

# **Alice Springs Peace Action Think Tank (ASPATT) Submission to IPAN People’s Inquiry August 2021**

## **ASPATT Background**

The Alice Springs Peace Action Think Tank (ASPATT) is a collection of individuals across Mparntwe (Alice Springs), who are engaged in issues related to creating a safer and more peaceful world. ASPATT is committed to advancing dialogue around peaceful resolutions to international conflict, as an alternative to war. ASPATT is an affiliate member of IPAN; ASPATT is also a partner of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) and this campaign is one of the key focus areas for ASPATT.

## **Submission**

**The Submission addresses the Terms of Reference, Part 1: The costs and consequences of the Australia-U.S. Alliance relating to: political, military/defence impacts – including:**

**-The impact on all Australian people**

## **Impact of the U.S. alliance on Military and Defence for Australia**

The Australian Government decision not to sign and ratify the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

Since the dropping of the nuclear bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan on 6 and 9 August 1945, our world has “known the devastating impacts of nuclear weapons”<sup>1</sup>. Seventy-six years later, however, all people across the globe “are still bearing the unacceptable burden of these weapons”.<sup>2</sup>

Around the world, First Nations people have borne the brunt of nuclear weapons testing<sup>3</sup>, and this has been the case in Australia, with tests conducted by the British Government in Maralinga, South Australia in 1953 having had horrific environmental and health effects, including lifelong disability on the people there, the Aboriginal land owners.

ASPATT is concerned that there are now nine countries who hold nuclear weapons - almost 14,000 weapons in total and disturbingly, 2,000 of the weapons are able to be launched within minutes.<sup>4</sup>

While there has been a very significant treaty in force since 1970, namely the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)<sup>5</sup>, there has been widespread international recognition for quite some time of the need for a complete ban on nuclear weapons. In 2017, “An overwhelming majority of the world’s nations” adopted the landmark United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the first treaty to comprehensively ban nuclear weapons and provide a pathway for all nations to outlaw and eliminate nuclear weapons.<sup>6 7</sup> The Treaty entered into force on 22 January 2021. The TPNW has

---

<sup>1</sup> ICAN 2020a

<sup>2</sup> ICAN 2020a

<sup>3</sup> ICAN 2017

<sup>4</sup> ICAN 2020a

<sup>5</sup> ICAN 2021a

<sup>6</sup> ICAN 2020b

<sup>7</sup> ICAN 2021b

been a very significant development indeed, because “Far from keeping us safe, nuclear weapons pose an unacceptable threat to all people everywhere” and “failing to disarm leads to more and more weapons”.<sup>8</sup>

So far, 55 countries have ratified the Treaty.<sup>9</sup> ASPATT is greatly concerned however, that Australia has not signed (or ratified) the treaty, despite the fact that “Australia has joined every other treaty that prohibits indiscriminate or inhumane weapons, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty”.<sup>10</sup> The entry into force of the TPNW means that Australia is now out of step with international law.<sup>11</sup>

Australia’s current stance “is contested by a growing nationwide movement and at all levels of government...[and] The treaty reveals Australia’s complicity in the problem by including nuclear weapons in its defence posture.”<sup>12</sup> The Australian Government currently has a “stated policy of reliance on US extended nuclear deterrence”, which ICAN argues “serves to encourage or induce the United States to use or threaten to use its nuclear weapons.”<sup>13</sup>

#### Risks to Australians in the event of a nuclear war

ASPATT is concerned that rather than making our country safer, Australia’s decision to side with the U.S. in support of the retention of their more than 6000 nuclear weapons, and the hosting of U.S. bases in Australia, may in fact increase the risk of a plausible nuclear threat to Australia. This is something that was recognised as far back as in 1981, in an analysis done by the Analysis & Policy Observatory, citing the late Professor Des Ball from the Australian National University. While the a nuclear war was seen as an unlikely event, the analysis noted in relation to four U.S. bases in Australia at that time (i.e., North West Cape, Pine Gap, Nurrungar and Smithfield) that if a nuclear war does come, those stations are going to be targeted”.<sup>14</sup> The concerns of a nuclear threat to Australia as a result of the presence of U.S. bases here, still remain today.<sup>15</sup>

#### Influence of the U.S. – Australia alliance on Australia’s decision not to sign the Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty

It is clearly in the best interests of the global community that we abolish all nuclear weapons as soon as possible. No good can come from them. ASPATT is greatly concerned the Australia-U.S. alliance is having an undue influence on the decision by the current Australian Government not to begin the process of signing and subsequently ratifying the TPNW. We believe that the Australian Government needs to develop independent foreign policy, in order to ensure what is best for the health and wellbeing of Australian people and ultimately the world as a whole.

