

Dr Vince Scappatura on 'B-2 BOMBER STRIKES IN YEMEN AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE FOR AUSTRALIA' at
IPAN AGM 26 Nov 2024

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTXHWPC7jCs>

Annette Brownlie Chair IPAN: over to you. Vince. Thank you very much.

Dr Vince Scappatura: Thank you. Thank you very much, Annette, for that kind introduction. Can I just confirm that I'm speaking for around 10 to 15 min? Is that what, the time I've been allocated? Yep, okay, alright. Well, I'll do my best to stick to that. But if I go over the time, please interrupt me. I won't take offence at all. Sometimes I can lose track of time.



All right. So, as Annette mentioned, I well, first of all, let me thank Annette, Jonathan and IPAN for inviting me to speak to you all today and to give you some kind of extended remarks based on a recent Nautilus Institute special report that I wrote and published recently on the significance for Australia of the recent strikes in mid-October. In fact, they were by US B2 strategic bombers.

[It's] the first time the United States has struck Yemen, using long range bombers, at least in the current conflict against the Houthis; and the first time, in fact, in almost 8 years that the US has employed its B2 bomber force in strike operations anywhere in the world.

The special report argues that it's highly likely that the B2 bombers used in the strikes in Yemen traversed through Australian airspace en route, and in return, to those strikes.

And even more, consequently, that US aerial refuelers utilised Australian territory, Australian airfields and strategic fuel reserves located in Australia to facilitate the long range attack by the B2 bombers.

And there are two key points that I want to make about the significance of all of that for Australia in my remarks this evening.

1. **The first point is that this really is an historical event for Australia.** To my knowledge, it's the first time since World War 2, that Australian territory has been directly used to support US Strategic bomber operations. And I think it foreshadows the potential for future joint. Australia, Us. Strategic bomber operations, not just in the Middle East theatre, but also in Indo-Pacific in any potential conflict with China; and including the possibility of support for nuclear operations. So that's the first point.
2. The second key point I want to make, or to really to bring attention to is **the utter lack of transparency and accountability on the part of defence. And the Albanese government** which hasn't even done really the absolute minimum by making even a formal public statement about Australia's participation in the strike, let alone provide even the most basic operational details about that support.

And this behaviour, in my opinion, doesn't really bode well for the prospects of the Australian public being properly informed about any future operations that the Government may or may not authorise in support of the United States operations, which should be the subject of robust national discussion and debate, given the profound strategic importance of those strategic bomber operations.

So before I flesh out these kind of two points in a little bit more detail, I'll just give a bit of a background to the events as they transpired. I understand that the Nautilus report was circulated, I believe, but many of you may not have read it, so I'll just give a brief background to the events.

So on 15th of October five US B2 strategic long range bombers left their base at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri, in the centre of the United States and they flew west over the US, out across the Pacific Ocean towards Hawaii, then down to the South Pacific before reaching the Coral sea, just 250 kilometres east of Brisbane, at about 3 pm Brisbane time, on the 16th of October.

And we know this much, not so much because the Australian Government told us, but because the B2 bombers checked in to air services Australia's Brisbane traffic control centre, as all aircraft are required to do when traversing Australian airspace, revealing the number of bombers, their formation, and the location at the time that they checked in

The bombers, then most likely continued across the north of Australia, out across the Indian Ocean to the US Base on Diego Garcia and after a short stop and refuel, continued on to their final destination in Yemen, where they launched 15 strikes against the Houthis, in the capital of Yemen Sana'a, and also a couple of hundred kilometres to the north of the capital, to the city of Sada.

The Houthis are, of course, a political and military movement that control a large swath of Yemen along the Red Sea, and since October 2023, in solidarity with Gaza, they have been launching drone and missile strikes against Israel, but also significantly against any Israel-linked naval, and merchant vessels traversing the Red Sea.

And as a result of those actions, a coalition led by the United States and the United Kingdom began striking Houthi targets in January this year, and these were primarily undertaken, at least by the Americans, by their navy destroyers by cruise missile submarines, by fighter aircraft launched from the US aircraft carrier in the region.

