

SPEECH BY
CHIEF OF THE AIR FORCE
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Peter Jennings, Members of the Board of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, (ASPI)
Distinguished Officers, Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Peter, it is always an honour to be invited to address ASPI, which has become an indispensable element of the Australian Strategic Policy community. Since its inception, ASPI has carved out a unique and respected role as a source of innovative ideas about Australian Defence and National Security issues. You provide a rational, dispassionate and fearless perspective on diverse issues, ranging from geo-political trends both within our region and beyond, as well as undertaking a rigorous research programme that challenges the assumptions of policy makers and practitioners alike.

Some of your work on the Joint Strike Fighter and Australia's procurement of Fifth Generation fighter aircraft have made an invaluable contribution to debunking some myths about the desirability and viability of the JSF programme. And of course Mark Thomson's scrutiny of budgetary and fiscal issues is simply without peer, helping to remind all of us that strategy is meaningless in the absence of funds to implement it. The introduction of the JSF and the importance of maintaining a balanced and highly effective Air Force in an era of fiscal austerity will be major themes in my remarks.

Tonight I wish to provide my perspective on the Role of Air Power in a Changing World. The great theorist of war, Carl Von Clausewitz, understood that military force must always be the servant of policy. And he argued that the foremost challenge to the statesman was to understand the nature of conflict in which he was engaged.

The same may safely be said of any military professional strategist in times of relative peace. I emphasise relative peace because while there are crises and a high operational tempo in this post-Afghanistan period, it is still relatively peaceful and a time for ensuring our capabilities will meet future challenges.

In this time, our force planning, training and doctrine development represents our collective memory applied to our best, though imperfect, speculations about the future. We continuously seek to remain abreast of technological changes, shifts in geo-politics and the behaviour of potential adversaries.

If one factor has characterised the application of military force in this century it has been the very abbreviated lead times for the response by our forces and those of our allies. That has been the case whether our government has requested that we rapidly deliver humanitarian aid in the wake of natural disasters or intervene in conflicts in our region or further afield. Air Power is the most agile and most responsive military instrument available to Government regardless of the nature of the operation. Our lead times are calibrated in hours—even minutes—as events over Iraq in recent days demonstrated.

In the case of Air Force, staying abreast of technological change is a challenge without respite. We operate sophisticated weapon systems, the cost of which is substantial and must be amortised over a

decent working life. Yet we cannot afford to operate outmoded equipment. There is simply no substitute for the technological edge in our business.

A very fine airman who made an enormous contribution to Australia's survival in our hour of deepest crisis—George Kenney—is reputed to have said “Second best air forces are like poker hands. They cost you a lot of dough and get you nothing.” He was right and his words are even more pertinent in the information and cyber age.

It is important for me as the chief custodian of Australian Air and Space power to make the case for the significant investment, which this nation must be prepared to make if we are to maintain our status as a modern, balanced, first class Air Force—An Air Force that will meet our Government's expectations of responsive and effective options as challenges to our national security emerge in the future.

We must be vigilant to ensure that our grand strategy, and the forces that we raise train and sustain to implement it, are aligned to the changing character of the global system and the consequential changes in the character of conflict. It seems apparent that we are entering a particularly challenging period of our history as a nation.

Indeed, the global order, which arose in the wake of the Second World War, is in a state of flux and we are entering a period of political and economic instability, which will shape a potentially volatile and dangerous security environment, especially in our region and among nations with whom our future is inextricably linked.

It is perhaps vanity, which prompts human beings to conclude that they are always facing unprecedented challenges of epic proportions, or that the era through which they are living, is the most disruptive or cataclysmic in history. Yet, it is no exaggeration to recognise that the status quo, which emerged after 1945, is now under enormous strain and fraying at the edges.

Whether in the perennially troubled Middle East or hitherto stable regions of Europe, numerous contemporary conflicts are becoming even more violent and intractable. Moreover, the threat of inter-state war in Europe and North Asia cannot be ruled out. Of particular concern to Australia is the rising tension in the South China Sea where our vital interests are directly engaged.

