

Address by the Chief of Air Force Air Marshal Leo Davies, AO, CSC

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It is an honour to address this conference today. This is my first major address since being appointed as the 25th Chief of the Royal Australian Air Force less than two weeks ago. So I welcome this opportunity to outline our modernisation vision and to discuss the topics of agility and coalition operations with an audience comprising so many fine airmen and women from around the globe.

Among you today are members of air forces with whom we have faced common perils in the past and with whom we may be required to operate in coalitions in the future. There is no better place to discuss Australia's approach to coalition operations than this forum.

I will outline how we are transforming to a 5th generation-enabled force and the implications this has for our agility in a coalition setting. In so doing, I will situate our efforts in the context of the challenges of securing the skies, protecting Australia, and projecting air power in our region and farther afield where Australian interests are engaged.

When we employ the terms air power and control of the air, we need to take an expansive view of them. Revolutionary changes in information technology over the past two decades have rendered many domain-specific terms and concepts irrelevant. Moreover, it is clear that in an era when budgets and force structures are under pressure, we must enhance our ability to deliver joint effects across the domains of land, sea, air, cyber and in and from space. We must be able to exploit the synergies of our combat power across all domains and at their intersection. Airmen and women of all nations know that this constitutes current professional mastery. And for my Air Force, there are additional geopolitical factors which shape my environment.

Since its foundation as a nation, Australia's grand strategy has been directed at ensuring our unrestricted access to the global commons. We have always relied on coalitions and alliances to achieve this. Moreover, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, those global commons now embrace the realms of cyber and space. We will continue to rely on partners to secure access to these expanded global commons and may need to contest access to them without undermining their peaceful commercial use. Ingenuity, technical excellence, precision and new and unprecedented skill in integrated, cross-domain command and control, is required. So we no longer see our role as merely securing the skies. Rather we see our role as contributing to joint combat effects across all five domains and across the entire spectrum of conflict.

Australia faces unique challenges in achieving this. Being an island continent with the largest Exclusive Economic Zone on earth, the speed and reach of air power are essential to our ability to secure our maritime approaches. Furthermore, air power provides our best means of rapid force projection. Air power gives a regional power global reach. The speed with which we configured and deployed a self-contained, potent, Air Task Group to contribute to operations against Islamic State exemplifies this. But our reach and agility were also amply demonstrated when we rapidly executed humanitarian and disaster relief operations in

Vanuatu and Nepal earlier this year. In 2014, we responded rapidly in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines. And our ability to facilitate and lead a complex coalition search and recovery operation was tested when Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370 disappeared over the Southern Indian Ocean.

In that latter operation there were significant challenges in maximising interoperability among platforms and people but the rewards were also great. I am optimistic that the bonds of mutual respect formed among aircrew from various Indo-Pacific and Asian nations may provide the basis for future confidence building measures that will contribute to peace and stability in our region. With increasing strategic competition over air and sea navigation in our immediate region, those human networks may prove vital to avoiding miscalculation.

Our near neighbourhood has been afflicted by numerous catastrophic natural disasters and climate events over the past decade. Our reach and agility were the decisive enablers of our national efforts to deliver medical and food supplies in all these contingencies. It seems likely that such disruptive natural events will continue. We are well postured to support our neighbours no matter the request.

All of these operations involved coalitions. As Ed Stringer has already reminded us, we are operating in an austere financial climate. Few nations possess the full suite of capabilities to secure their interests across all domains and to provide forces against every threat—whether natural or man-made. Coalition operations will be the norm in this new environment. Although Australia accepts—indeed welcomes—this reality, we are still committed to maintaining a balanced air force. By balanced force, I mean that we can meet the Australian Government’s assessed strategic needs. These include the capacity to not only contribute effectively to coalition operations, but also lead them where called upon. These key missions pose a mutually supportive, not mutually exclusive, force design challenge and one my Air Force is ready to meet. Despite increased fiscal discipline, our force has modernised into the most advanced and capable fleet we have ever operated.

Our Air Task Group in the Middle East deployed with its own air-to-air refuelling, air battle management, strike, surveillance and sustainment capabilities. We deployed potent war fighting aircraft with organic enablers. But it is the balance of that force that ensured the whole was greater than the sum of the platforms. We performed well but learnt that we are still not seamlessly ‘joined up’ either internally or in a coalition setting.

