

After Obama – The new joint facilities*

Richard Tanter

Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability

rtanter@nautilus.org

<http://nautilus.org/about/associates/richard-tanter/>

When Barack Obama visited Australia in November last year he and Julia Gillard announced a new level of military cooperation between the United States and Australia. The public centre-piece of the “announceables” for Obama’s visit was the planned deployment of a United States Marine Air-Ground Task Force to Darwin. Less attention was paid to the second part of the Obama-Gillard announcement of more use of Australian air bases by US aircraft – more visits, more frequent, by a wider range of aircraft. No detail was provided as to which aircraft or which bases, but already US strategic B-52 and B-2 bombers based in Guam and the US practice long-range bombing at the huge ADF Delamere Weapons Range in the Northern Territory. Subsequently possible new roles for Australian facilities at HMAS Stirling in Perth, and the Cocos-Keeling islands emerged in the media.

The Australian and US government spokespeople were careful to insist that no solely US bases were being established, and that US personnel would only be rotating through Australian bases – albeit, from the US side, a “constant rotation”¹. This particularly applied to Robertson Barracks in Darwin – already home to 4,500 ADF personnel after extensive upgrading, and to be expanded for half as many US forces again.

* An edited version of this article appeared in Arena Magazine, May 2012. This article draws on conversations with Hugh White, Peter Van Ness, Peter Hayes, and Desmond Ball. Needless to say, none are responsible for errors, and all would disagree with some or all of my analysis. They have my thanks, nevertheless. My thanks also to Alison Caddick for editorial prodding and advice.

¹ *Press Briefing [Full Text]*, Jay Carney, Press Secretary; Ben Rhodes, Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications; Danny Russel, NSC Senior Director for Asia – Canberra, Australia, November 16, 2011.

“Q. Do you envision permanent bases here? Could it lead to that?”

“MR. RHODES: No, I don't think -- again, the Australians have a robust capability, obviously, through their own military forces. What this is about is enhancing our ability to partner with them and to partner with other countries in the region. Therefore, it can be a deployment of U.S. Marines, a deployment of U.S. aircraft onto Australian facilities, rather than the United States having to come in and develop some separate infrastructure.”

Yet, as politically important as the Marines deployment was as a clear and highly visible US and Australian statement of intent to forestall the influence of China's increasing military posture in the region, militarily it was far less so. It is far from negligible, but cannot be compared with the quiet but extraordinary growth in Australia-US military and intelligence cooperation in the last decade, that has led to a largely unnoticed regular series of announcements every year at the annual Australia-US Ministerial (AUSMIN) meetings of defence and foreign ministers.

At AUSMIN 2008 and 2010 new joint facilities were announced at the Naval Communications Station Harold E. Holt at North West Cape, and in 2007 at the Australian Defence Satellite Communications Station at Kojarena near Geraldton. New or increased United States access was announced to a number of existing facilities: the Bradshaw Field Training Area (2004) and the Delamere Air Weapons Range (2005)² and Shoalwater Bay (2004) in the Northern Territory, the Joint Combined Training Centre (2004), and the Yampi Sound Training Area northwest of Derby, Western Australia. In parallel, while not discussed in this article about new joint facilities, new operational capacities at the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap outside Alice Springs have brought the work of that facility to the front line in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and which, together with a new US space surveillance radar planned for North West Cape, have cemented Australia's role in US missile defence and space operations. (For reasons of space, the complex developments are not addressed in this article.³

In late March 2012, HMAS Stirling at Perth, the only major naval facility on the west coast of Australia was reported to be under discussion, as was US Air Force Global Hawk (UAV) access to the airfield on the West Island of the Cocos-Keeling group in the Indian Ocean south of Java. The Australian government has foreshadowed an increase in the number, frequency and type of US naval visits to HMAS Stirling, but unlike the case of the northern facilities, few details were announced. Following media reports of the Global Hawk deployment to the Cocos Islands, the Australian government maintained that while the matter was under discussion, no decisions had been taken.⁴

After the Bush debacle : Rebalancing US strategy around the Asia pivot

² "Australia's premier spot to drop bombs", *Air Force* (newspaper), <http://www.defence.gov.au/news/raafnews/editions/4714/features/feature01b.htm>

³ For a short version of the argument, see Richard Tanter, "Pine Gap and the coalition wars in Afghanistan and Iraq", Christians Against ALL Terrorism, Alice Springs, 13 June 2007, at <http://nautilus.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Alice-meeting.ppt>

⁴ *Minister for Defence – Interview with Chris Uhlmann*, ABC 7.30, 28 March 2012, at <http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/2012/03/28/minister-for-defence-interview-with-chris-uhlmann-abc-7-30/>

The strategic background to the heightened US military and intelligence access to Australian facilities is two-fold. The first is the Obama administration's efforts to rebalance US global power from the disasters of the Bush administration's wars of choice in Iraq and Afghanistan - rebalancing around the "Asia pivot":