However, as I mentioned, in the recent strike in October, this was the first time that the US employed B2 bombers launched from the Continental United States to strike against Houthis and not from us assets already in the region.

And the last time the US employed the B2 bomber in any operation, combat, operation or strike was in January 2017, against ISIS targets in northern Libya. So it's a rare use of the B2 bomber. And officially, the reason for employing the bomber on this particular mission was to target hardened underground weapons storage facilities that apparently required the unique Bunker Buster capabilities of the B2 bomber.

However, the decision to use the B2 was also widely interpreted as a signal, a signal to Iran, first and foremost, that the US is ready and capable of destroying its hardened underground nuclear facilities in Forido and Natanz.

And particularly if the conflict between Israel and Iran were to spiral out of control, and, if you remember, in mid-October, we were in the middle of a particularly tense period between Israel and Iran. The world was bracing for a retaliatory attack by Iran on Israel as a result of a series of escalations that Israel had undertaken against Iran.

But apart from the signal to Iran given, the B2 bomber is, in fact, a dual, capable bomber, which is to say that it is capable of launching nuclear weapons as well as conventional weapons. Whether it was intended or not, it also conveyed very clearly, I think, to China, and even to Russia, the global nuclear and conventional strike capabilities of the Us. Air Force.

So the employment of the B2 had a much larger significance than the immediate strikes against the Houthis in Yemen.

But even beyond that the strikes also had profound strategic implications for Australia, although this fact in particular was left entirely unexamined by the mainstream media. You can find some commentary about potential signalling actions of the US. Strikes against the Houthis to Iran, but nothing really about the implications of Australia's participation.

And this brings me to the first key point I want to make about this operation being an historic event, Australia's participation in the B2 strikes marks the first time, as I mentioned since World War 2, as far as I know, that Australian territory has been used in support of US strategic bomb operations.

Moreover, this participation involved not just B2s. Traversing Australian airspace en route, and in return from strikes against Yemen, but also the use of American aerial refuelers taking off from Australian airfields to enable the B2s to carry out their long-range strikes; that is, Australia played a crucial enabling or logistics role for long-range strikes carried out by US B2 dual-capable bombers.

Now given the distances involved, the B2 bombers could not have flown from their home base in Missouri all the way to Yemen, without refuelling a number of times, in fact, at least four times.

And this is where the geopolitical importance of Australia to the United States becomes apparent, because not only do us B2 bombers need to seek permission to overfly any foreign territory, of course, on their way to strikes; They need aerial refuelers to support them on their journey, and they need to be in strategically located air bases, and where they have access to fuel reserves, and so on.

Now, US B2 bombers could have flown east from the United States to Yemen, which, in fact, would have been a shorter distance, but would require overflying Europe and the Middle East. Moreover, there's a shorter path flying west than flying over Australia, which the US could have taken, but would have required the B2 bombers to fly over Southeast Asia with aerial refuelers provided out of Hawaii and then Guam, and then finally out of Diego Garcia.

And this is, in fact, the path the B2 bombers took to strike Libya in 2017, however, taking that same path this time was likely to be politically fraught, because that path would require the overflight of any number of Southeast Asian States with large Islamic populations, with obvious political sensitivities to participating in strikes in defence of Israel.

Australia, therefore, provided a geopolitical, sweet spot with a loyal, if not acquiescent government that evidently had no qualms about the operation participating in the operation. Moreover, Australia has in recent years, through the US Force Posture initiatives been steadily building up capabilities to provide logistical and other support for B2 bomber operations.

In fact, B2s were actually operating out of Amberley Air Force Base in Queensland just prior to the Yemen operation across the months of August and September in a bomber task force mission conducting interoperability exercises with the Royal Australian Air Force, practicing refuelling operations across the vast distances of the Indo-Pacific.

So Australia's support for the B2 strikes in Yemen served really as a first demonstration or a proof of concept of what the US military build-up in Northern Australia is capable of achieving in actual combat.