Such balance among these highly capable platforms also provides the agility to transition seamlessly from combat operations to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, or to even conduct them simultaneously. In this era of austerity and contingency, that is a vital capacity for any air force and any government. Although we have modernised our inventory, we are not complacent. Our force had been built through a programme of platform replacement rather than by design. Consequently, we are not as integrated as we ought to be.

Over time we have developed stovepipes in delivering air power roles and this has been reflected in our procurement. In the information age, we simply cannot continue to operate like this. The imminent entry into service of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter has provided the impetus for us to undertake root and branch transformation of the way we employ air power.

Plan JERICHO is our institutional response to this game changing weapons system. The F-35 is a 5th generation system. If we treat it as a mere replacement for our existing control-of-the-air and strike capability, comprised of Hornet and Super Hornet, we will have missed a transformative moment. Our headline is ‘The F-35 replaces nothing. It changes everything.’

Indeed, the JSF does not recognise arbitrary distinctions between control-of-the-air, strike, C2, EW and ISR missions. It is quite simply the smartest platform we have ever operated. In particular, it will sweep up an unprecedented volume of information regardless of its nominal mission. We must design or adapt the rest of our Air Force to be fully able to exploit this capability and to analyse and disseminate this information in a timely and relevant manner. We must abolish our internal stove-pipes in delivering operational effect. And we must join up with the entire Australian Defence Force, especially when we are operating as a joint force in the maritime approaches to Australia. This is the primary strategic task allocated to us by our Government. This is how we will harness the combat potential of a fully integrated force. In this effort, I know I enjoy goodwill and cooperation from my fellow service chiefs. After more than a decade of sustained joint and coalition operations, none of us is inclined to engage in single service shenanigans for short term gains.

As I have said we have the best platforms available. Ensuring that they can operate seamlessly, and share information and a common operational picture, is the next challenge. This will entail the vital but unglamorous work of investing in enabling capabilities and ensuring that we have the agility in the procurement process to stay abreast of changes in information technology. These occur at a speed which confounds most bureaucracies. That is why Jericho will demand changes to the way we acquire and sustain capability.

The JSF will permit seamless coalition operations with those allies who operate it. But we must not allow possession of a particular platform to reduce our agility and strategic flexibility. The JSF is incredibly smart. But it does not exercise political and strategic judgement. Politics and national objectives will always determine with whom we cooperate to meet contingencies. We are aware that initially we will be alone among our immediate neighbours in procuring the JSF. We must adapt to ensure that we can still collaborate with you on issues of mutual concern and operate with you as a coalition.

Ultimately that is why Plan JERICHO is about empowering our people. They are the ones who will operate all of these systems and adapt them to changes in the environment. My main effort as Chief of Air Force is going to be directed at the people part of this puzzle. Transformation of an air force must be pervasive. It must embrace every element of our recruitment, training, culture, procurement and doctrine. And agile, adaptive, innovative airmen and airwomen are the foundations of every element of 5th generation capability.

The uninitiated predict that technological progress will reduce the role of people in delivering air and space power. However, we know that the opposite is the case—even in respect of so-called ‘unmanned systems.’ Plan JERICHO will only succeed if we develop an innovative and empowered workforce. Our people are superb. They are brave, resilient and adaptive. But their ingenuity will be tested. Their efforts alone will determine whether the RAAF becomes a 5th generation-enabled force or whether it merely settles for being an Air Force that operates a 5th generation aircraft.

We will have to examine all of our trade structures. We must simplify our horizontal and vertical constructs. And we must educate our people rather than merely train them. This will be especially essential in the challenging realm of cyber where the temperament and aptitudes of the best operators may differentiate them markedly from what we consider our current ideal recruit to be.

And Australia faces particular demographic challenges. We have a small and affluent population which is ageing. The pool of people who will even consider a military career is

finite and shrinking. To attract and retain the calibre of people essential to 5th generation platforms and systems will be our greatest challenge. To retain them through whole-of-life learning and fulfilment will be critical to ensuring we recover the significant investment entailed in finding and training them.

In making coalitions work, people are the critical element. Smart, agile people can sort out the improvisation—‘the work around’—that compensates for incompatibilities in technology. We saw this in the search for MH370. It must become routine in the way we do business.

We are poised on the cusp of an exciting era. I am delighted to be able to address this esteemed forum. I also look forward to hearing from the other speakers and to learning from your experiences and perspectives. Regardless of the technology we employ, the fiscal, political and environmental challenges we face are substantially similar.

Thank you.