The Pax Americana, through which the security of the global commons, as well as the stability of global financial markets rested, is now being contested. Briefly, at the end of the Cold War, it appeared that we were entering the period of the so called democratic peace. Some even boldly presaged the “End of History” whereby a golden age of liberal democracies linked through free markets and shared values would make the resort to military force anachronistic.

Sadly, rather than the End of History, we entered what the esteemed strategic thinker and air power theorist Colin S. Gray termed “Another Bloody Century” where the use of force in pursuit of national, ethnic or religious motives has continued unabated.

Military force is still the ultimate arbiter of disputes among nations. And the motives for states and peoples going to war remain unchanged from the days of Thucydides power, resources and prestige. Even so called non-traditional threats contribute to the greater risk of conventional war as massive migrations of people in pursuit of water or arable land take place, or as competition for scarce oil and gas reserves pits nation against nation—as is occurring in the South China Sea.

Indeed, Colin also coined a phrase “Wars of the Soviet Succession“ to describe the vicious ethnic civil wars that erupted in the former Yugoslavia and other parts of the Soviet Empire after 1989. The forces of fragmentation, which are still reverberating through Afghanistan and many parts of Africa and the Middle-East, were unleashed by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The bi-polar world of the Cold War had evolved into a relatively stable status quo enforced by the threat of Mutually Assured Destruction. This status quo collapsed along with the Berlin Wall.

Many contemporary conflicts may be traced back to that seismic shift in the global order. As the barbaric events in Ukraine last month demonstrated, a viable global order is still evolving in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Empire and many analysts fear the Russian backlash against loss of its empire is just beginning. It is quite poignant, as we mark the Centenary of the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, to recognise that so many conflicts—that arose in the power vacuum of the fall of the Russian, Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian empires—continue in more virulent form today. Events in Syria, Iraq, Gaza and the Ukraine all had their origins in the aftermath of 1918.

Closer to home we are witnessing an intensification of strategic competition between our most significant security partner and our most valuable trading partner. The global balance of power for the remainder of the 21st Century may be resolved in our region over the next few decades. Our vital interests will be engaged and we must strive to ensure that the rise of China and its integration into the emerging North East Asian order is managed peacefully.

Every significant security issue in North Asia is derived from interstate tension over borders and resources. Of course, all of these are made more complex by historical grievances and mistrust, as well as non-traditional issues such as climate change, increasingly frequent extreme weather events, and water and food scarcity. As I will explain air power must evolve—and is evolving—to provide Government with a full suite of options for securing Australia's interests in this dynamic era.

According to the respected military theorist, Azar Gat, the rise of China, in concert with the renewed assertiveness of Russia, will constitute the defining trends, to which the United States and its key allies will be obliged to respond in the next decade. Gat makes the important point that the era of irregular war and counter-insurgency does not necessarily constitute a fundamental change in the nature of conflict. Of more importance, he asserts, will be the return to the international system of totalitarian capitalist powers for the first time since the 1930s. This is an important insight.

As Liddell Hart wryly observed, the most difficult challenge is not persuading military leaders to embrace change. The hardest task is persuading them to let go of old ideas. And I believe it is imperative that we take stock of our recent operational history and ensure that the Force Structure Review and the next White Paper confront the world that is emerging rather than the era through which we have just passed.

Similarly, it is critical that the ADF transforms to operate new capabilities in the most effective way to deal with emerging challenges rather than how we have operated in the past. For Air Force, this transformation will be driven by Plan Jericho, which I will release early next year.

One of the greatest of all airmen, Hap Arnold once said, “Any Air Force which does not keep its doctrines ahead of its equipment and its vision far into the future can only delude the nation into a false sense of security.” Plan Jericho aims to transform Air Force into an agile adaptive information age force. Too many of our structures from recruiting and training of people through to designing and bringing systems into service are based on industrial age techniques. This must change. Over time I will detail how.

Of course many believe that impact of globalisation and the diffusion of information technology has radically empowered individuals and largely rendered the State irrelevant. Future conflict, they argue, will resemble the hybrid wars of the past decade or so in Iraq and Afghanistan. They believe that State on State conventional war is likely to become rare, if not extinct, because nations are too deeply enmeshed in commerce and trade to be able to afford to fight one another.