In particular, it is time that Australia forges an independent foreign policy in relation to nuclear weapons. During the ban treaty negotiation process the U.S. was the strongest opponent of the process, with

---

<sup>8</sup> ICAN 2020a

<sup>9</sup> ICAN 2021c

<sup>10</sup> ICAN 2020b, p.2

<sup>11</sup> ICAN 2020b, p.2

<sup>12</sup> ICAN 2020b, p.2

<sup>13</sup> Hawkins and Kimber 2016, cited in ICAN 2019, p.22

<sup>14</sup> Analysis and Policy Observatory 1981

<sup>15</sup> ICAN 2019, p.22

Australia being their “most active and vocal supporter”.<sup>16</sup> It is very notable, however, that behind closed doors, the U.S. has acknowledged that a ban treaty will actually achieve its intended purpose., i.e., that it would “make it impossible to undertake nuclear planning or training”. As Barret and Wareham express “that’s the whole point of the thing.”<sup>17</sup>

The current decision by the Australian Government not to support the TPNW helps to perpetuate the continuation of nuclear weapons in the world, whereas the current climate for change amongst the majority of countries across the world, represents an enormous opportunity for the Australian Government to play a leading role in encouraging the U.S. and the other eight nations that possess nuclear weapons, to sign and ratify the TPNW and finally rid the world of all nuclear weapons.

ASPATT supports ICAN’s call that “It’s high time the Australian government followed New Zealand and most other countries in our region and got on the right side of history.”<sup>18</sup> ASPATT believes that if the alliance with the U.S. is as strong as the Australian Government maintains it is, it should be able to withstand differences in policy within each country. ASPATT echoes the call by Setsuko Thurlow (survivor of Hiroshima) in a letter to Australian Prime Minister that committing to the TPNW is a way “to honour the victims and survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as all who have been affected by nuclear testing, particularly First Nations Peoples’.<sup>19</sup>

#### Role of Pine Gap in relation to nuclear weapons

IPAN have described that “The Australian government has declared that two Australian defence facilities”, the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap and the Joint Geological and Geophysical Research Station<sup>i</sup>, both in or near Mparntwe (Alice Springs) and regarded as “joint facilities” with the U.S and which are operated “with the full knowledge and concurrence of the Australian government”<sup>20</sup>; and the Australian Government has stated that these make the Australia-U.S. alliance incompatible with Article 1(1)(e) of the TPNW currently.<sup>21</sup>

In relation to Pine Gap, three distinct major surveillance systems are installed at the defence facility and one of these has “a critical role in US nuclear command, control and intelligence”, namely “the Relay Ground Station (RGS)”.<sup>22</sup> The RGS’ four main antenna “provide linkage to US early warning satellites (Overhead Persistent Infra-Red, or OPIR, consisting of older satellites and more powerful modern satellites... [which] detect the heat bloom of intercontinental and submarine-launched nuclear ballistic missiles launched against the US”.<sup>23</sup> “Data from these sensors is downlinked to Pine Gap and sent automatically in virtual real time to the system’s Mission Control Station at Buckley Air Force Base in Colorado, US Strategic Command and the White House, as early warning of nuclear attack”.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Barrett & Wareham 2017