"From day one of this Administration, we have employed a multifaceted strategy to articulate a vision and chart a pathway to realize the Asia pivot in American foreign policy. ...As the long shadow of 9/11 recedes, we are witnessing the re-emergence of the Asia-Pacific as a key theater of global politics and economics. ... As Asia rises, so too must America's role in it."⁵

"For starters", Hillary Clinton said, this involves six elements of "a forward deployed diplomacy" to deal with "the rapid and dramatic shifts playing out across Asia":

"strengthening bilateral security alliances; deepening our working relationships with emerging powers, including with China; engaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights."⁶

A precursor and foundation to this "rebalancing" had in fact already begun under the Bush administration with a "strategic partnership" between India and the US in 2004, followed by nuclear energy and arms cooperation agreements the following year. But the Obama military, political and economic strategy is much more comprehensive, and more clearly marked by retreats from Iraq and Afghanistan – albeit far from complete. The strategic core concerns the long-running ambivalence about China in US ruling circles: is China to be the United State's new global strategic partner in a positive sum global game as seemed to be preferred under the Clinton administration, or as in the Bush administration's early preference for a strategic competition, with a penchant for articulating theories of the "inevitability" of a rising power coming into conflict with a fading but not mortally wounded global hegemon?

The issue is still by no means clear, with Obama pursuing close dialogue with China on many issues – in fact most unusually the two presidents met face-to-face eight times in the twenty four months January 2011⁷. Yet at the same time, US military strategy, with enthusiastic Australian and Japanese support has increasingly emphasized a robust

⁵ Kurt M. Campbell, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs – *Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Washington, DC, October 4, 2011.*

⁶ Hilary Rodham Clinton, "America's Pacific Century", *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century

⁷ *Preview of the Upcoming State Visit of President Hu of China*, Press Briefing by Tim Geithner, Secretary of the Treasury, Tom Donilon, National Security Advisor, and Robert Gibbs, Press Secretary – Washington, DC, January 14, 2011

realignment of US and allied forces to the east and south of China, and in the Indian Ocean, with control of sea-lanes a clear concern. Containment, a term redolent of Cold War banishing of dialogue and shared interests, may be too strong a word, but the United States is going far beyond mere hedging on its future options. US hegemony in East and Southeast Asia – the system of power and rules built on the victory of 1945, nuclear alliances, and on the 1972 accord between Nixon and Mao for China to take the path of export-lead industrialization into the US-controlled regime of world trade and globalised production platforms – has begun to dissolve as allied elites question American political resolve and military capacity, and as Chinese elites increasingly decide to challenge US domination of the writing of the rules of global capitalism and security practices.

Whether the Obama “Asia pivot” can revitalise American hegemony in Asia – through global military reorganisation and modernization, strengthened bilateral alliances, new multilateral institutions like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and restructured political and economic relationships with former Cold War outliers like India and Vietnam - remains to be seen. But certainly security issues are now front and centre for the US relationship with China, with the shadow of a revived containment policy not far off the stage.

A key part of this is, Clinton and Campbell foreshadowed, is increased military cooperation not only with Australia, but also with Singapore which for the first time will be the homeport for four US Navy warships⁸, and the Philippines, where the US is seeking to restore close military ties and basing rights lost decades ago following intense political pressure from campaigns by Philippines civil society groups following longrunning US support for the Marcos dictatorship.

The Australian strategic background

In all of this Australian policy is fraught. Everyone and her dog knows of the contradiction between 60 years of security ties to the US and the deep but asymmetrical trade interdependence with China - asymmetrical because while there are other potential quarries in the world, even Japan and Korea cannot constitute a replacement for China as an Australian resources customer. Two sets of Australian strategic developments are relevant here. The first is the deepening integration of the ADF with the armed forces of the United States, Japan, and NATO – the latter two themselves the subject of ever closer integration with the United States. The 2007 Australia-Japan Security Cooperation Declaration and the NATO formal partnership with Australia buttress the bilateral AUSMIN-auspiced developments.

⁸ The US Navy expects to deploy four of its new Littoral Combat Ships in Singapore by 2016. See Craig Whitlock, “Obama’s Asia strategy gives Navy key role, fewer ships”, *Washington Post*, 15 February 2012, at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obamas-asia-strategy-gives-navy-key-role-fewer-ships/2012/02/15/gIQAhNngGR_story.html

This integration is manifest organisationally, operationally and materially. The AUSMIN process has provided the institutional framework for bilateral working groups of officials and military focussing on the mantra of “interoperability” – with implications for organisational culture, standard operating procedures, weapons systems and logistics compatibility, and shared operational practises in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In 2006 the Defence Department made clear the areas of priority for further developing “the highest levels “ of ADF and intelligence interoperability with the United States as including:

- “Joint Battlespace Management, Command and Control.
- Combat identification and common operating picture. Collaboration is imperative to ensure Australia is protected from friendly-fire incidents when operating with the US or as part of a combined US force.
- Communications and information systems. There are currently some differences in tactical communications capability between Australian and US ground forces. Projects are being progressed to ensure fully compatible communications systems are procured for the land forces.
- High-end warfighting capabilities (major ships, armoured vehicles, air combat assets).
- Intelligence exchange.”⁹

Most of these areas of interoperability turns out to involve the ADF bases to which the United States has gained increased access over the past decade – i.e. “joint facilities” in reality, whatever the name.