Such theories associated with Norman Angell, author of *The Great Illusion*, were popular at the time one hundred years ago. He argued in 1913, in his best selling book, that the deep trade links between Great Britain and Germany precluded war.

This view has many credible proponents both in the United States and here. They believe that the optimum force structure for the ADF is a heavier Army capable of operating in networked combat teams in complex urban terrain. Air power of course will continue to play the vital—if all too often invisible—role it has in the hybrid wars of the past decade; close air support, strategic strike, air mobility, full spectrum Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) all linked by space assets.

However, this school of thought asserts that we can only achieve presence and influence on the ground with land forces. Yet, as events in Afghanistan in 2001-2, and more recently in Libya have revealed, it is possible to provide Government with a wider range of options, through the speed, reach and precision of air power in support of local ground forces. This reduces both our own costs and the political risk to our policy makers. It is important for airmen to dispel some myths about air power, which have been allowed to proliferate since the 1999 Kosovo campaign.

I do not believe that either our Government or our people have much enthusiasm for long-term nation building operations away from our immediate region. And if one accepts that premise, air power provides our Government with multiple options for exerting coercive influence, or delivering precise blows or merely putting an adversary at risk in order to influence his behaviour; then it is obvious that air power must take its place at the centre of our national security strategy.

I know that sounds parochial, but it is the reality that air and space power is fundamental to any military option. Our Air Force capabilities provide flexible and responsive options to Government within the four enduring roles of control of the air, strike, mobility and ISR.

In the majority of cases, such options would be within a balanced and integrated joint force that exploits the attributes of our land and naval forces. This has been the case over the past decade, but I believe will be even more relevant as we move into an era of rising potential confrontation. Air power enhances every element of joint fighting power whether by joining up forces through our networks or providing information through our pervasive ISR capabilities.

Airmen need to recover our professional confidence in making this case to government in the lead up to the White Paper. The enduring qualities of air power are even more relevant as we move into an era of rising major power confrontation than they have been over the past decade.

Moreover, we have the main responsibility for the development of space power. The ADF simply cannot operate in any domain without untrammelled access to space. With our adoption of a new mission of space situational awareness, sustaining access to space capabilities will become an even more pressing demand on airmen.

Yet the average lay person could be forgiven for thinking that our recent military history has been written exclusively by ground forces.

Much of the discussion of our recent wars and operations since the deployment of INTERFET in 1999 has discounted the role of air power. So pervasive and uncontested has been our superiority across the third and fourth dimensions that our contribution has been too easily overlooked.

To an extent, this has been the result of the recurrence of one of the perennial errors to which air power advocates are prone. Ever since Giulio Douhet, air power advocates have enthused that we have been on the cusp of the magic bullet solution, which will allow us to defeat an adversary with a negligible commitment of ground forces.

Throughout the relatively short history of the military use of the third dimension such claims have fallen short of reality. This has led many critics to throw the baby out with the bath water and conclude that air power has failed. Yet careful scrutiny of the real lessons of history, especially the defeats of Germany and Japan in 1945 reveal that air power was decisive in both cases. The same is true of all of our recent operations as well.

As recently as the aftermath of the First Gulf War, however, some air power enthusiasts allowed their enthusiasm to cloud their judgement. As spectacular as the success of Allied air power was in that war, and subsequently in the Balkan air campaigns of 1995 and 1999, as well as in Afghanistan and Iraq in this century, no credible airman ever claimed that air power alone could win wars.

The massive improvements in precision, situational awareness and lethality of air power in the period after the Vietnam War represented a genuine revolution in military affairs. In certain circumstances, air power demonstrably had become the decisive arm. It was capable of shaping the scope, context and conduct of the joint campaign. Conventional ground forces cannot survive in a hostile air environment. Too many land power theorists ignore this reality.

There is a dangerous myth afoot that the emergence of the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan constitute a failure of air power, as the swift and decisive results of 1991 have not been replicated. Such analysis ignores the vital contribution of air power right across the spectrum even in irregular wars.

In addition to close air support, which has inflicted massive casualties on our insurgent enemies, air power has been indispensable to the deployment and sustainment of our forces through replenishment and casualty evacuation. And the use of air and space ISR capabilities to dominate the electronic and cyber domains has conferred an extraordinary asymmetric advantage on our land forces. It would not be appropriate to canvass the full suite of effects that air power has generated across all domains in Iraq and Afghanistan but it has been integral to our operational effectiveness.

