program, which has involved more than 370 attacks in Pakistan since 2004, is reported to have killed between 2500 and 3500 al-Qaeda and Taliban militants, including many top commanders.

But hundreds of civilians have also been killed, causing anti-American protests in Pakistan, diplomatic tensions between Washington and Islamabad and accusations the "drone war" has amounted to a program of "targeted killing" outside of a battlefield. Earlier this year, the Obama administration acknowledged four American citizens had been killed by strikes in Pakistan and Yemen since 2009.

"The [Taliban] know we're listening, but they still have to use radios and phones to conduct their operations, they can't avoid that," one former Pine Gap operator told Fairfax Media. "We track them, we combine the signals intelligence with imagery, and once we've passed the geolocation intell[igence] on, our job is done. When drones do their job we don't need to track that target any more."

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, new disclosures by former Pine Gap personnel and little-noticed public statements by US government officials have shown.

Australian Defence intelligence sources have confirmed that finding targets is critically dependent on intelligence gathered and processed through the Pine Gap facility, which has seen "a massive quantitative and qualitative transformation" over the past decade, and especially the past three years.

"The US will never fight another war in the eastern hemisphere without the direct involvement of Pine Gap," one official said.

Secret documents leaked by US intelligence whistleblower Edward Snowden indicate that Pine Gap also contributes to a broad US National Security Agency collection program code-named "X-Keyscore".

Pine Gap controls a set of geostationary satellites positioned above the Indian Ocean and Indonesia. These orbit the Earth at a fixed point above the equator and are able to locate the origin of radio signals to within as little as 10 metres. Pine Gap processes the data and can provide targeting information to US and allied military units within minutes.

Former US National Security Agency personnel who served at Pine Gap in the past two years have described their duties in unguarded career summaries and employment records as including "signals intelligence collection, geolocation ... and reporting of high-priority target signals" including "real-time tracking". US Army personnel working at Pine Gap use systems code-named "Whami, SSEXTANT, and other geolocation tools" to provide

targeting information, warnings about the location of radio-triggered improvised explosive devices, and for combat and non-combat search and rescue missions.

Pine Gap's operations often involve sifting through vast quantities of "noise" to find elusive and infrequent signals. One former US Army signals intelligence analyst at Pine Gap describes the "collection and geolocation of an extremely hard-to-find target" as a task that included "manually sifting through hundreds of hours of collection".

Last month, Defence Minister Smith assured the Australian Parliament that Pine Gap operated with the "full knowledge and concurrence" of the Australian government.

He provided no details other than to say that the facility "delivers information on intelligence priorities such as terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and military and weapons developments" and that it "contributes to the verification of arms control and disarmament agreements".

Mr Smith told Parliament that "concurrence" means that the Australian government approves the presence of a capability or function in Australia but "does not mean that Australia approves every activity or tasking undertaken".

Following consultation with the US embassy in Canberra, the Defence Department provided Fairfax Media with some basic factual information about Pine Gap, including the number of personnel employed there - approximately 800. However, consistent with a long-standing policy of not commenting on operational intelligence matters, the department did not respond to questions about the facility's support for US military operations including drone strikes.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/pine-gap-drives-us-drone-kills-20130720-2qbsa.html>

Questions on Pine Gap role in Drone Deaths

04 Mar 2014 | [Scott Ludlam](#)
[Foreign Affairs & Defence](#)

Senate Question on Notice No.27 – Defence Facility Pine Gap

Senator Ludlam asked the Minister for Defence on 2 December 2013:

With regard to the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap (Pine Gap):

- (1) What role does Pine Gap play in providing intelligence used in the US armed drone program.
- (2) Is intelligence downlinked, processed or analysed at Pine Gap that is used to track targets before a drone strike or in post-strike assessments.
- (3) Has intelligence that is downlinked, processed or analysed at Pine Gap been used in drone strikes that have caused the death of civilians.
- (4) What role do Australian officials play within the base in relation to downlinking, processing or analysis of intelligence or locational data used in targeting for the US armed drone program.
- (5) On what basis does Australia claim its involvement through the Pine Gap base is lawful under both domestic and international law.
- (6) Has the department received legal advice on this matter and, if so, from whom.
- (7) What policies apply to Australian officials at Pine Gap setting out the circumstances in which they can downlink, process, analyse or transfer intelligence or data to be used in the US drone program.

Response:

In answer to 1-7 (inclusive):

The Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap is an essential component of our national defence and our alliance with the US.

All activities undertaken at the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap are subject to the full knowledge and concurrence of the Australian Government.

All activities are conducted in accordance with Australian law.

Consistent with long standing practice, the Government does not comment on intelligence matters.

Authorised by Scott Ludlam, Parliament House, Canberra, ACT 2600