The strategic effects of this growing operational, organisational and material impetus to global allied integration were then confirmed and amplified by the 2009 Defence White Paper titled *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030* - widely recognized as the most incoherent, belligerent and incompetent white paper in a generation. Three aspects of the white paper are salient. First, the paper was framed around an overt and blunt identification of China as a potential threat (the corresponding Japanese white paper was explicit on the same theme). Second, the medium-term strategic environment was characterised by a decline in American regional primacy. And third, the paper conceived of the basic principles of Australian defence planning as an unworked-through hodge-podge of the Dobb/Beazley-era “Defence of Australia” doctrine based on a set of concentric circles of decreasing strategic significance for Australia with distance, and a retention and reiteration of Howard-era niche expeditionary roles for the ADF in American-led global coalitions.

⁹ *Submission No. 20, Department of Defence Submission to the Inquiry into [Australia's Defence Relations with the United States](#)*, Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 22 May 2006. p.7.

Taken together, the result of these policy and force structure changes may well be, from a Chinese perspective, that Australia is not so much hosting US military bases, but is becoming a virtual American base in its own right. That perspective may be overwrought, but almost a decade of continuous developments in joint Australia-US defence facilities and new levels of US access to Australian facilities undoubtedly change Australia's strategic situation profoundly.¹⁰

One issue that needs close examination is the extent to which these still ongoing developments are the result of US pressure on its Australian ally, or rather, as was the case in the Vietnam War, Australian governments seeking to deepen the involvement of the US in the region and increase the perceived utility of Australia to the US by anticipating US needs, and taking the initiative by offering the facilities first.¹¹ It is not possible yet to make such a judgement in the contemporary case, but a hint of Australian bureaucratic and strategic activism, reported by *The Australian* as suggesting that "Australia might have been encouraging the US to increase its military presence", was the remark to the *Washington Post* by the US Secretary of the Navy, Ray Mabus, that "It's fair to say that we will always take an interest in what the Australians are doing and want to do."¹²

¹⁰ Despite much commentary, there is remarkably little sustained and informed discussion of Australian strategic options. The most important recent reflection remains Hugh White's 2010 Quarterly Essay "Power Shift: Australia's Future between Washington and Beijing", (*Quarterly Essay* 39, September 2010). Prior to that three key contributions still relevant were the *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities* (the 1986 Dibb report, reflecting earlier conceptual work by Dibb, Desmond Ball, J.O. Langtry, and Kim Beazley); Ball's own highly condensed argument in his "The Strategic Essence", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2001; and David Martin's maverick but central 1984 contribution, *Armed Neutrality for Australia*, Dove Communications.

¹¹ On the Vietnam case see Michael Sexton, *War For the Asking: Australia's Vietnam Secrets*, Penguin, 1981, and subsequent debate. This includes the official history by Peter Edwards, *Crises and Commitments*, Allen & Unwin, 1992; and a number of interventions by Gary Woodard, including his "Asian alternatives: Going to war in the 1960s", Public lecture for the National Archives of Australia, presented in Canberra, 30 May 2003, at http://www.naa.gov.au/Images/Woodard_tcm16-35766.pdf

¹² See Craig Whitlock, "US, Australia plan expansion of military ties amid pivot to SE Asia", *Washington Post*, 26 March 2012, at <http://www.stripes.com/mobile/news/pacific/us-australia-plan-expansion-of-military-ties-amid-pivot-to-se-asia-1.172739>; and Brendan Nicholson, "US seeks deeper military ties", *The Australian*, 28 March 2012, at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/us-seeks-deeper-military-ties/story-e6frg8yo-1226311869939>

The new joint facilities

Darwin and the Marine Air-Ground Task Force.

For the US Marine Corps, the smallest and politically weakest of the US armed services, the Darwin deployment was a mixed matter. There has long been both political and operational urgency to moving the Marines from the main island of Okinawa, which has been hugely contentious due to their social and environmental impact. Militarily, for the most part, Okinawa and Guam Marines are a poor location for Middle Eastern, Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian operational operations. The Marines had been hoping the Asia pivot strategy would lead to basing in Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, or in Thailand. Strategically, Darwin was second-best. On the other hand, the political significance and visibility of the Darwin deployment means that the Marine Corps can look for some budgetary protection in the face of the Obama administration's plan to cut \$500 bn. from the military budget over the next ten years.