However, there is more at stake than public recognition for our contribution to all of our operations since 1999. Rather, we risk assuming that the wars we have just fought represent some immutable new form of war that should determine our force structure well into the future. In my view, this is dangerously misguided for two fundamental reasons.

First and foremost, it is based on flawed and very selective interpretation of the wars in which we have been engaged. Our enemies chose to fight as irregulars and insurgents because they dared not mass and risk annihilation by our space enabled air power. The rout of Saddam's Armies in 1991 and the successive Balkans campaigns in 1990s demonstrated that the risk entailed in fighting advanced western air forces is simply unacceptable. Air power shaped the nature of our recent wars subtly and unobtrusively and also defined and constrained the battlespace. It also was the most lethal element of fighting power we employed regardless of the apparently land-centric character of the campaigns.

Secondly, apart from misinterpreting the past, it invites our policy makers to assume unacceptable risk as to the nature of future conflict. The irregular wars that occurred under the nuclear threshold of the Cold War stalemate were not exclusively indicative of the nature of war as an instrument of statecraft. They most certainly did not constitute a disruption to the way the global system operated. Rather they generally constituted conduct of superpower rivalry by other means through surrogates.

Of late, the Islamic State insurgent forces in Iraq have concentrated and fought to occupy urban centres and relied on road vehicle movement like any conventional force. While the insurgents were able to advance in the absence of an air power threat, the US introduction of a strike campaign in Sinjar demonstrated how decisive air power can be.

We should never forfeit the massive psychological and kinetic advantage that air superiority confers upon us against such opponents. I was delighted to read in the weekend press that the former Australian army officer David Kilcullen has identified this change in the tactics of the Iraqi insurgents and advocates the enhanced use of air power coordinated by Special Forces and indigenous land forces as the optimum response by Allied Forces.

A permissive air domain, as has been the case in recent conflicts, is not something we can presume in future contingencies, or least not without unacceptable strategic risk. Credible air power capability has moved from a force enhancer, as may have been the case in the early days of military aviation, to an absolute necessity and a prerequisite for any form of manoeuvre. A credible capability in the air domain also brings strategic weight, which may help deter the prospect of conflict.

Thus, I would argue that rumours of the demise of the state and of conventional war are premature. In their latest Future Operating Concept our RAF friends have characterised this new strategic era as a shift from campaigning to contingency. Like them we need to take stock of where we are as a profession in respect of every element of fighting wars—physical, moral and intellectual.

The Chief of the Air Staff, Sir Andy Pulford, recently observed that his force had adapted to the era of campaigning quite well. However, an entire generation of his people thought that the limits of air power were close air support missions and providing air mobility to ground forces. He is leading the RAF back to preparing for the full suite of air power roles, especially high intensity combat.

We need to heed the same lessons and avoid the same pitfalls. And the Air Force that I am asking the Government and the Australian people to support is firmly predicated on that assumption. It will be a balanced force capable of rapid, scalable effects right across the spectrum of conflict. It will exploit the very latest technology available to us and it will be employed by a sophisticated, adaptive and resilient force of men and women who will provide us with our ultimate edge.

Technology is essential to credible air power and the information age has exponentially enhanced our capabilities. In an era of contingency, air power—more than ever before—provides the most rapid military response option to Governments whether in responding to a humanitarian emergency or coercing an adversary by exposing them to serious risk at long range and short notice or by delivering rapid precision strike. These technologies have increased the precision, reach, responsiveness and persistence of the effects that Air Force can deliver.

As an aside, most of the key roles of air power had evolved by the end of the First World War. By then airmen were conducting aerial bombardment, close air support, surveillance and reconnaissance and air combat. Only strategic air mobility really emerged as a separate role after that war. Ever since then, airmen and their industry partners have sought to achieve a technological edge to be able to think faster and respond faster with more lethality and precision than an adversary.