<sup>17</sup> Barrett & Wareham 2017

<sup>18</sup> ICAN 2021d

<sup>19</sup> Setsuko Thurlow, 2020, cited in ICAN 2020a

<sup>20</sup> ICAN 2019, p.23

<sup>21</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2018

<sup>22</sup> ICAN 2019, p.23

<sup>23</sup> ICAN 2019, p.23

<sup>24</sup> Richelson 1999, cited in ICAN 2019, p.23

“In the US the same data stream flows on to the US Air Force’s Space Command, providing missile launch locations and anticipated trajectories for combined US and Japanese missile-defence systems.<sup>25</sup> Today, these missile defence systems depend on “cueing” from Pine Gap to have any chance of finding their targets in flight in space”.<sup>26</sup> The functions of the RGS in providing early warning, and missile defence “might be seen as defensive, and therefore stabilising”, however, “Missile defence, when it is possessed by only one of two nuclear armed enemies, is anything but defensive and stabilising”.<sup>27</sup>

Pine Gap’s role in nuclear targeting clearly conflicts with the TPNW’s prohibition on assistance in the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons.<sup>28</sup> ICAN have articulated that there is a pathway to compliance with the Treaty, but it would mean an Australian government would have to provide assurances that the RGS’s OPIR systems could not and would not be used for nuclear war fighting”, but a consideration remains as to “how this could be achieved without threatening what the US considers its national security interests”.<sup>29</sup>

ICAN have outlined two possible approaches to compliance for Australia

1. Separating the defensive functions of the RGS from nuclear war-fighting.
2. Closure of the RGS (“which is highly vulnerable to attack”) and the removal of its systems from Pine Gap, with an agreed timeframe “without closing Pine Gap as a whole.”<sup>30</sup>

ASPATT urges the Australian Government to give immediate consideration to weighing up the merits of these two approaches, in order to begin to take steps to start the process of signing the TPNW as a matter of urgency.

In relation to the second approach regarding closure of the RGS, ICAN argues that this approach would mean the rest of Pine Gap “and its principal signals intelligence functions” would remain unaffected and there would not be an impact on U.S. national security and it would not lead to the Australia-U.S. alliance being thrown into crisis<sup>31</sup>. It would however remove the most significant “obstacle posed by Pine Gap to Australia becoming compliant with the TPNW”.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, ICAN has also pointed out that, due to the U.S. (for decades) being “acutely aware of the physical vulnerability of facilities like Pine Gap to enemy attack, they have “for some time built technological alternatives to relying solely on Pine Gap for its most important nuclear-related operations...with its “multiple and complex intelligence activities...basically characterised as providing big ears and big infrared eyes”.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> ICAN 2019, p.23

<sup>26</sup> ICAN 2019, p.23

<sup>27</sup> ICAN 2019, p.23-24

<sup>28</sup> ICAN 2019, p.24

<sup>29</sup> ICAN 2019, p.24

<sup>30</sup> ICAN 2019, p.24

<sup>31</sup> ICAN 2019, p.24

<sup>32</sup> ICAN 2019, p.24

<sup>33</sup> ICAN 2019, p.23

It is significant to note that there is broad support amongst the Australian population for the banning of nuclear weapons. ICAN have reported that between 70-80% of Australians believe that Australia should sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.<sup>34</sup>

### Concerns about other activity conducted at Pine Gap

ASPATT is greatly concerned about the use of data gathered at Pine Gap for use in drone strikes and we believe that Australians must consider the unintended consequences when Australian stability and security is threatened by Australia's unquestioned support of drone strikes.

There has been significant public comment on this issue, highlighted by a range of people including the late Des Ball (former Special Professor at the Australian National University (ANU) and expert on defence and security)<sup>35</sup>, Richard Tanter (Honorary Professor in the School of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Melbourne and Senior Research Associate at the Nautilus Institute)<sup>36</sup>, Felicity Ruby, PhD candidate at Sydney University<sup>37</sup>, as well as the late former Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser.<sup>38</sup>

Tanter has argued for many years, that the work of Pine Gap, which was brought to the front line in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the new U.S. space surveillance radar planned for North West Cape, have cemented Australia's role in U.S. missile defence and space operations and in 2012, he urged a reconsideration of this arrangement<sup>39</sup>, and his concerns remain<sup>40</sup>. Tanter has also expressed concern about the expansion of capacity and operations at Pine Gap Joint Defence Facility (just outside of Mparntwe (Alice Springs)) in recent years.<sup>41</sup>