The first 150 of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) arrived in Darwin in March 2012¹³, and the full complement of 2500 is expected to be in place by 2016. When complete the Darwin MAGTF will consist of command, ground combat, and air combat elements available for rapid deployment for expeditionary combat. Despite Australian government gainsaying, the Robertson Barracks deployment will effectively be a permanent joint base, with the organisational heart of the Task Force retained at Robertson as 2,500 Marines on "constant rotation" pass through, probably on six-month tours.

Second-best choice though it is, Darwin is an attractive location for the Marines. RAAF Darwin is co-located with Darwin International Airport. The port of Darwin, already the busiest naval port in the country¹⁴, can take ships with a draft of up to 12 m.¹⁵ – at a stretch enough even for the largest US aircraft carriers – and at East Arm Wharf has a good-sized POL (petroleum-oil-lubricants) pier for Marines logistics requirements. The

¹³ Brendan Nicholson, "First wave of US Marines heads to Darwin", *The Australian*, 20 March 2012, at

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/first-wave-of-us-marines-heads-to-darwin/story-e6frg8yo-1226304540063>

¹⁴ *Northern Territory Defence Support Industry Strategy 2007-2017*, Northern Territory Government and Australian Industry and Defence Network – Northern Territory, n.d., p. 12.

¹⁵ *The Port of Darwin*, Darwin Port Corporation, Fact Sheet No. 1, at http://www.darwinport.nt.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/publications/DPC_fact_sheet1x.pdf

Northern Territory government is eager for more defence spending, which already makes up 12.6% of the territory's gross state product.¹⁶

The joint networked range: Bradshaw, Delamere and Mount Bunday

The three main training locations for the MAGTF will be the Bradshaw Field Training Area, the Mount Bunday Training Area near Humpty Doo, and the Delamere Air Weapons Range 220 kms. southwest of Katherine, which together make up the ADF's North Australian Range Complex (NARC). With Shoalwater Bay in Queensland, all three are key locations for the multinational Talisman Sabre exercises.

In AUSMIN 2004 Bradshaw was designated, along with Delamere, as part of a Joint Australia-US Combat Training Centre. At 8,700 sq kms. the former cattle station is just a little smaller than Cyprus, and vastly bigger than any other training range available to US Marines in the western Pacific. As part of Talisman Sabre In 2007 US and Australian personnel constructed an Assault Landing Zone airfield at Bradshaw with a 1250 m. runway capable of taking the largest US and Australian cargo aircraft, the 120 tonne C-17 Globemasters, in just four weeks as a test of the Joint Rapid Airfield Construction concept.¹⁷ The Northern Territory Government's investment arm anticipates "7000 troops visiting [Bradshaw] every dry season".¹⁸ One of Bradshaw's primary uses is for training and exercises with armoured vehicles – both the ADF and the US Marines use the Abrams main battle tank, the ASLAV (the Australian version of the Marines' LAV-25 (Light Armored Vehicle), and the M-113 armoured personnel carrier.

Delamere Air Weapons Range is the RAAF's principal bombing practice and testing range, more than 3,000 sq. kms in size. Japan-based US Marine fighter aircraft have been using Delamere in exercises for many years, with an F/A-18 crashing in mysterious circumstances in 2004¹⁹, and another was damaged a year later.²⁰ Since at least 2005,

¹⁶ "Northern Territory Economy: Defence", *Budget Papers, Budget 2011-2012 Budget*, p. 171, at http://www.nt.gov.au/dbe/industry-development/defence-support/Documents/defence_support_budget_paper.pdf

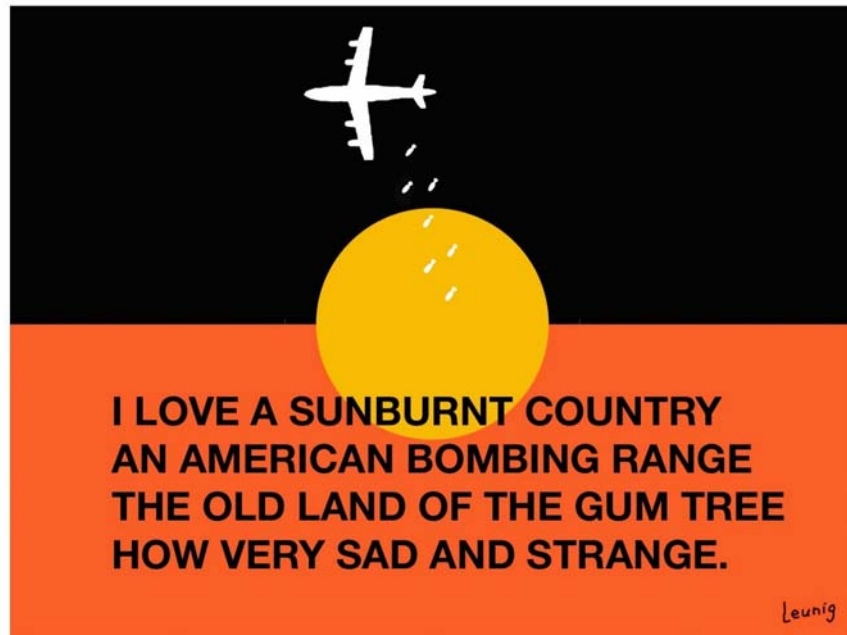
¹⁷ Gary L. Anderton, Ernest S. Berney IV, Travis A. Mann, J. Kent Newman, E. Alex Baylot, Daniel K. Miller, and Quint Mason, *Joint Rapid Airfield Construction (JRAC) 2007 Technology Demonstration*, U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center, ERDC/GSL TR-08-17, July 2008, at <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA485296>; and "New airstrip opens in NT outback", *SMH*, 29 June 2007, at <http://www.smh.com.au/news/National/New-airstrip-opens-in-NT-outback/2007/06/29/1182624140724.html>

