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# Diversifying Air Power: Broadening Air Force's value proposition in an age of high contest

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## About the author

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**Disclaimer:** The author is solely responsible for the views expressed in this publication which do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of any particular government or organisation.

## Key points

- For Air Force to meet the challenges of Australia's current geostrategic environment, and remain relevant, it must broaden the options it provides to the Australian Government.
- In addition to its traditional combat roles, Air Force must maximise its contribution to national-level influence and deterrence.
- Australia faces constant contestation in the grey zone, and powers in the Indo-Pacific have adopted political warfare methods which deliberately blur the distinction between war and peace. To meet this reality, Air Force should move to a mode where it is 'competing constantly'.
- By capitalising on its advanced capabilities and its culture of innovation, Air Force can substantially contribute to Australia's ability to project national influence in the Indo-Pacific.

## Introduction

How should Air Force contribute to Australian Defence Force (ADF) strategy?

In answering this question, it is important to start from first principles.

By definition, Air Force remains responsible for the provision of air power capabilities to meet national defence requirements. Combat excellence is its bedrock requirement and Air Force will continue to focus on building joint, integrated missions to generate combat superiority.

But in the emerging Indo-Pacific security environment, where contest and competition are defining features, there are challenges that won't always suit the application of force. The provision of air combat power is a necessary but not sufficient response to these changed geostrategic circumstances, and Air Force will require an improved value proposition for government.

That means Air Force needs to broaden the options it provides as an instrument of national power. In addition to its traditional combat roles, Air Force must maximise its contribution to national-level influence and deterrence.

Air Force must also maximise the value the air domain contributes to the ADF's partners to create integrated capabilities and effects, and these in turn must be in service of national strategic priorities.

As important as Australia's alliances and partnerships are, it would be imprudent to think they will always be there to deliver for our security needs. We need to be smarter and more determined in the sovereign application of our national power.

It is important to emphasise that the focus of this paper is on Air Force's contribution to the ADF. It is not an argument for an independent air strategy: Air Force must nest its value within the strategic framework provided by Defence Planning Guidance and Australia's Military Strategy.

That said, a strategy-led approach is essential to ensure that Air Force delivers maximum benefit for government. While Air Force's advanced platforms can be game-changers, it is vital that strategy determines their application, rather than having the tools determine the job.

# Air Force's contribution to Defence strategy

Competition among major powers has become a key driver of the Indo-Pacific security environment. In response, a robust, simple and clear articulation of air power's contribution to Australia's national security goals is required.

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**In particular, Air Force must contribute to Australia's ability to project national influence. This will mean a focus on strategic effects including deterrence, influence and counter-influence.**

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Air power's value will be measured by its:

- ability to deter, deny and discourage traditional military threats
- contribution to deterrence and counter-influence options that prevents behaviours and policies by regional powers inimical to Australia's interests, and
- contribution to Australia's ability to positively influence outcomes in the region in support of national security goals.

If Air Force is to realise the full potential of its sophisticated capabilities, national-level effects must drive what it does; its missions and force design should reflect broader national priorities. This will require a strong emphasis on how Defence contributes to whole-of-government approaches to the instruments of national power – including diplomatic, informational, military, and economic.

## Combat power is still the foundation

Air Force's core air power roles,<sup>1</sup> including control of the air; strike; air mobility; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR); command and control (C2); force protection; force generation and sustainment all remain as relevant today as they have been for more than the last hundred years. This will remain the foundation of what Air Force must provide.

But in addition to traditional combat power, Air Force must be able to deliver options that will be relevant in the persistent and likely threat environment posed by political warfare in the grey zone.

## New frontiers: winning without fighting

The concepts of political warfare and the grey zone are now widely used to describe the actions of competitor states in the Indo-Pacific. Political warfare describes how competitors employ tightly-coordinated campaigns to use every aspect of their national power through covert, coercive and corrupting methods to win influence and control.

These actions are pursued in grey zone scenarios: their purpose is to achieve the rival power's strategic interests below established thresholds which would trigger intervention by other states. Given the costs and risks of engaging in direct military confrontation, grey zone operations seek to influence and coerce while not provoking a military reaction. The goal is winning without fighting.