Of course this is just a small taste of what's possible. Given the US Force Posture initiatives involve not just the forward basing of US bombers in Australia, but also our full spectrum support operations for those bombers by the RAAF, including air, protection, refuelling and supply. And remember, these are dual, capable bombers that can launch both conventional and nuclear operations.

And so the real significance for Australia of the B2 strikes in Yemen is that they prefigure similar and more prominent roles for Australia in American conventional, but also potentially nuclear operations, not only in the Middle East, but in East Asia and the Pacific, and especially around China.

Okay, so just very quickly, I want to just end on the second key point that I raised earlier about the utter lack of transparency and accountability by defence, and the Australian Government about Australia's participation in the strikes.

So just to be clear. There has been no formal announcement by defence, by Richard Miles, by Penny Wong, or anyone in the Albanese government about Australia's involvement in the strikes.

We learned about Australia's participation, because a defence spokesperson confirmed to the ABC that Australia had provided *'access and overflight for US aircraft in Northern Australia'*. That's all, we got no details about what US aircraft were supported, and no information about where and what level of access to Australia or Australian facilities was provided.

The only reason we know about the basic details of the B2s traversing Northern Australia is because of publicly available air traffic control communications between the bombers and the Brisbane Control Centre that I mentioned before

And the only reason we know about US aerial refuellers providing support for the B2 bombers from Australian airfields is because a Queensland based amateur plane spotter group, posted pictures and videos of American KC-135 air tankers taking off and returning to Cairns airport during the time period when the B2s were checking into the Brisbane Air Traffic Control Centre.

Of course, the amateur plane spotters had no idea what they were capturing. That was, in fact, a live combat operation. It's only by piecing these things together that we have some idea of what transpired.

Now, while there may be some security justification for maintaining a level of secrecy around the details of such an operation during and just before or just after the strikes, there's really no excuse now not to share with the Australian people what Australia has actually done.

And really this should be part of a much larger national conversation debate about what, precisely are the limits to Australia's support for US strategic bomb operations should the very real prospect of an all-out war breaking out in the Middle East come to pass, or closer to home, should conflict break out in East Asia between the US and China

Unfortunately, the Australian Government has displayed no willingness to publicly acknowledge, let alone debate, the implications of America's steady military build-up in the north of the country, and the deepening integration of the ADF with the armed forces.

We know, because senior US Congressmen tell us, that Washington now views Australia as a central base of operations for its operations in the Indo-Pacific, which are squarely targeted at China.

And the strikes in Yemen make clear that the United States is willing and able to utilize its new base capabilities in Australia to devastating effect. The question the Australian public should be having is, whether or not we are content with taking on this role with all of the costs and risks that it entails.

It's clear the Australian Government doesn't want to have that conversation. And so, unfortunately, as with most things related to defence policy in the US Alliance, the task is left to non-government civil society to have that conversation; and on that note I'd like to end just again by thanking IPAN for giving me the opportunity to speak on this topic for circulating the report and hopefully generating some discussion around it.

Annette Brownlie Chair IPAN: Fantastic Vince, and he's kept to time as well. That's incredible. So yeah, I think people like you, the work that you're doing, whether it's, you know, there's a range of people that are delving into these issues, whether it's Kelly Tranter doing FOI's, Richard Tanter, doing the work that he does, Peter Cronau. We're all trying to break through that silence of our government and the denial of our opportunity for democratic debate based on knowledge. Awareness. Yeah.

So a very big thank you for coming along tonight. In all fairness, I think we should allow five min for anyone who has a specific question to Vince.

Is there anyone who would like to take this opportunity?

Annette Brownlie Chair IPAN: You're probably not prepared for it, my one. My question really, Vince, is, have you got back to the ABC reporter, who did the initial report, prior to the, the denial that you know that Tindal had actually been used to for these aircraft to continue its, their journey.

Dr Vince Scappatura: So. Yeah, the reporter, the report was done by Andrew Greene from ABC. It might have been co-authored with someone else as well, but certainly Andrew Green was on there.

I did send the report out to a large list of journalists that I have a database. I can't remember if Andrew Green was on the list, I should double check, and perhaps I should write a more tailored personal message to him, because I did kind of a batch, you know, release to anyone any contact that I had in the media that I thought would be interested.