¹⁸ "Katherine region", Invest NT, accessed 1 April 2012 at <http://www.investnt.com.au/research-your-investment/northern-territory-regions/katherine.shtml>

¹⁹ David Williams, "US fighter pilot survives crash", *SMH*, 15 September 2004, at

US Air Force B-52 and B-2 bombers based in Guam have repeatedly used the Delamere range.²¹ This news moved Michael Leunig to one of his most dramatic overtly political images with bombs dropping on the yellow, black and red of the koorie flag, with a bitterly mocking re-phrasing of Dorothea Mackellar²²:

I love a sun-burnt country,
An American Bombing Range,
The old land of the gum tree,
How very sad and strange.



<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/09/15/1094927577862.html>

²⁰ An August 2005 Defence Department media release cryptically reported that a "weapon released from a United States Marine Corps (USMC) F/A-18 Hornet struck the ground in close proximity to a control building". See "Range Incident – Delamere Air Weapons Range", *Defence Media Release*, MECC 199/05, 11/08/2005, at <http://www.defence.gov.au/media/DepartmentalTpl.cfm?CurrentId=5040>.

²¹ Brendan Nicholson, "Coming to a country very close to you", *The Age*, 19 November 2005, at <http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/coming-to-a-country-very-close-to-you/2005/11/18/1132016987058.html>

²² I regret I no longer have the original reference for this work by Michael Leunig's.

Presently sourced from

http://bp1.blogger.com/_VjDedArKEYE/SBQ2DXg2J2I/AAAAAAAAAB8/qmu_u0u0xTM/s1600-h/leunig+country3.JPG.

The true significance of the US access to these training ranges is not just their size and the consequent comparative freedom of action compared with Japanese- and Marshall Island ranges, but the high level of instrumentation and electronic networking with both other ranges and US and Australian command and training centres. Outlining the concept of the Joint Combat Training Centre (JCTC) to a parliamentary inquiry into *Australia's Defence Relations with the United States* in 2006 the Defence Department made clear the truly joint and networked character and role of Delamere, Bradshaw and Mount Bunday as newly joint facilities:

“A mature JCTC should not be seen as a test range or even a series of ranges. The JCTC should function as a training system that links training management systems, training areas, simulations, headquarters and units. It is proposed that the JCTC should be linked to the US Pacific Command's Pacific Warfighting Center and the US Joint Force Command's Joint National Training Capability as part of the US Global Joint Training Infrastructure.

North West Cape – talking to submarines and stalking satellites

The Naval Communication Station Harold E. Holt at North West Cape, which was originally a US only facility, then a joint station, and with the end of the Cold War, an Australian-controlled facility, as returned to a primarily US war-fighting role with a vengeance, by two distinct pathways.

The first leads from US concern concerned to retain naval dominance in the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia. North West Cape's original function was communication with submerged US nuclear missile submarines.

Naval Communication Station Harold E. Holt is presently made up of three sites some 60 kilometres apart running the length of the narrow peninsula separating the Exmouth Gulf from the Indian Ocean. The original primary purpose of the US Naval Communication Station North West Cape when it opened in 1967 was to enable the US Navy to use powerful Very Low Frequency (VLF) transmissions communicate with submerged submarines (and surface vessels) in the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific Ocean. Two important qualities of VLF signals are that they follow the curvature of the earth and hence can be received at great distances, and that they can be detected by receivers more than twenty metres underwater. Transmission of such VLF radio signals required more than a million watts of power and the construction of twelve towers more than 300 metres high to support a network of antenna wires for the transmission of these powerful signals. As the ranges of US submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) increased, the submarines carrying them moved into the deeps of the Pacific well away from the Soviet Union, and North West Cape became less useful.

