

## The militarised centre of Australia

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*This is a slightly edited version of an opinion piece I wrote for the Alice Springs News and subsequently published on John Menadue's Pearls & Irritations in July 2020.*

*I'm submitting it to the Military and Defence panel as a reflection on the creeping militarisation of the centre of Australia, which has only intensified since this was written.*

I can remember the naive excitement with which I ventured up the Stuart Highway for the first time more than thirty years ago. Now I feel the weight of the creeping expansion of a militarised swathe running south to north right through the centre of Australia.

The Northern Territory and South Australia trade on the allure of the big landscape, the tiny rough-edged communities, the sense of openness and possibilities. It is at the heart of the NT's appeal to tourists and of its current population strategy, encapsulated as "Boundless Possible".

My grasp of the militarised landscape may not be comprehensive, but here goes:

Starting from RAAF Base Edinburgh and Technology Park in the north of Adelaide – even before the latest big-spending defence announcements both were subject to massive new investment by the Commonwealth, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, BAE Systems, and SAAB.

Up through the Woomera Prohibited Area (WPA), stretching from Woomera to just shy of Coober Pedy on the eastern side of the highway, as far north as Cadney Park on the western side, more than 100,000 square kilometres of land.

I'd driven this route for years, noticed the warning signs by the side of the road and thought of them as a chilling relic of the British nuclear tests at Maralinga. Not at all. Drive off the road to make camp and you soon come to other signs: "Danger. Road Closed. Live firings in progress."

After a decline in the 1980s and '90s, the WPA resumed its role as an active weapons testing range, the largest in the world, ideal for its remoteness and "quiet electromagnetic environment". Parts of it are in near constant Defence use and the Australian taxpayer is pouring close to a billion dollars into its upgrade.

Onwards to Alice Springs, with Pine Gap military base just to the south of town, also going through a "midlife upgrade" for an unquantified spend. Then there's the Jindalee Operational Radar Network (JORN), part of it at Jindalee to the north-west; the whole network is getting a \$1.2 billion upgrade.

Heading north, to where some of the recently announced further billions will be spent, there are RAAF bases in Tindal and Darwin, barracks in Palmerston and Darwin, training areas at Kangaroo Flats, Robertson Barracks, Mount Bunday and Bradshaw Field. All of them are receiving new infrastructure investment worth some \$2 billion, with the US contributing a fraction of that, supporting the US Force Posture Initiative.

There's also the Australian Signals Directorate facility at Shoal Bay not far from Darwin, and a possible new deep-water port development a little further out, offering an improved base for the regular "rotations" of US Marines and their deployment into the Indo-Pacific.

The language used to talk to the public about all this is expressed in terms of industry, jobs, investment, billions of dollars. Dig down and in the small local economies that host these facilities the billions shrink – to just a few million, for example, with the JORN upgrade, mostly going on fleeting work for local tradies, not to developing a sustained and skilled local workforce.

The Prime Minister, talking to the massive new defence investments, evoked a dangerous new world out there. Meanwhile the ever more militarised Territory is becoming a more dangerous place to live – an increasingly effective military target should hostilities break out.

Are civil defence plans being developed? If they exist, the public knows nothing of them.

This is not a fanciful consideration. During the 1970s and '80s, when the Soviet Union was the threat, it was accepted in intelligence circles that the joint facilities including Pine Gap would be likely targets in a nuclear war. Paul Dibb was a senior policymaker and intelligence officer at the time and later emeritus professor of strategic studies at the ANU. In *Inside the wilderness of mirrors* (MUP, 2018) he wrote that it was "remiss, to say the least, of successive Australian governments not to provide even the most basic civil defence measures against nuclear attack on those facilities – despite the fact that they were advised to do so".

Meanwhile in the public announcements and comments on the new military spending, whether in the NT or nationally, there is never a mention of the fundamental premise of this industry, which is violence and threat as the way to conduct human affairs.

The same goes inside the expert circles that work to shore up the industry. I'm not an expert but as I began to inform myself in this area, so that I could talk about my neighbourhood military base with some degree of understanding, I started reading in the military sector.

There I found a world picture almost unrecognisable to me.

An article about military logistics by an Australian commanding officer led me to a 2018 paper by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff that advances a new intellectual framework for what they do. The Chiefs argue that the "peace/war binary" is obsolete. Instead they want to see military and civil activities aligned along a "continuum of cooperation, competition below armed conflict, and armed conflict".

The campaign is worldwide, continuous into the foreseeable future and framed entirely to project US power. The Chiefs seek to maintain the existing international order that has been challenged by "emerging and resurgent global powers, aspiring regional hegemons, and non-state actors" competing with the US.

Nowhere, though, in the document's forty or so pages is there a vision for, or even any reference to, striving for "friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples", as put in the United Nations Charter to which both our nations are signatories.

We don't hear that from our Australian political and military leaders either. Rather they are embracing this "forever war" with little awareness in the general community. It's what we are buying into with our commitment to "interoperability" with the United States armed forces, clearly reflected, for example, in this year's RAAF Air Power Conference.

In his introductory speech Air Marshal Mel Hupfeld spoke of Australia now being in an "environment of constant competition". In response to this, "[w]e need to demonstrate national power across a broader spectrum – from influence and competition to counterinfluence and conflict ... We need to recalibrate our thinking so that air and space power, as part of the joint force, is a tool of national power that is constantly operating. Not simply at the ready in case of outright conflict, but deployed in some form, all the time."

This thinking was already on display in the 2018 conference, on the theme of air power in "a disruptive world". We were being urged to think of artificial intelligence as our "intellectual partner" in order to accelerate the decision cycle – to be able to make best use of the vast amount of data which Pine Gap and its network suck up.

Digital natives, growing up with Xbox games and the like, "need to run the show". Trust needs to be built, not in one another, but in AI.

We were told Russia has declared that AI is the future and that "whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world". China is unambiguous about its AI plans and already has the advantage of military–civil fusion; when "our adversaries" are going down this path our ethics could be the "handcuffs" holding us back.

Another speaker, referring to the "grey area" of lethal force short of outright conflict, asked whether hybrid warfare could be used for good. But what good, whose good? He didn't go there.

I couldn't find any sustained reflection in the presentations about the resort to lethal force, the grave weight it is due, the ethical challenges of this brave new world, described as disruptive but accepted, it seems, as prescriptive – entirely inevitable. The PowerPoints were all shiny imagery of high-tech kill chains, but not a dead body to be seen, nor devastated city, nor vast refugee camp.

It seems we are going headlong into this intensively militarised world, with an ever-ready prospect of rapid resort to lethal force on many fronts – including of the kind delivered by our soon-to-be-acquired armed drones, the MQ-9B SkyGuardian.

This drone is not much different from the MQ-9A Reaper that took out Iranian military leader Qassem Soleimani, an assassination recently deemed "unlawful" by the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions. The United States invoked self-defence as justification for an attack, the first time a country had done so for a lethal attack against another state actor in a third country.

"Major General Soleimani was in charge of Iran military strategy, and actions, in Syria and Iraq. But absent an actual imminent threat to life, the course of action taken by the US was unlawful," the special rapporteur concluded.

These kind of attacks rely on the intelligence collected by Pine Gap and the network it is part of.

This is happening in our backyard. The wide open spaces that we in central Australia are so fond of evoking hide some nasty truths.

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