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## Defence approaches to influence

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### An effects-oriented strategy

Air Force is building its contribution to defence strategy with emphasis on effects:

- *Access and influence:* By maintaining and building military cooperation and alliances, air power can underpin deterrence and regional influence. Air Force can contribute persistent access and presence in the Indo-Pacific in support of national influence measures.
- *Exposure:* Air Force capabilities can contribute to effects which expose and discourage grey zone actions.

- *Cost-imposition:* When rival states persist in unacceptable behaviours against Australian interests, air power effects will contribute to cost-imposing responses. This would require innovative recalibration of how Air Force might use its traditional and new roles and missions to enable asymmetric effects in this context.

## Multi-domain influence

The concept of multi-domain operations (MDO) has become an important way of thinking about how the ADF can fight and win in the event of conflict. Defence can capitalise on this model by broadening it to suit the winning-without-fighting environment Australia faces.

Since MDO works by drawing on synergies from one domain to win asymmetric advantage in another, there is no reason to limit it exclusively to combat scenarios. Defence should be exploring how it can achieve synergies across domains to generate access, presence, influence, deterrence, denial and counter-coercion. This will enable it to build flexible deterrence options that can be applied across the full spectrum of challenges Australia faces in the Indo-Pacific.

The challenge for a recalibrated air power strategy is to identify direct, achievable links between these high-end goals, and practical guidance for operational communities. Therefore, instead of taking a clean slate approach, it is more practical to work with existing doctrine and ideas that can be applied to the theme of multi-domain influence.

### Influence as a foundational activity

A recent NATO paper suggests that “the goal of policy (and actions supporting policy, certainly including information, but up to and including warfare) is to get others to do what you want, and the English language word for getting others to do what you want is influence”.<sup>2</sup>

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**Since air power needs to be an instrument of government for wielding international influence, then Air Force's international engagement should be considered a core activity that contributes to this goal: it cannot be something that is done 'on the side' of core business – it *is* core business.**

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In the context of broadening the value of air power to government, this will require a much more integrated approach to working within whole-of-government efforts. Moreover, since political warfare and grey zone activities typically do not revolve around a contest of arms, the ADF will often be in a supporting role to whole-of-government influence effects, particularly as the significance of information warfare comes to the fore.

## Information warfare

Information warfare (IW) is not new, but the urgency to master it is. The ubiquity of and access to social media, the windfall of big data, and resulting advances in analytics and artificial intelligence have disrupted traditional approaches. Even lethality, the ultimate penalty of physical force, is giving way to abstractions of perception management and behavioural control, a fact which suggests that strategic success, not tactical victory, is the more coveted end-state.<sup>3</sup>

IW involves the provision and assurance of information to support friendly decision-making, while denying and degrading that of adversaries.<sup>4</sup> As the Head of ADF's Information Warfare Division has noted, it involves both cognitive and technical dimensions, and is pervasive.<sup>5</sup>

Within the IW concept are nested a range of information-related capabilities (IRCs). Broadly, these are tools, techniques or activities that can be employed by themselves or in combination to contribute to a desired strategic effect. They include:

- information operations
- public affairs and public diplomacy
- military information support operations
- deception operations
- cyberspace operations, and
- electronic warfare.

By working with Information Warfare Division and as part of the ADF, Australian air power has rich potential to contribute significantly across all these effects. But to achieve maximum strategic benefit, these will need to be woven into whole-of-government approaches to deploying the elements of Australia's national power.

# Guiding principles: becoming an Air Force of influence

## Compete constantly

The political warfare methods being used against Australia deliberately blur the distinction between war and peace. And since they are in play now, and not a future threat, Air Force needs to move to a mode where it is 'competing constantly'.

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**Defence needs to recalibrate its thinking so that air and space power is a tool of national power that is constantly operating not just in outright conflict scenarios, but all the time, for national influence.**

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And while the nature of the operations will be variable, according to circumstance, the underlying ethos needs to be that constant operations are the necessary condition for constant competition.

## A cross-domain approach

For maximum effect, it will be important to apply an MDO approach across the spectrum of influence-related operations. Air Force should be exploring how effects in any one of these influence domains might compliment the others.

The ADF already thinks of MDO as a pathway for combat synergies. It should now look at how to achieve influence through force integration. How might Army, Navy and Air Force elements cooperate to achieve synergies and force multiplication in the fight for influence? What are the specific capabilities each service brings, and how can they cooperate?

