

# Australian government expands northern air base for US military use against China

By Mike Head  
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The Australian government underlined its commitment to the US war preparations against China last Friday by announcing a further \$1.1 billion upgrade to the Tindal air force base in northern Australia, primarily to provide access for US war planes, including nuclear-capable bombers.

On the same day, after visiting the base, near Katherine, to make the announcement, Prime Minister Scott Morrison flew to the key electronic spying and communications facility, the US-controlled base at Pine Gap, near Alice Springs in central Australia, for a classified briefing from US and Australian intelligence officials. Pine Gap is a pivotal site for US missile and drone warfare across the Indo-Pacific region and the Middle East.

Taken together, these two developments point to the government's anxiety to align itself with Washington's war plans, which rely on northern Australian air, naval and ground bases as a vital platform for what could be a catastrophic nuclear war with China. Washington regards Beijing as the chief threat to its global hegemony.

Behind the backs of the Australian population, the Liberal-National Coalition government, backed by the opposition Labor Party, has stepped-up agreements with the US to provide access to military facilities, making Australia not just a launching pad, but a prime target, in any such war.

At a media conference at Tindal, Morrison described the base as “the sharp end of the spear.” Without mentioning China by name, he said the base “plays an incredibly important role in Australia's efforts to ensure a stable and secure Indo-Pacific, working particularly with our partners in the United States.”

Morrison said the \$1.1 billion program of works at the base was on top of the \$495 million already spent

there recently, taking the total to \$1.6 billion. Major runway extensions, fuel stockpiles and engineering will be designed to support “Code E” large aircraft, such as US B-52 strategic bombers and Australian KC-30 air-to-air refuellers. US and Australian “fifth-generation strike fighters” also will have greater capacity to conduct joint operations and training exercises in the Indo-Pacific.

Revealing the pressure being applied by Washington, Morrison said: “When I was in the United States last year and was with the president and was meeting with the Secretary of Defence Mark Esper and the secretary of state and many others, I was so proud that we can say unreservedly that Australia holds up its end when it comes to our defence commitments and the role we play in our part of the world.”

The prime minister stressed that his government was spending \$200 billion on increased military capacity, and would lift the allocation to 2 percent of gross domestic product—or about \$40 billion—in the 2020–21 budget, “several years ahead of what we set as our original target.”

As well as satisfying the Trump administration's demands, Morrison is seeking to use militarism to deflect the public hostility toward his government. An Australian National University opinion poll published last week found that confidence in the government plunged by nearly 11 points from October to 27 percent in January, mostly because of the government's contemptible response to the bushfire catastrophe.

While pouring billions into the military, successive Australian governments and their state counterparts have starved firefighting and other essential civilian services of funds. This has left volunteer fire-fighters confronting infernos with old and outdated trucks and equipment.

The corporate media has barely reported the Tindal announcement, reflecting concerns about high levels of anti-war sentiment. But the *Australian* newspaper and US-connected strategic think-tanks emphasised that the “spear” was aimed at China.

The *Australian’s* foreign editor, Greg Sheridan, highlighted the upgrade’s advantages for US planning for war against China. “For the US, the move continues its long-term process to disperse its forces throughout the Indo-Pacific, to make them harder to hit and less focused on the two islands of Okinawa and Guam.”

Sheridan said this reality was being kept hidden from public view. “Politicians will be too polite to mention it explicitly but this makes US forces less vulnerable to potential strikes by Chinese forces in the event of military conflict between the US and China.”

Labor’s defence spokesman and deputy leader Richard Marles quickly endorsed the announcement, while the Greens, which once postured as an anti-war party, remained silent. In fact, the Coalition government is ramping up arrangements first agreed by the Greens-backed minority Labor government of Julia Gillard.

Via the US Force Posture Initiative signed in 2011 by the Gillard government and the Obama administration, the US and Australia committed to joint funding for military infrastructure projects of about \$2 billion.

The commitment included an annual rotation of up to 2,000 US marines through the northern capital of Darwin, and the construction of a naval port for US use in that city’s harbour. Last year, Australia and the US scaled up an Enhanced Air Co-operation agreement that involved the integration of US F-22 Raptors.

The Tindal upgrade also signals the greater basing of missiles that could strike Chinese ships in the critical trade routes through Singapore and Indonesia. The announcement followed a decision by the US State Department this month to approve the sale to Australia of 200 AGM-158C Long Range Anti-Ship Missiles for about \$1.5 billion. The stealth cruise missiles could be fired from Australia’s new Joint Strike Fighters, when the US delivers them, or its F/A-18F Super Hornets.

Former intelligence and defence chief Paul Dibb indicated the discussion going on in ruling circles. He urged the government to go further by acquiring longer-range land-based missiles—a prospect raised by US Defence Secretary Esper last year—and upgrading

other “frontline” air force bases, Learmonth and Curtin in northwest Western Australia, and Scherger on the Cape York Peninsula.

US Studies Centre analyst Brendan Thomas-Noone told the *Australian* that US B-52 bombers were likely to be “rotated through” Tindal. He said Australia’s northern bases were at a relatively safe range from China, which did not have conventional land-based missiles that could hit them. “That’s why the Americans are so interested in that territory and why Australia has become so much more valuable in terms of its strategic geography.”

Morrison’s visit to Pine Gap is revealing because, as American National Security Agency (NSA) whistle blower Edward Snowden exposed in 2017, Pine Gap plays a central role in assisting US military operations, including identifying targets for missile attacks. It is also vital for spying on China, Russia and Iran and intercepting phone calls, satellite transmissions and ballistic missile electronic communications.

The bipartisan escalation of Australian involvement in US war plans, and the silent complicity of the Greens, matches the line-up against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and the brave whistle blower Chelsea Manning. That is because they laid bare the war crimes and atrocities of the Pentagon and its partners, including Australia.

*The author also recommends:*

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