Joshua Peach and Lucy King, 'Major expansion under way at secretive military base Pine Gap' Australian Financial Review, 23 October 2026, at https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/major-expansion-under-way-at-secretive-military-base-pine-gap-20261023-p616t1

A major expansion is under way at the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap in the Northern Territory, reigniting questions about the role of Australia's most secretive military base in a world increasingly at war.

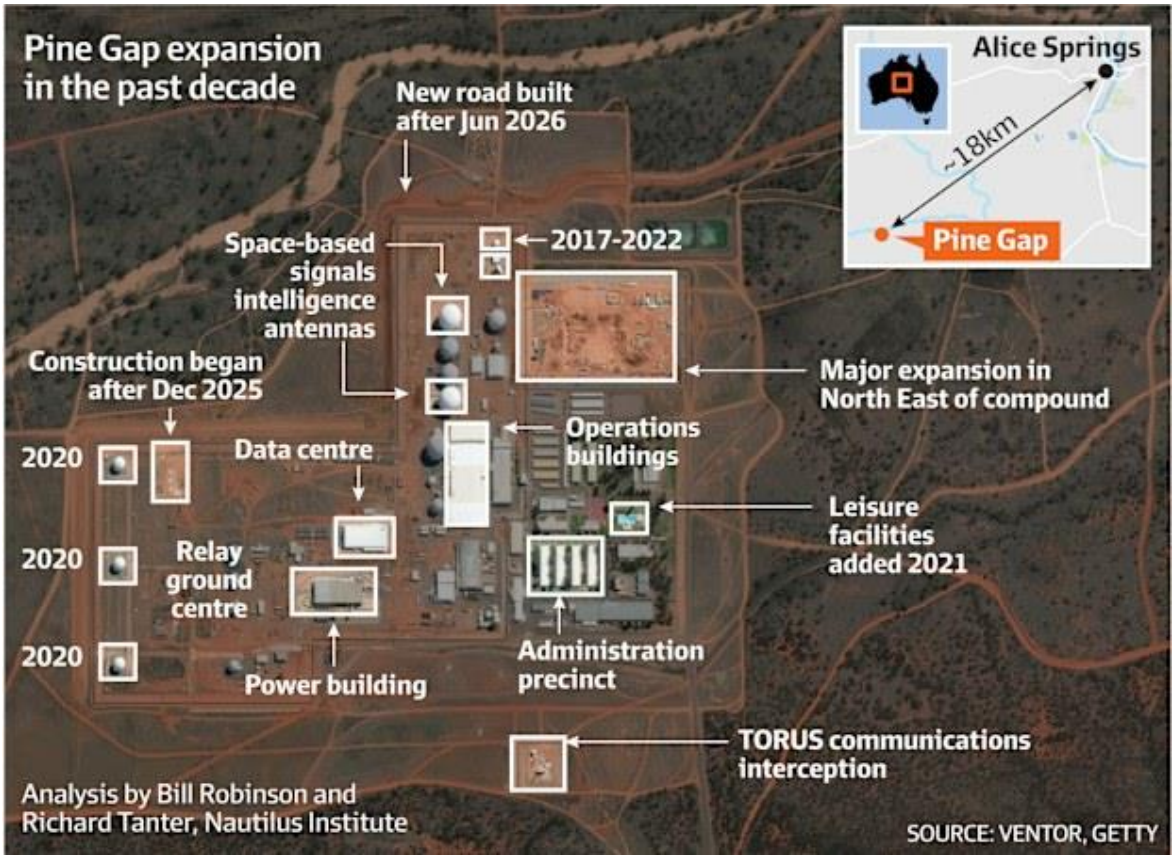
A satellite image taken on October 6, analysed by *AFR Weekend* and shared with intelligence experts, showed that the facility is likely undergoing one of its largest expansions in its 60-year history.



The new developments, which began between October 2025 and April 2026, include a new five-hectare compound expanding the facility's existing 50-hectare footprint to the north-east, as well as new roads and land clearing to the north of the base. New platforms have also been built in the western portion of the facility, near three large antennas that were erected in 2020.

The top secret nature of the base means details of what is being built have not been released publicly. The Department of Defence declined to comment on the developments at the base. Open-source intelligence expert and Australian Strategic Policy Institute fellow Nathan Ruser said that while it may be too early to tell the nature of the development, it was among the largest in the site's history.

"Recent satellite imagery shows that Pine Gap is beginning to undertake what appears to be its biggest expansion since AUKUS."



Located near Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, the site is jointly operated by Australia and various US agencies, including the National Reconnaissance Office, the National Security Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency.

Codenamed RAINFALL by US agencies, the site's primary functions include processing intelligence gathered from three US-operated geosynchronous signals-intelligence satellites, tracking missile launches and spying on communications from foreign and commercial satellites.

Richard Tanter, a senior research associate at the Nautilus Institute, a think tank that advocates for peace, has studied Pine Gap for more than three decades, and estimates the facility currently employs around 850 US and Australian personnel.

Tanter tracked a number of expansions at the site since 2015 and said that the newest construction is "undoubtedly a major development".

"All three systems at Pine Gap are of great, and indeed, expanding importance to the United States," he said. "The fact that we can't at this stage say what the purpose may be without further visual evidence distinctly does not mean it is unimportant."

Tanter said that as construction progresses in the next few months, the nature of the construction effort will become clearer.

He added that the advent of artificial intelligence and its impact on modern warfare and intelligence gathering is likely to necessitate new infrastructure at the site, regardless of whether these latest developments are related to the emerging technology.

"Rapidly growing AI infrastructure demand from proliferating AI applications means greater data centre capacity is inevitable at [Pine Gap]."

Jennifer Parker, adjunct professor at the Defence & Security Institute at the University of Western Australia, said the US alliance remains Australia's key "insurance policy" as the risk of regional conflict increases, particularly against potential coercion from China.

Although acknowledging that sites such as Pine Gap might become targets in any future conflict, Parker said that hosting such facilities strengthens Australia's hand.

"You increase bargaining power in an unequal alliance relationship by generating areas of indirect dependence of the major ally on you," she said.

"Pine Gap provides us a lot of capability that we would not have if not for the US, but it also increases US dependence on Australia, which gives us, as a smaller power, more bargaining power in that relationship and more freedom of action."

The facility, which has long been supported by successive governments as a linchpin in Australia's alliance with the US military, has also courted decades of public outcry over Canberra's culpability in American military operations.

Most recently, in July, around 300 protesters descended on the remote site to protest its likely involvement in intelligence sharing between the US and Israel since the outbreak of renewed conflict in Gaza following the October 7 attack three years ago.

It marked the largest anti-war protest at the site since 1987, when protesters, including Tanter, gathered to oppose nuclear proliferation at the height of the Cold War.

Among those to gather at the site in July was recently elected Greens leader David Shoebridge, who said that any signs of further development at the site were worrying.

"Pine Gap makes Australia less safe. It is a US base that implicates Australia in their wars around the world," he said. "We can see from the US war on Iran that bases are targets, and US President [Donald Trump] has proven perfectly comfortable with other countries being the front line of his wars."

Tanter, a longtime critic of the site, said that the benefit of the facility to Australia has always been asymmetrical, despite its strategic importance to the US.

“Our biggest problem at the moment is that while Trump may hate Europe and be happy to trash some other allies, for geographical reasons and because of our willingness to co-operate, he and the long-term Pentagon folks think very differently about us,” he said. “And so [Pine Gap] keeps growing and our influence over its use diminishes further.”