



close to the Chinese coast.

North West Cape's "mission payload assessment" role is exactly what would make that possible – a fact unlikely to be ignored by Chinese military planners.

### Geraldton satellite communications base

Since its construction in the 1980s, the Australian Defence Satellite Communications Station (ADSCS) near Geraldton on the West Australian coast has been one of Australia's own premier electronic spy stations (with Shoal Bay near Darwin), listening to any and all satellites beaming down transmissions from an arc from the Indian Ocean to the edge of the Pacific. On the western edge of the continent, the Geraldton facility is able to listen to more than 176 satellites in geosynchronous orbit over the equator, including large numbers of Chinese and Russian military communications and navigation satellites.

Following a series of agreements between the Australian and US governments in 2008 and 2010, the Australian base at Geraldton has become a joint facility, almost doubling in size to accommodate antennas and other equipment for three new US military satellite communications systems in new US-Australian compounds, each critical to US operations in Asia and the Middle East. These are:

#### 1. A Wideband Global SATCOM (WGS) ground terminal

Australia paid a little under \$1 billion for one of the six communications satellites currently in the Wideband Global SATCOM constellation, and in return gets the ability to use the entire system worldwide. The Geraldton WGS facility, with its three antennas, supports both Australian and US use of the constellation. The ADF not only collaborates with the US in operating the Geraldton facility, but embeds its own personnel in WGS operations centres in the US and elsewhere.

"Wideband" here means a capacity for large rapid uploads and downloads of data, voice, and imagery to and from the WGS satellites with aircraft, naval forces and ground forces around the world. Global operations of US armed and surveillance drones with massive amounts of sensor data to download now depend on the global WGS system, making the Geraldton base

another Australian link to the controversial US drone operations.

#### 2. A Mobile User Objective System (MUOS) radio access facility

The awkwardly named MUOS has been likened to a military smartphone system, able to rapidly and securely connect military users anywhere in the world.

The three 18-metre antennas at the Geraldton MUOS facility and three other ground stations (in Italy, Hawaii, and Virginia) communicating with satellites allow military users to connect with each other under almost any conditions and in any terrain.

Most importantly, the MUOS system gives users the potential to access the Pentagon's internet-like Global Information Grid – the largest intranet in the world – and its military and intelligence data banks and computing systems. The ADF itself will also use MUOS communications for regional operations as part of global coalition forces, giving it a degree of access to US-managed intelligence data banks.

But while this technological integration with US communications systems brings undoubted benefits for the ADF, it also raises the question of whether, should the US disapprove of a planned ADF deployment, the Americans could cut off Australian access to a communications system on which it has come to depend. Whatever polite relations among allies may suggest, the technical answer is surely yes.

#### 3. A Defence Information Systems Agency (DISA) Combined Communications Gateway

A DISA gateway is essentially a combina-

tion of hardware (including two 12-metre antennas) and software that allows the WGS, MUOS (and later, other) US military satellite-based communications systems to connect the rest of the Pentagon's Global Information Grid through its truly global network of optical fibre cable.

In pleading to a budget-cutting Congress last year, the US Pacific Command described funding for the gateway as an "urgent operational need".

Without the gateway, Pentagon plans for introducing armed and surveillance drones into south-east Asian and Indian Ocean operations will be difficult, if not impossible.

The new roles of the bases raise fundamental issues in our relations with Japan and China. Japan is now one of Australia's most significant military partners; Japanese government sources now speak of a "quasi-alliance" between the two countries.

The role of Pine Gap in Japan's defence may seem unobjectionable, were it not for its destabilising consequences for the nuclear relationship between China and the US.

Moreover, the newly re-elected government led by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is the most nationalist of any Japanese cabinet since 1945, with a penchant for border disputes with all its neighbours and a yearning to throw off the restraints of its pacifist constitution.

While Australia may have a strong interest in the defence of Japan, it also has an interest in ensuring that the Japanese dog does not wag the American-alliance dog

The Harold E Holt base at North West Cape is being upgraded for space surveillance. Below, left and right: contemporary protesters outside Pine Gap and Peter Garrett joins a rally in 1986.

over mere rocks in the East China Sea.

For all the recent discussion in Australia about its relationship with China, most has avoided the hard implications of the American facilities in Australia.

However remote or unthinkable such an outcome may be, the leaderships of two countries vital to Australia now spend considerable time thinking about the war with each other. From a Chinese perspective, Australia is not so much hosting US military bases but is a virtual American base in its own right.

The question for Australians is whether the continued operation of the bases renders that outcome inevitable.

It's not surprising that defence planners have sought to trade off the risks of hosting the bases against the hope that their unique role will make the defence of Australia essential to the US. After all, the language of the ANZUS Treaty itself, with its Article 3 pale promise to "consult" (rather than to "defend") when the security of any of the parties is threatened, offers much less commitment than the robust language of the comparable US treaties with Japan, South Korea, and the NATO countries.

The real question, however, is not whether the bases oblige the US to defend Australia; that is something that will always rest on the US government's calculation of its interests. The critical question – more urgent after sending the ADF four times since 1990 to American wars of strategic irrelevance to Australia – is whether the alliance embrace nullifies Australian sovereignty and its ability to assess its national interests independent of the United States.

Given the risks brought by the bases and the tightening web of alliance integration, the ability to test government claims in informed public debates amounts to a necessary – and presently missing – condition of Australian democracy. ■

MAX SUICH, CHIEF EDITORIAL EXECUTIVE OF FAIRFAX 1980-87, CONTRIBUTED IDEAS FOR THE STRUCTURE OF THIS ESSAY.

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