

# MILITARY UPGRADES FOR AUSTRALIAN SATELLITES: THE SMALL PRINT BEHIND THE BIG DEAL

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Almost hidden in enlarged Australian defence budgets in general and the recent \$270 billion ten-year military upgrade specifically, lie references to equip existing US-led satellite systems with enhanced facilities.

The US-led facilities form the basis of regional intelligence-gathering hosted by the Australian government. The facilities, furthermore, have placed Australia in a front-line position for US-led regional foreign policy with all the dangers and implications which that particular diplomatic position has involved.

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A recent announcement from the Pentagon the US military have begun testing an advanced artificial intelligence system for faster analysis of intelligence was provided minimal coverage in mainstream Australian media outlets. The system, referred to as a global information dominance experiment (GIDE), is not about new ways of intelligence-gathering and will use existing satellite systems, radar facilities and various underwater systems which are already in place. (1)

The GIDE system is primarily an AI computer program with the capacity to analyse vast quantities of intelligence for military application with the specific intention of 'exploiting the mass of data, beyond any human ability to absorb, to predict how the enemy might react by examining patterns and changes'. (2)

Once alerted to what are regarded as significant factors military commanders will then have the ability to feed the information into geo-spatial intelligence satellites (GEOINT) to 'examine human behaviour ... in order ... to take a closer look at what might be going on in a specific location'. (3)

The range of the satellite systems has also been extended in recent years with linkage to more than one ground station to increase coverage of larger geographical areas. (4)

The announcement coincided with a similar official diplomatic statement from the

Australian Defence Department about the ADF adopting new digital battle space strategy systems with modern warfare postures for defence and security provision. (5) It was noted by Assistant Defence Minister Andrew Hastie that 'our war-fighters – commanders and troops in the field, air-crew and sailors – all need access to fast and reliable data to successfully conduct operations ... our inter-operability with our security partners and allies depends upon us sharing sophisticated mission and intelligence data'. (6)

Australia has had a long history of intelligence-sharing with the US; Pine Gap has remained central to US regional and global operations for decades. A February 2008 agreement between the US and Australia, likewise, was based upon 'intensified co-operation and intelligence-sharing in GEOINT ... to boost surveillance of Asia and the Pacific'. (7) It formally linked Canberra with the US National Geo-Spatial Intelligence Agency Headquarters at Fort Belvoir, Virginia.

Australia, subsequently, re-named existing facilities into the Australian Government Geo-Spatial Intelligence Organisation in 2013, as one of six official intelligence agencies. (8) It was later linked to similar US-led agencies, elsewhere, in: Canada, the European Union, the UK, New Zealand and Portugal.

As the Indo-Pacific region, in recent years, has become the epicentre of rising diplomatic and strategic tensions, Australia has become even more important for US-led regional military planning. Recent references in ADF material to Five Eyes Partners and 'repositioning data as a strategic asset ... which will ... underpin front-line operations', leave little to the imagination about the designated role of Australia in US-led regional military planning. (9) Australia has become primarily an important hub for US-led regional operations.

The newly established Australian Force Structure Plan has, furthermore, been noted as 'a signal ... and major shift in Australia's global role ... placing ... a greater focus on the immediate region', and has already included planned anti-ballistic missile defence shields. (10) Elsewhere, references to 'military satellites and ground-based signals intelligence facilities' linked to the use of long-range strike capability and anti-submarine warfare, leave little to the imagination. (11)

The moves have also coincided with increased high-level diplomatic relations between Australia and Japan, as a three-way relationship with the US. The recent Japanese diplomatic statement from Ambassador Yama-gami Shingo that he wanted greater access to Australia's remote training facilities and more joint naval exercises reveal a greater co-ordination between the US allies. (12) They have drawn Australia ever closer to hostilities between the US and China over Taiwan, which is one of several regional flashpoints where military and diplomatic posturing could easily escalate into real-war scenarios. (13)

The moves have also created dangers for Australia which have been clarified in a recent military assessment by the Lowy Institute. The paper, from the Centre for a New American Strategy, by Thomas Shugart, has assessed China's new range missile programs and concluded that while a war between Australia and China is 'remote', serious competition between the US and China particularly within the western Pacific has become problematic for Canberra. (14)

Australia has nothing to gain from being so closely allied with the US, and a great deal to potentially lose in a real-war scenario:

We need an independent foreign policy!

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1. Pentagon uses AI to figure out what the enemy will do next, The Australian, 4 August 2021.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. See: Fundamentals of Micro-wave and Satellite Technologies, Abdul Khaleque, 29 October 2008.
5. Diggers to fight on digital front, The Australian, 4 August 2021.
6. Ibid.
7. Australia to access US spy satellites, Spatial Source, 13 February 2011.
8. Wikipedia: Geo-Spatial Intelligence Satellites.
9. Diggers to fight on digital front, op.cit., 4 August 2021.
10. PM shoulders arms to China, The Australian, 1 July 2020, and, Defence spending must shore up national security, Editorial, The Australian, 11 August 2021.
11. Ibid.
12. Japan steps up military alliance, The Australian, 5 July 2021.
13. Japan steps up to support Taiwan, Editorial, The Australian, 8 July 2021, and, Japan vows to defend Taiwan with US, The Australian, 8 July 2021.
14. Australia 'within PLA strike range', The Australian, 11 August 2021.

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