The 400 hectare site, known as Area A, lies at the very tip of the Cape, and for more than two decades was a key link in US Navy communications, with its Polaris and other strategic nuclear missile submarines. Areas B and C hold high frequency transmission and receiving facilities further south on the peninsula, and until 1998, a Defense Satellite Communications System (DSCS) satellite communications ground station.²³ Polaris submarines were retired in 1982, and were replaced by Ohio-class submarines carrying Trident nuclear ballistic missiles. These Trident missiles had a much greater range than their predecessors, allowing the submarines to remain far from the Soviet Union in the deeps of the Pacific. The Ohio-class relied then and now principally on Jim Creek in Washington for VLF communications. But until that point, Naval Communication Station Harold E. Holt would have been a high priority Soviet nuclear target.²⁴

Following the 1963 Agreement to establish “a United States Naval Communications Station in Australia”, it became clear that the Australian government had no control over or access to the contents of those communications. In March 1974 the Whitlam Labor government subsequently renegotiated the base treaty, leading to the dropping of the ‘US’ from the name of the facility, and an increased but still for many years insignificant Australian presence. According to the head of civilian employment, “In the Communications Centre, the only thing the Americans and Australians shared was the coffee pot.”²⁵ During the 1980s “joint” operation came to have more substance.

By 1992, the United States no longer needed direct control over the base and the long-resident Naval Security Group detachment was withdrawn in October of the year, and full command passed to the Royal Australian Navy. In 1999 Australia took over responsibility for the facility, although US involvement and funding continued.

Today, the main US concern is with communication with US attack submarines. North West Cape’s return to “joint” status formally began at AUSMIN 2008, with Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon and Secretary of Defence Gates signing the Harold E. Holt Treaty. The treaty required Australia to operate a naval communications station, allowed the United States “all necessary rights of access to and use of the station”, and split the costs between the two.²⁶

²³ Desmond Ball, *Code 777: Australia and the US Defense Satellite Communications System (DSCS)*, (Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No.56, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1989).

²⁴ See the discussion by Desmond Ball in his *A Base for Debate: The US Satellite Station at Nurrungar*, Allen and Unwin, 1988.

²⁵ Brian Humphreys, *Calls to the Deep: The Story of Naval Communication Station Harold E. Holt*, Defence Publishing service, 2006, p. 154.

²⁶ *Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of the United States Of America relating to the Operation of and Access to an Australian Naval*

The Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Treaties in its majority report on the Holt Treaty noted that the VLF facility was and would continue to be used to communicate with both Australian and US submarines,

including nuclear armed ballistic missile submarines, and that there is some concern in Australia about that aspect of the station's operations. However, Australia's hosting of the station is not inconsistent with our commitments under the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty and the Antarctic Treaty. The committee also recognises that the station is part of an integrated network of communications stations and that the Australian Navy is reliant upon VLF transmitters provided by other bases operated by the US in other countries to communicate with Australian submarines worldwide. The committee accepts this is a genuine area of mutual cooperation in defence activities that assist in meeting the operational requirements of Australia's defence forces.²⁷

The most important aspect of the emphatic US return to the VLF communications base, given that it had retained access to three of the four communication channels at the facility (with the RAN having the remaining one) was, as the Greens Senator Scott Ludlam put it,

“North West Cape continues to facilitate, enable and support nuclear armed submarines, offensive attack weapons platforms, thereby legitimising the retention and deployment of nuclear weapons.”²⁸

The second and quite new pathway, derives from Australia's decision to support the United States' quest for military dominance in space. Through a new Space Situational Awareness (SSA) Partnership signed in 2010 the US intends to establish a powerful space surveillance sensor in Western Australia, preferably at North West Cape.²⁹ This

Communication Station at North West Cape in Western Australia, (Washington, 16 July 2008). Entry into force: 24 November 2011.

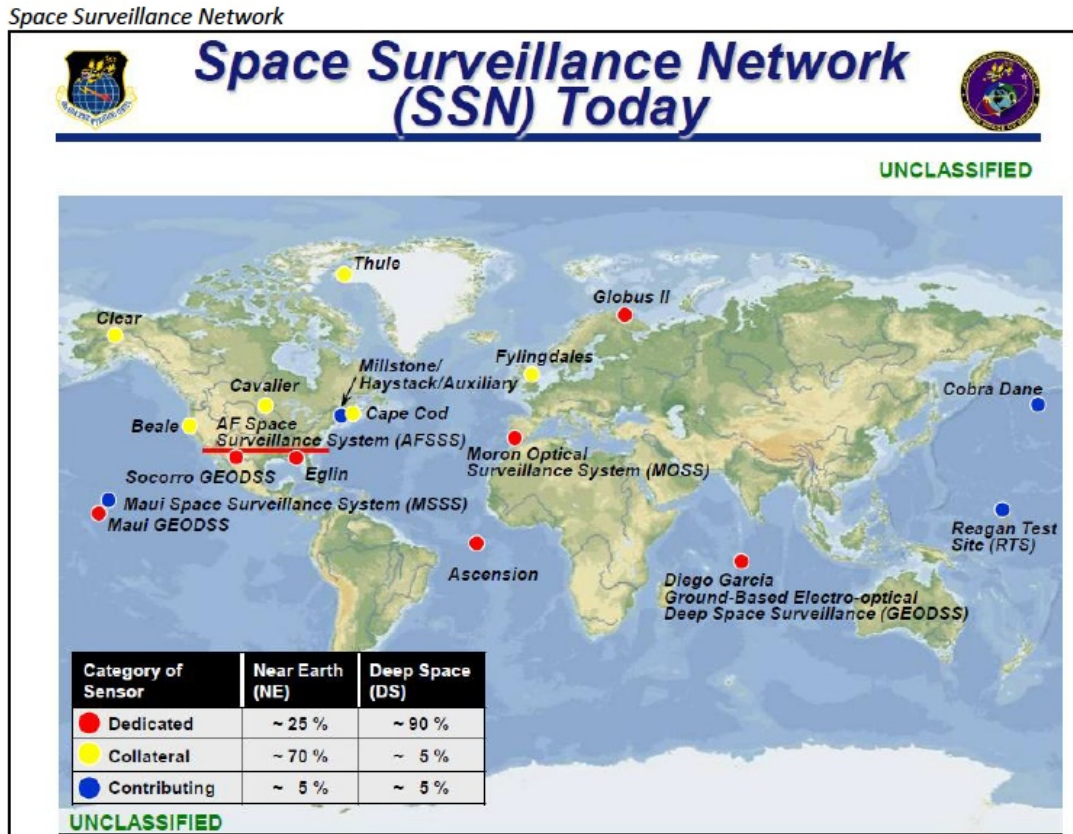
<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/treaties/2011/36.html>

