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## Middle East

Feb 22, 2007

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### US gets bigger ears in the sky

By Alan Boyd

Misawa Air Base in Japan. In the Pacific, Inmarsat transmissions are monitored by Pine Gap, Waihopai in New Zealand, Misawa, and Yakima in the US. Pine Gap is the main ground station for the intercepts, with half of its 900 operatives believed to be from the CIA and US signals agencies.

Misawa, staffed by Japanese and US technicians, specifically intercepts signals from Russian satellites in the North Pacific, together with bases in Hawaii, Osan Air Base in South Korea, and

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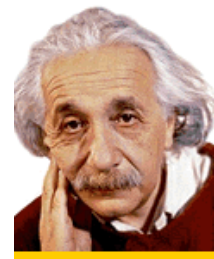
the Yakima and Sugar Grove, West Virginia, ground stations in the mainland United States.

One of the 1970s generation of Intelsat satellites still covers East Asia exclusively and is tracked from Pine Gap and Kojarena. But the focus since the 1990s has increasingly been on regional satellites. Palapa, the Indonesian orbiter that has a footprint covering most of Asia, including China, is monitored from Shoal Bay, a base in Australia's Northern Territory.

Australian Defense Minister Brendan Nelson has said the new Geraldton base will be part of a Mobile User Objective System that the US is developing that will use satellites to supply ground troops in Asia and the Middle East with instant intelligence, graphics and maps. Nelson said negotiations with the US began in 2003.

There is speculation that it may also support Pine Gap's other function of providing early warning of missile launches as part of the so-called "Son of Star Wars" defense system. This role was formerly performed by the US-Australian facility at Nurrungar, South Australia. Until its closure in 1999, Nurrungar was the only ground station capable of monitoring first-strike missile launches by the Soviet Union.

But a US assessment also found it was one of the highest-priority nuclear targets. Pine Gap and Nurrungar were crucial to the



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success of both US-led invasions of Iraq, providing early warning of Scud missile launches. In an earlier era, they were used to select and find targets for US bombers in the Vietnam War.

The success rate of ECHELON is not known, but many analysts doubt that it is possible to trawl efficiently through billions of items of information in a time frame that would make it readily available to military forces and intelligence agencies.

As the EU study noted, satellites generate only a tiny fraction of global telecommunications transmissions: the more usable material is likely to come from laborious intercepts of signals or microwave transmissions obtainable from terrestrial forms of communication. And computers often are not capable of sorting the wheat from the torrent of chaff.

Researcher Duncan Campbell has even cast doubts on the capability of intercepting all e-mail, telephone and fax communications. "This has proved to be erroneous; neither ECHELON nor the signals intelligence system of which it is part can do this. Nor is equipment available with the capacity to process and recognize the content of every speech message or telephone call," he said.

#### **Commercial applications**

Nevertheless, the ECHELON concept has been copied - on a single-country basis - by Russia, France and China, among others.

One reason may be that the objective has widened from filtering diplomatic and military transmissions to getting a head start on commercial competitors. There is circumstantial evidence that the system has been used by both the US and Britain to decide the fate of business contracts in Asia.

Documents released in the US suggest it is also used for direct commercial espionage, often under the guise of monitoring corruption. "It is the new Cold War. The United States intelligence agencies, facing downsizing after the fall of the Berlin Wall, have found themselves a new role spying on foreign firms to help American business in global markets," said Campbell.

In 1990, the German newsmagazine Der Spiegel claimed that president George H W Bush, father of the current US president, had used intercepted messages between Indonesian authorities and Japan's NEC Corp to stop a US\$200 million telecommunications deal. He is said to have insisted that it be split with a US telecom firm, AT&T.

Boeing landed a \$6 billion deal for arms, airliners and maintenance in Saudi Arabia in 1994 after the National Security Agency reportedly handed president Bill Clinton evidence from intercepted faxes and phone calls that the rival European Airbus consortium had discussed the payment of bribes to government officials. Clinton is also said to have cited intercepted evidence implicating one of former president Suharto's daughters in a \$150 million kickback to gain leverage in a \$40 billion package of deals, including the Paton power station, signed with Indonesia in 1994.

Washington has even used intercepts against its own ECHELON partners. In 1995 a portfolio compiled by the CIA led to Britain losing a \$400 million contract to build a power station near Bombay (now Mumbai) that went instead to the United States' Enron, General Electric and Bechtel. Similarly, the British were pushed out of a major construction deal in the Philippines.

The ultimate act of commercial espionage may still be working itself through the system. In 2000, a French intelligence report accused US intelligence agencies of developing software - in conjunction with Microsoft - that would enable the CIA to spy on the 90% of computer users around the world who use Microsoft programs. Briton Brian Gladwell, a former North Atlantic Treaty Organization computer expert, stated in an interview after his retirement that the practice was akin to "where we were 250 years ago with pirates on the high seas".

"Governments never admitted they sponsored piracy, yet they all did behind the scenes. If we now look at cyberspace, we have state-sponsored information piracy. We can't have a global e-commerce until governments like the US stop state-sponsored theft of commercial information."

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**Alan Boyd** is a Sydney-based correspondent.

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Head Office: Unit B, 16/F, Li Dong Building, No. 9 Li Yuen Street East, Central, Hong Kong

Thailand Bureau: 11/13 Petchkasem Road, Hua Hin, Prachuab Kirikhan, Thailand 77110