This will demand significant coordination and integration across all domains including air, land, maritime, space and cyberspace.

## A whole-of-government and multinational approach

Equally, this multi-domain logic must be broadened to whole-of-government applications. By linking the influence operations the ADF can achieve to whole-of-government efforts to wield national influence, Australia can generate maximum impact in the regional high contest environment.

This should be broadened to international partners. Australia should be exploring pathways for multi-domain influence operations in partnership with the US, Japan,

Singapore, India, Indonesia and the Pacific Island Countries (among others). Where once international engagement was viewed as a secondary activity to enhance operations, it should instead be foundational to everything Air Force and the ADF does to contribute to national influence.

## Disruptive thinking required

Giving priority to effects above platforms requires a disruption to the linear logic which once saw battlefield dominance as the maximum value that Air Force can provide. While Air Force must maintain those capabilities, they should instead be considered minimum viable products, and the role of the ADF should be seen as broadening the options available to government. Since this is unconventional, non-linear thinking, the ADF needs creative options for generating strategy-to-mission pathways.

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**Small, intellectually agile teams should be engaging in war-gaming, design thinking, and liaison with other departments, industry and academia.**

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Through such engagement, the ADF can quickly move from the higher-order strategic effects (influence, deterrence, counter-coercion and the like), through an MDO approach to influence operations, to generate concrete guidance to operational communities.

## Enablers

The requirement to interlink effects across these domains also underscores the importance of moving away from platform-centric thinking.

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**Air Force no longer has the luxury of thinking exclusively in terms of the roles, missions or capabilities of any one platform. Realising the full potential of a cross-domain, influence-oriented strategy will require significant emphasis on enablers including data, ISR, logistics, force generation and, above all, people and the diversity they bring.**

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There will be a large body of work in ensuring the ADF is networked and integrated in ways that will help realise their full potential. Industry partners will be needed to achieve that integration. Moreover, disruptive technologies are going to be increasingly important. The speed and scale at which game-changing technologies

are proliferating into our region and getting into the hands of potential adversaries will challenge our thinking about sustaining a capability edge. This is called transient advantage: where once the ADF could rely on staying in front technologically, this has eroded to the point where it can no longer be taken for granted.

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## Summary

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Air Force's role in providing air combat power for national defence is immutable. Its combat excellence must remain the baseline for who it is and what it does. But in light of the competitive Indo-Pacific security environment Australia now confronts, Air Force's value proposition to government must be expanded beyond combat capabilities.

Political warfare and grey zone activities will substantially affect the Indo-Pacific regional security environment. While air power must continue to provide combat power for Australia, many international security challenges will not be suited to force-on-force engagement but will nevertheless require astute Australian statecraft.

Air and space power must contribute to Australia's ability to wield its instruments of national power – including diplomatic, informational, military and economic – to enhance national security and prosperity.

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**By deciding to move from a platform-centric approach to one which prioritises effects, Air Force will recalibrate its contribution to the ADF as an instrument of national power.**

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In particular, Air Force must be able to conduct operations with and through the joint force across Australia's spectrum of international engagement, from cooperation to competition to conflict, in order to influence other state and non-state actors.

In these ways, air power will broaden the options available to whole-of-government efforts to wield Australian influence.

### Notes

- 1 RAAF Air Power Manual (Australian Air Publication AAP- 100D, 6<sup>th</sup> edition).
- 2 Kelly, A and Paul, C. *Decoding Crimea: Pinpointing the influence strategies of modern information warfare* (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Brussels, 2020).
- 3 Kelly and Paul Ibid, p.5.
- 4 Thompson, M. and Morgan, E. *Information Warfare: An emergent Australian Defence Force capability* (CSIS Discussion Paper 3: Building Allied Interoperability in the Indo Pacific Region, Washington DC, 2018).
- 5 Thompson, M. *Information warfare – a new age?* Speech to iWAR Five Eyes Principals Forum, Canberra 2018.

### **About this publication**

The National Security College publishes research and analysis to inform policymakers on topical national security issues facing Australia. Occasional papers are informed by consultation, and reviewed by experts.

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The Air Power Development Centre provides practical and effective analysis and advice on the strategic development of air and space power to the Chief of Air Force, the Royal Australian Air Force and its partners. Visit [airpower.airforce.gov.au](http://airpower.airforce.gov.au).

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