Pine Gap, the quiet American eavesdropper in our midst, turns 50

Happy birthday, Pine Gap, and many happy returns. Tomorrow we celebrate 50 years since the treaty establishing Pine Gap was signed.

Since then, Pine Gap has been on the frontline of intelligence collection during the fall of South Vietnam, the end of communism in some regions, two wars in Iraq, the Balkans conflict, Afghanistan, the war on terror and the emergence of Islamic State.

In any situation where Australian or US citizens and soldiers may be at risk, the Pine Gap satellites have been quietly eavesdropping — Australia’s location allows Pine Gap to monitor signals from distant regions where many of these threats are found.

Originally developed to monitor the simpler Cold War threats — such as signals associated with ballistic missile development from the Soviet Union — Pine Gap has evolved to meet likelier dangers with the emergence and growth of terrorism’s threat.
The potential use and spread of nuclear weapons from North Korea, the increasing military capability of China and the widespread use of terrorism have seen the eavesdropping mission spread beyond the borders of 1960s post-war interest.

In recent decades we have been inundated with news reports describing the dreadful toll of successful terrorist attacks in Europe, the US, Africa and throughout the Middle East. Australia also has not been immune to terrorism.

But we know Pine Gap is still listening — detecting signals that may identify a terrorist network, leading to a response that prevents yet another headline of death and destruction.

And Pine Gap does this quietly, never receiving public acknowledgment, and never wanting any.

So, as we say happy birthday, we also say give thanks for the presence of Pine Gap and the added protection it brings us.

Most Australians will echo these sentiments, knowing that the alliance and security partnership with the US goes back well before the Pine Gap treaty — to World War II, when Britain was unable to provide significant defence for Australia against Japan.

Since that time, both countries have signed security agreements to include the ANZUS Pact of 1951 and the UKUSA signals intelligence sharing agreement, which Australia joined in 1956. In a forward-thinking world, Australians know that the bedrock of the alliance with the US goes much deeper than simply signed agreements — it is one that is ever-present in spirit and kinship.

We have gone to battle together and have died alongside one another as brothers-in-arms.

And Pine Gap has been there. Since June 19, 1970, when its first satellite was launched, Pine Gap has collected intelligence that has contributed to preventing terrorist attacks and saved the lives of military personnel as well as civilians.

As the mission has grown and the satellites have evolved in complexity, Australia’s role has increased, providing about half of the manning in operations.
Importantly, all the information collected at Pine Gap is available to Australia.

There are no secrets within the walls of Pine Gap about what is collected: it is shared, every one and every zero.

And that is the case regardless of which country tasks Pine Gap for information.

The mission is performed with full knowledge and concurrence of the Australian government, yet the cost for this information to Australia is extraordinarily low, last disclosed as $14 million in 2011-12.

For that small sum our security dividend is immense.

For any significant threat, Australia may task Pine Gap to collect information on anything it feels is necessary for our nation’s security. This information may be unique to Pine Gap, meaning the base remains a crucial part of Australia’s defence strategy.

Despite this, many Australians still oppose the presence of the base.

Those who would see it closed speculate about Pine Gap providing targeting information for drone strikes in which civilians not associated with terrorism have been killed.

But Pine Gap’s assets have no offensive capacity.

They are passive collectors — bringing together intelligence and providing this to the security agencies that requested it. This information is then cross-referenced with other intelligence sources to ensure the right action is taken.

Intelligence from Pine Gap is not used in isolation, nor does anyone there make the decision to initiate an offensive strike.

Although we all have seen reports of innocent civilians killed in drone strikes, information contributed by Pine Gap in any scenario would be used to minimise such harm, with the goal to eliminate the unnecessary deaths of non-combatants.
Still, there are Australians uncomfortable with the role their country may play in these events.

Pine Gap’s future seems assured, whatever new president-elect Donald Trump’s foreign policy ambitions may be — the US and Australia will continue to need the intelligence gathered there.

Trump would be wise to value the special relationship with Australia that benefits each country so richly.

*David Rosenberg was a National Security Agency employee at Pine Gap for 18 years. His book, Close to God’s Ear: NSA Eavesdropping Memoirs, will be published next year.*
The Greens and Labor would shut it down tomorrow if given half a chance.

I learned more about Pine Gap here than in any past article. But it seems a bit overembellished.

With the Americans so intimately involved I can't help thinking it's a pale copy of Area 51 with secrets we'll never know about.

Thank you David for an interesting article.

We may have to expand Pine Gap, living in the area for a couple of years I couldn't find a 'cleaner' that was going to go back. One question, do we really need all these subs, wouldn't PG
do the job.

james

@John I assume PG would be the security camera and our third world constructed wind powered squid propelled subs were to be the guard and attack attack dogs.

Woe to us.

Colin

@John Errr subs sink ships, John, with missiles, mines and torpedoes. Bit hard to do from a passive listening station in central Australia.

There are times when I feel like reaching through the TV (from my passive listening station at home) and strangling a sanctimonious ABC presenter, but fortunately I'm prevented by physics. Same for PG.

Robert

The US alliance is the bedrock of Australia's prosperity and stability. Explaining the basic facts of political security to ignorant youngsters is essential, and this article provides highly welcome information. Thank you.

Edward

@Robert The US alliance is the bedrock of Australia's lapdog participation in US wars of aggression and our subjugation as the 51st State of the Union.
@Edward @Robert  Australia has always relied on the current hegemon for its security, the UK and now USA, in both securing our borders and securing our collective psyche, and we pay a high price for this security.

Subjugation? perhaps, I will willingly be chained to freedom and our western values. They do come at a price, ask your grandparents! Freedom and free speech and everything associated with it comes with a price.

Mx Turnbull and B.S. will tell you that freedom and western values look after themselves, no need to defend them. They are a reflection of the meek selfish society we have evolved into. Someone else will fight for us, continue shopping.

Unless we become an Israel or Norway and arm and train every citizen to become real defenders of the nation, and discard the tokenism we laughingly call a defence force, we always will rely on such hegemons.

I just hope in the far future the hegemon we cling to will have the same values and freedoms that our forebears fought and paid for in blood and flesh, these same freedoms and values we trash and water down in the name of political correctness and multiculturalism.

Kenneth

@james @Edward @Robert Correct! We can look back at how small armed European states fared when non-aligned they tried to stand against German and Russian invasion. It's a fact of life that small countries need big friends in their corner when war comes to their door-step. The Edwards of this world are the ones who endanger us with their misty-eyed fantasy views of society.
Edward
"There are no secrets within the walls of Pine Gap about what is collected: it is shared, every one and every zero."

I have a used Klingon spaceship which you may be interested in purchasing.

Tonya
@Edward [/rolleys]

James
@Edward they were a bit slow

Kate
Pine Gap must be the cleanest place in the NT... I met many American personnel from the base during my three and a half years living in the area; and every single time an enquiry was made as to what they did at The Gap, the answer without exception was "I'm a cleaner"! Mind you, when they asked me in return my answer was something like: Commodore at the Ayers Rock Yacht Squadron...

Husband

Neville
Nice to hear positive comment. Alice Springs has had its share of the looney left protesters this year.

@Neville

Why should Alice be any different than the rest of us?