²⁷ *Report 121 of the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties*, October 2011, at http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=jsct/16august2011/report1.htm.

²⁸ Ludlam also attacked the government's failure to honour its disarmament pledges, and “missing an opportunity to demonstrate that giving a reduced role to nuclear weapons is practically achievable, and need not result in damaged alliances.” See *Dissenting Report – Australian Greens, Report 121 of the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties*, October 2011, at http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=jsct/16august2011/report1.htm.

²⁹ Minister for Foreign Affairs Kevin Rudd, Minister for Defence Stephen Smith,

will be part of the US global Space Surveillance Network (SSN). The Space Surveillance Network consists of a world-wide network of optical and radar sensors supporting the Joint Space Operations Center (JSpOC).³⁰



Map from Capt. Amy Ianacone, "614 AOC/COD Conjunction Assessment", PowerPoint presented at the Conjunction Support Message Workshop, Washington, DC, 21-22 July 2010.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, *Australia-United States Joint Statement on Space Security*, AUSMIN 2010, 8 November 2010, at

<http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/us/ausmin/Australia-United-States-Joint-Partnership-on-Space-Security.pdf>; and *Space Situational Awareness Partnership Fact Sheet*, AUSMIN 2010.

<http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/us/ausmin/Space-Situational-Awareness-Partnership-fact-sheet.pdf>

³⁰ The source for the remainder of the discussion of the Space Surveillance Network, unless otherwise specified, is Edward P. Chatters IV and Brian J. Crothers, "Space Surveillance Network", in *AU-18 Space Primer*, Air University Press, September 2009, pp. 249-258.

The Space Surveillance Network has two principal functions. The first, emphasized by the Australian government, is to provide a global public good through detection and location of the large volume of space debris orbiting the earth and threatening to damage the satellites on which the networked society depends. “Space junk” in increasingly congested – and contested – space is a genuine and serious problem. Accidental and intentional breaking up of space vehicles has created tens of thousands of long-lasting objects orbiting in the most regions most used by satellites, most of which are fragile and all are vulnerable to collisions with even very small particles.

The primary task of the SSN is to provide JSpOC with information on the size, shape, motion, and orientation of objects in space above the earth up to 36,000 kms. At those geosynchronous orbits (GEO), the SSN at present can detect objects as small as 1 m. in diameter, while in low earth orbits (LEO) objects as small as 5 cm can be detected.³¹ This Space Object Identification (SOI) crucially involves deterring the operational status of payloads, predicting deorbits or maneuvers, and in the case of unidentified payloads, “mission payload assessment”.

“Space junk” in increasingly congested – and contested – space is a genuine and serious problem. Accidental and intentional breaking up of space vehicles has created tens of thousands of long-lasting objects orbiting in the most regions most used by satellites, most of which are fragile and all are vulnerable to collisions with even very small particles.

“Because of orbital velocities of up to 7.8 km per second (~30,000 km per hour) in Low Earth Orbit (LEO), debris as small as 10 cm in diameter carries the kinetic energy of a 35,000-kg truck travelling at up to 190 km per hour.”³²

However, the SSN has another and equally if not more important role for the US military, which is to use the same capacities to detect objects in space for offensive and defensive aspects of war-fighting in space. Albeit well buried, there was a hint in the AUSMIN papers that SSA is more than a matter of common interest in the global public good of cleaning up the space environment crucial to the functioning of the wired society. Australia welcomed, it said, “space arms control measures that are equitable,

³¹ NASA Handbook For Limiting Orbital Debris, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, NASA-HANDBOOK 8719.14, Approved: 2008-07-30, p. 45, at <http://www.hq.nasa.gov/office/codeq/doctree/NHBK871914.pdf>

³² *Space Security 2011*, Project Ploughshares and the Space Security Index, www.spacesecurity.org, p. 27; and “USA Moves Ahead with Next-Generation ‘Space Fence’ Tracking”, *Defense Industry Daily*, 22 March 2012, at <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/Air-Force-Awards-First-Phase-of-Next-Generation-Space-Fence-05511/>.

verifiable and in the national interest of the United States and its allies” and pledged to work with the US towards “transparency and confidence-building measures for enhanced stability and safety in space activities”. The Fact Sheet did note that the recipient of the data from radar and optical sensors is the (US) Joint Space Operations Center (JSpOC), which manages the US Space Surveillance Network at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California.