As people committed to the future of Mparntwe (Alice Springs), ASPATT is also very concerned about the role Pine Gap plays in terms of its involvement in directing U.S. drone strikes. In 2013, Pine Gap's key role in the United States' drone strikes program by tracking "the precise "geolocation" of radio signals, including hand-held radios and mobile phones, in the eastern hemisphere, from the Middle East across Asia to China, North Korea and the Russian far east", was revealed, which for example had involved the "targeted killing" of al-Qaeda and Taliban chiefs.<sup>42</sup>

Between 2004 and 2013, the U.S drone program "involved more than 370 attacks in Pakistan... [and was] reported to have killed between 2500 and 3500 al-Qaeda and Taliban militants, including many top commanders" as well as "hundreds of civilians<sup>43</sup> [particularly children<sup>44</sup>] "causing anti-American protests in Pakistan, diplomatic tensions between Washington and Islamabad and accusations the "drone war" has

---

<sup>34</sup> ICAN & IPSOS Polling 2018, 2020

<sup>35</sup> Ball 2014

<sup>36</sup> Tanter 2012, 2021

<sup>37</sup> Ruby 2019

<sup>38</sup> Fraser 2013

<sup>39</sup> Medical Association for Prevention of War (MAPW) 2012

<sup>40</sup> Tanter 2016, Tanter 2018

<sup>41</sup> Tanter 2012, p.30

<sup>42</sup> Dorling 2013

<sup>43</sup> Dorling 2013

<sup>44</sup> Ball 2014

amounted to a program of "targeted killing" outside of a battlefield.<sup>45</sup> There had also been "four American citizens ... killed by strikes in Pakistan and Yemen" between 2009 and 2013<sup>46</sup>.

ASPATT believes that Australia's involvement in the drone program through Pine Gap should be immediately, thoroughly and transparently reviewed, both in terms of the counterproductive human and strategic consequences of such operations and the culpability under international law of Australian personnel involved in such Pine Gap-supported U.S. drone strikes,<sup>47</sup> for which United Nations Special Rapporteurs for Extra-Judicial Killings have considered likely violations of international law.<sup>48</sup>

Ruby (2017) refers to the "listening and watching capacity [of Pine which] is applied to verification of compliance with arms-control-treaty obligations" but she also points out that "Pine Gap plays a vital role in US nuclear war planning through its capacity to seek, locate and jam Soviet and other air-defence radars to ensure US nuclear weapons hit their targets."<sup>49</sup> ASPATT's concerns about Pine Gap's role in U.S. nuclear war planning are highlighted in above.

Ruby has also highlighted the emergence more recently established "battlefield functions" ("real time battlefield support)" of Pine Gap which include "supporting communications and targeting of military operations and troop movements in battlefields such as in the Balkans, Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan... and that "this evolving technology has the ability to identify the location of individuals holding mobile phones and hand-held radios"<sup>50</sup>. These developments are of great concern to ASPATT.

### **The Submission addresses ToR Part 2: Recommendations about the future of the U.S.-Australia alliance**

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** That decisions regarding the priorities and future objectives of Australian foreign policy be made independently, being determined by what is in the best interests of the Australian people and the south-Pacific region of which we are a part.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** That the Australian Government review and act on Pine Gap's role in nuclear targeting, which conflicts with the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) which disallows assistance in the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** That the Australian Government sign and ratify the Treaty for the prohibition of nuclear weapons as a matter of urgency.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** That Australia's involvement in the U.S. drone program should be immediately, thoroughly and transparently reviewed, in terms of both:

- the counterproductive human and strategic consequences of such operations and
- the culpability under international law of Australian personnel involved in such Pine Gap-supported U.S. drone strikes, for which United Nations Special Rapporteurs for Extra-Judicial Killings have considered likely violations of international law.