But it's probably a good suggestion for me to reach out to Andrew personally, and just see if maybe he could use his and the ABC's much more greater resources than I have to pursue the story and pursue the issue.

Annette Brownlie Chair IPAN: Yeah, thanks. And, Jonathan

Jonathan Pilbrow: So from what you've what I've heard today, there was no role that Tindal played. Is that correct?

Dr Vince Scappatura: So we don't know what role Tindal played. The ABC report initially was, Australia plays a staging role for B2 bombers or something like that. It was subsequently changed, I think defence reached out to the ABC and clarified that there were no B2s operating out of Tindal Air force base at the time.

Now that still left open the possibility that B2s could have been operating from other Australian air bases. But from what I understand from what we know it seems unlikely that the B2s were actually launched from Australia. There was a bit of speculation about that at the time, and I think the ABC article almost intimated that that might have been the case. And so they issued this clarification.

So we know that the aerial refuelers took off at least from Cairns Airport, right, because we've got pictures and videos of them. And it makes sense because the B2 bombers were in the Coral sea coming across Northern Australia. It makes sense that they would be refuelling from that location.

Where did they top up from? Not from Cairns airport. I don't think there are strategic fuel reserves for military strategic fuel reserves, so it could have been any number of wonder places. I don't know if, I mean, we know the fuel, the large strategic fuel reserves in Tindal are completed. So all the upgrades at Tindal for the forthcoming forward basing of B 52 bombers; everything isn't complete, but the fuel reserves are complete. So maybe they're fuelled from Tindal. Maybe they're refuelled from other strategic fuel reserves a little bit closer to the east coast. We don't know.

Jonathan Pilbrow: Is it possible that the first ABC report said too much?

Annette Brownlie Chair IPAN: Sorry, but another hand was up before yours, so. Dr. Hayes. Go ahead. Colin, yeah.

Dr Colin Hughes: Okay. So look. I wonder Vince, if you could perhaps reword my question that I put on chat and that we could send to all members. We do need to kind of pre-empt this, and perhaps just with a very simple sentence given Australia's secrecy about the recent involvement in refuelling B2s. From Northern Australia and its involvement in Yemen.

What are the Australian limits to cooperation with us forces now? We could each individually write to our own personal Member of Parliament and any other member of Parliament that we perhaps know. Personally, I'm fortunate in Western Australia, because, although we I live in one electorate. I'm very involved with Kate Chaney and she has asked questions about nuclear safety issues at Coburn Sound. So it's an issue that we can raise.

The other issue, of course, is, I don't know whether people have yet found the little chat issues on radio national Radio, ABC, if you use their app, now, you may never get your question asked, but the journalists do read them, and the producers do read them, and so a constant little reminder with a very brief question, is a way of gradually increasing the pressure on government from a social media and media point of view.

So, Vince, I just wonder whether we could ask you to just tidy up my question a little bit if there's any improvements, and perhaps we could send it to all members, asking them to specifically ask their Member of Parliament to ask a question of the Minister in Parliament.

Dr Vince Scappatura: Yeah, I think that's a fantastic suggestion. I'm more than happy to do that. Should I just send an email with the I mean, the wording looks good, but I can just have a quick check over it and then send an email to you, Annette, or and you can pass it on or.

Annette Brownlie Chair IPAN: That'll work, Vince, and that's a great proactive suggestion. Thanks very much. Just timing wise. We have one more question from Bevan, but I think we then need to move on to the AGM, because otherwise we'll have people up too late.

Bevan Ramsden: I suggest that we actually write to the Department of Defence with those questions.

Annette Brownlie Chair IPAN: Yep, that's good. And the other option that we have got is to generate one of those automated letters emails to politicians which we have used in the past. So that may be also a good option.

Annette Brownlie Chair IPAN: All right. Well, thank you again, Vince, for taking the time out of your busy life, and for all the work that you do much appreciated.

Dr Vince Scappatura: Thank you, and thank you again for inviting me.

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