The Air Force that we are in the process of developing over the next two decades continues that trend. We are seeking to become more agile, to extend our reach, to hit harder with greater precision, to see much further more quickly and to disseminate this common operational picture throughout the joint force. Every platform that we are introducing, whether airborne early warning aircraft or airborne refuelling aircraft, contributes to the achievement of those concerted effects.

Of course the most high profile element of our modernisation plan is the introduction of 5th generation fighter aircraft in the form of the F35. As the most visible symbol of Air Force modernisation I welcome public interest in the F35, or JSF as it is colloquially known.

However, as formidable and transformative as the F35 is, I do not want it to become a distraction from the holistic and coherent nature of our strategic modernisation. The JSF will exponentially enhance our air combat and strike capability, but its truly transformative impact on the ADF will depend on its ability to truly operate within a system of systems. My intention for this transformation is that the F35, and other capabilities within the force, will be employed in a way that maximises our effectiveness.

Fighter pilots can lose an audience quickly if we start rattling off statistics and tabulated data about aircraft. But you can rest assured that the introduction of the F35 confers a tactical edge and considerable strategic weight to the Air Force. There has been much debate about the merits of the F35, too much of it ill-informed. Sadly, I am old enough to recall the misconceptions about the F111, which were rapidly dispelled after it entered service. Its powerful deterrent effect ensured that it made an incalculable contribution to our national security over nearly four decades. It more than paid for itself over that time. The same will be ultimately said of the F35. Believe me, there is a massive, qualitative leap from 4th or even 4.5th generation to 5th Generation aircraft. And we are in the process of making it.

The F35 will be simply the ‘smartest’ and most agile aircraft ever to fly. It will provide us with a winning edge well into the future. And it brings versatility across numerous air power roles, performing them simultaneously. It can deliver precision strike while sweeping up copious amounts of information. Indeed, one of the real challenges we will face across the ADF is to ensure that we adapt our joint systems to maximise the effects that the F35 can deliver by ‘joining up’ the joint maritime force, through providing kinetic strike and ISR options from theatre level, right down to an individual soldier on the ground.

In conjunction with the Air Warfare Destroyers, the EA-18G Growler, our future Maritime Surveillance platforms and other force elements, our joint forces will be postured to achieve our maritime strategy in defence of Australia and its interests in our near approaches and further afield. Getting our joint doctrine and our recruitment and training systems balanced to ensure that we can fully exploit this technology will be one of our most significant challenges. And of course space power will enable and enhance the entire system.

I could deliver an entire address devoted exclusively to the challenges of utilising space power for military applications but tonight is not that occasion.

However, as the lead service on ADF development of space power, Air Force is immersed in developing the capabilities and concepts to secure our national interests in this increasingly contested and congested domain. The entire ADF—indeed the entire nation—is increasingly dependent on space. The force that I have described is a well-balanced air force. The main elements and platforms comprising it are already in service or on track to enter service. This is a period of significant change in Air Force as we have transitioned to modern and highly capable new systems.

As we receive the last of these platforms within the decade, we will need to move from transition to transformation, in which we adjust how we train, enable, support and operate to ensure we are using our systems to best effect. We are well on course to deliver a force that offers a wide range of policy options to our Government.

Of course no discussion of our future would be complete without mentioning the most important element of the future air force; our people. I do not mention them last as an indication of their relative importance, but rather to pull together every element of what we aspire to do. That is what our people do.

As I mentioned earlier, it is vital that a capable air force aspires to possessing a technological edge. However, the human factor provides essential tangible and intangible elements of air power. The demands on our work force are going to increase significantly as we modernise by introducing 5th Generation aircraft, unmanned systems and seek to contest space and cyberspace. Whereas our people were important during our transition phase, they will be central to our transformation. Airmen enlisting next year may retire in the 2050s. The problems that they will be required to solve are beyond our imagination, just as the systems they will operate may not even yet exist. Recruiting, training, educating and retaining the exceptional men and women that we will need to maintain our

winning edge is actually one of our major institutional risks over time. That is why we have moved to implement measures to make us an employer of first choice. That is why we seek to expand and diversify our sources of recruits. We cannot waste a single motivated man or woman.

Yet if history is any guide we always find superb people who are drawn to our unique high quality air force. I am proud to lead these talented, skilled and resilient men and women. I welcome your questions.