---

<sup>45</sup> Dorling 2013

<sup>46</sup> Dorling 2013

<sup>47</sup> Tanter 2021

<sup>48</sup> Howie and Pearson 2013

<sup>49</sup> Ruby 2019

<sup>50</sup> Ruby 2019

## References

- Analysis and Policy Observatory 1981, Threats to Australia's security: their nature and probability, 4 June 1981, [Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, Parliament of Australia https://apo.org.au/node/39901](#)
- Ball, D (2014), 7.30 Report, ABC Lateline, Top intelligence analyst slams Pine Gap's role in American drone strikes  
Lateline Transcript 13.8.14
- Barrett, P. & Wareham, S., 2017,. Australia's unprecedented decision to snub nuclear talks is irresponsible, Sydney Morning Herald, 22 February 2017
- Department of Foreign affairs and Trade 2018, Statement by DFAT Assistant Secretary Richard Sadleir, Senate, Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee, Parliament of Australia, Estimates Hearing, (31 May 2018), page 215, cited in ICAN, Choosing Humanity 2017, p.23
- Dorling, P. 2013, Pine Gap drives US drone kills, Sydney Morning Herald, July 21, 2013  
<https://www.smh.com.au/national>
- Fraser, M, 2013, "Letting go of the US", published in The Age and Sydney Morning Herald, 26 August 2013,
- Hawkins, D. and Kimber, J., 2016, "Australia's stance on nuclear deterrence leaves it on the wrong side of history," The Conversation, 26 August 2016, <https://theconversation.com/australias-stance-on-nuclear-deterrence-leaves-it-on-the-wrong-side-of-history-64163>, cited in ICAN 2019, p.22
- Howie, E. and Pearson, E., 2013, Emily Howie, Director of Advocacy and Research, Human Rights Law Centre and Elaine Pearson, Australia Director, Human Rights Watch, *Australia: Joint Letter on an Inquiry Into Human Rights and Civilian Impact of Drone Strikes*, to Ben Emmerson, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and Christof Heyns, Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Killings, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; 16 August 2013). <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/19/australia-joint-letter-inquiry-human-rights-and-civilian-impact-drone-strikes>.
- ICAN 2017, Indigenous Statement to the U.N Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty Negotiations, June 2017*  
<https://icanw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Indigenous-Statement-June-2017.pdf>
- ICAN 2018, 2019 IPSOS Polling Survey Results 2018, 2020*
- ICAN 2019, Choosing Humanity, p.23-24*
- ICAN 2020a Internal Presentation, Gem Romuld notes for Soka Gakkai International Australia (SGI) Australia Talk, August 2020
- ICAN 2020b Australia Entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, October 2020
- ICAN 2021a Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)  
<https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/text/>
- ICAN 2021b Treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/tpnw/>
- ICAN 2021c International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons Website <https://www.icanw.org/>
- ICAN 2021d, ICAN Media Release, Nuclear Weapons banned as historic UN Treaty becomes International Law, 22 January 2021

*ICAN & IPSOS 2018, 2020, IPSOS Polling Survey Results 2018, 2020*

Medical Association for Prevention of War (MAPW) 2012 <http://www.mapw.org.au/download/back-bases-r-tanter-us-forces-australia-may-2012>

Richelson, J, 1999, Richelson, America's Space Sentinels: DSP Satellites and National Security, (University Press of Kansas, 1999); and Jeffrey T. Richelson (ed.), "Space-Based Early Warning: From MIDAS to DSP to SBIRS", National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 235, updated edition 8 January 2013, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB235/20130108.html>. cited in ICAN Choosing Humanity, p.23

Ruby, F, 2019 Minding the Gap, Arena Magazine No. 149, August 2017

*Setsuko Thurlow, 2020, Letter to Australian Prime Minister, The Hon. Scott Morrison, June 2020, cited in ICAN 2020a, Internal Presentation*

Tanter, R, 2012 Back to the bases, in Arena Magazine, April-May 2012

Tanter, R, 2016 Our poisoned heart, Arena Magazine No. 144, October 2016

Tanter, R, 2018, Tightly Bound: The United States and Australia's Alliance-Dependent Militarization, The Asia-Pacific Journal, June 1, 2018; Volume 16 | Issue 11 | Number 2; Article ID 5150 <https://apjif.org/2018/11/Tanter.html>

Tanter, R, 2021, Email correspondence with Alice Springs Peace Action Think Tank, 14 August 2021

To contact ASPATT:

ASPATT Convener

Jonathan Pilbrow

[aspatt2016@gmail.com](mailto:aspatt2016@gmail.com)

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Joint Geological and Geophysical Research Station is a US Air Force operated seismic monitoring station*