What the Australian government did not say is that JSpOC’s role is to support the mission of the Joint Functional Component Command for Space within US Strategic Command, which

“is to provide unity of command and unity of effort in unimpeded delivery of joint space capabilities to supported commanders and, when directed, to deny the benefits of space to adversaries.”³³

JSpOC itself is to provide

“continuous C2 [command and control] capabilities to conduct space operations.”³⁴

The North West Cape sensor will be part of new Space Fence made up of US Air Force operated S-band (2-4 GHz) phased array radars, also located depending on budget at either Kwajalein Atoll in the Pacific or Ascension Island in the south Atlantic, or both.³⁵

Australian Defence Satellite Communications Station, Kojarena,

The Australian Defence Satellite Communications Ground Station is located at Kojarena, 30 km east of Geraldton in Western Australia. It is operated by the ADF Defence Signals Division [DSD]. As of November 2005, the base was staffed by 79 personnel, and housed five radomes and eight satellite antennas. The Kojarena station is a major Australian DSD signals interception facility, and is part of a worldwide system of satellite communications keyword monitoring known as Echelon operating within the wider UKUSA signals intelligence system.

³³ Christopher J. King, Dillard W. Young, Edward P. Byrne, and Paul P. Konyha III, “Space Doctrine”, AU-18 Space Primer, Air University Press, September 2009, p. 65.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³⁵ *Space Security 2011*, Project Ploughshares and the Space Security Index, www.spacesecurity.org; and “Lockheed Martin Space Fence Radar Prototype Tracking Orbiting Objects”, *Press Release, Lockheed Martin*, 8 March 2012, at <http://www.lockheedmartin.com/us/news/press-releases/2012/march/0306-ms2-space-fence-radar-prototype-tracking-orbiting-objects.html>

Under an agreement initiated in 2007, Geraldton figures in the US-Australia partnership in the Wideband Global SATCOM system, which provides Australian access to the principally US-funded constellation of at least seven (and possibly nine) high capacity global war-fighting communications satellites. Under the agreement, Australia funded the sixth satellite, due to be launched in 2012-13. The first three satellites were launched between 2007-2010, and Australia gained operational access by June 2010.

In November 2007 the Australian government announced the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the United States government for the building of an additional but separate facility within the grounds of the ADSCGS. This is to consist of three small buildings, three 19-metre antennas, and two smaller antennas making up a joint US-Australian ground station for the US Department of Defense Mobile User Objective System, a narrow-band networked satellite constellation for Ultra-High-Frequency satellite communications enabling secure all-weather and all-terrain 3-G mobile telecommunications.

The Kojarena MUOS facility will be one of four MUOS ground stations, with the others being located Niscemi, Sicily, Virginia , and Wahiawa, Hawaii.

Trouble ahead

This brief review of new joint facilities is necessarily incomplete, and does not discuss changes in the capacities and operations of the longstanding and most important joint facility of all at Pine Gap. There is much that is troubling about all of these developments.

Most disturbing of all is the lack of public discussion and detailed analysis of the implications of these new military arrangements for security in the Australian national interest and the broader human interest. The reasons for this are not clear. Lack of information is certainly not the answer: Australian media have reported most of these developments prominently, if not in depth. A great deal of informative and detailed background material is easily found by anyone who looks. In fact the problem is often a matter of being swamped by data and analysis. Understanding the broad technical characteristics of particular systems is not too difficult, and is often crucial to ascertaining the subsequent constraints and implications imposed by those technologies on political and strategic issues. The usual reasons why Australian academic researchers are AWOL on these issues – the risk of damage to career prospects, disinterest in or aversion to “technology matters”, preoccupation with downstream theoretical questions , or the unfashionable status of “mere empiricism” – does not entirely explain things.

Perhaps, as with wider Australian resignation to the inevitable horrors of auspicing the war in Afghanistan, there is some sense that, when it comes to the US alliance, there is simply nothing that can be done. So brazen is the government’s willing subordination,

and so powerful the ally, that serious discussion of the operations and consequences of the alliance is just so much pissing in the wind.

Or even more dismayingly, both security practitioners and their would-be critics share, by default if not by choice, a notion of Australia that is inseparable from the US alliance. Alternatives are, analytically as much as politically, just unthinkable. If any of this close to true, we are all in for serious trouble.