



### DECISION SUPERIORITY

*they were fifty to our ten,  
but they were easily outnumbered by a  
smaller force of men*

Moroccan war song

An analysis of history suggests that strategically out-thinking the adversary is often just as important to prevailing in conflict as out-gunning him. Warfare and conflict are clashes of will. They may be contested in the theatre of operations but, fundamentally, they are won or lost in the mind. In conflict, therefore, superior decision-making, enacted with operational competence, is the foundation of effective action and the primary path to success.

For Air Force to prevail in future conflict, it must possess decision superiority—the ability to dominate the decision space—to out-think, out-manoeuve and outwit any potential adversary. Consequently, Air Force is pursuing decision superiority as a human, organisational and operational imperative. But what is decision superiority and why is it so important?

Decision-making is a human endeavour. It is conducted by people, between people, and regardless of the machines, technologies and mechanisms of waging war at any level, involve people analysing choices, deciding, acting upon those decisions, reviewing outcomes, learning, adapting and if necessary reconsidering. Decisions, therefore, are essentially distilled thought—the result of a cognitive process in which people make choices between various alternatives. It involves a determination of will to make a decision, even if the decision is to do nothing, to defer action, or to consciously not decide. Decisions can be the product of rational or irrational thought, made by rational or irrational actors, or they may be intuitive, emotionally derived, subliminal or any combination of these. Fundamentally, however, decisions are a human cognitive process, which comprise acts of will and lead

to chosen courses of action. The implications of this for military forces are substantial, and go to the heart of our understanding of the nature of conflict and the conduct of operations.

The ability to dominate the pace of decision-making and to make and enact sound decisions is critical for the success of military forces. Effecting change in an adversary, be it through physical force or non-physical means, is achieved in practice most successfully through the exercise of greater judgement and in making better, more timely decisions than the adversary, that is, in achieving superiority in decision-making. Superior decision-making allows a force to achieve and retain the initiative, which

is a fundamental principle of all military action. By achieving and retaining the initiative, military forces are able, to the greatest extent possible, to control the pace, direction and flow of battle, enabling their forces to adaptively plan and implement pro-active action while forcing their adversary to adopt a re-active posture.

This is essentially what is meant by out-thinking an

adversary. In complex and ambiguous situations, it is not possible to know with certainty how an adversary may act. The very best that can be achieved is a subjective appreciation of how one's own actions cause a response and which of one's own actions work 'best' and which do not. This is the basis of a simple 'adapting' or 'learning' cycle in which options are generated, tested, evaluated and retained if successful and rejected if unsuccessful. Being able to do this better than an adversary means achieving decision superiority in that particular and defined context. Being able to adapt faster than an adversary means being able to deal with new and unexpected situations as they arise more effectively than they do and thereby out-manoeuve them to achieve desired effects or outcomes. Being superior decision-makers through superior adaptability and being able to make and enact 'superior' decisions therefore, is the key to prevailing in conflict and consequently of vital interest to Air Force.



Decision superiority may appear at first blush to simply mean the ability of individuals to adapt and make superior decisions. While this is an important part of the idea, decision superiority is a far more inclusive and nuanced concept than the name might suggest. A definition that captures the multi-faceted nature of the concept and the significant undertaking necessary to achieve and maintain it is:

*Decision superiority is the degree of dominance in the cognitive domain an organisation achieves through its decision-making processes that enables it to acquire and maintain an advantage over its competitors.*

Using this definition, decision superiority refers not only to the human aspect of making 'better' decisions, but also to the broader organisational and operational attributes and philosophy that embraces the value, necessity and demands of prevailing in the decision-space. From this perspective decision superiority has three domains—human, organisational and operational.

The human domain—concerning the individual members of the organisation—is undoubtedly the most important. It entails the acquisition of knowledge through reasoning, intuition or perception, that is, cognitive processes and the resultant decision made by individuals who comprise the organisation. While much has been written on decision-making within a variety of environments, most researchers agree that effective decision-making can be enhanced and augmented through education and training.

Effective organisations are those designed to decide. Subsequently, structuring an organisation to decide effectively is essential in achieving decision superiority. This structuring involves implementing effective and appropriate organisational design that facilitates an adaptive stance and promotes decision-making and implementation throughout the organisation. This organisational design includes implementing pathways of communication (both electronic and personal), and processes that enable decisions to be made and enacted quickly, transparently and effectively. It ensures that identified decision-makers at all levels throughout the organisation are resourced, authorised and held responsible for making and implementing decisions in a timely and considered fashion. Organisations structured to decide—decisive organisations—therefore, have

a culture that values superior decision-making and are structured for institutional learning.

The ultimate manifestation of decision superiority is in the operational domain. Being able to prevail over an adversary is a function of out-maneuvring them operationally. The operational dimension of decision superiority therefore, shapes how a force is commanded and employed to optimally exploit the capabilities at its disposal.

Decision superiority, consequently, encompasses not only the outcomes of good decision-making, but also the processes, structures and organisational design that facilitate and enable superior decision-making. It refers not only to the human aspect of making 'better' decisions, but to a much broader organisational attribute and philosophy that embraces the value of adaptability as the best means of making superior decisions. Decision superiority is an enabling concept, which if utilised as an underpinning philosophy of the Air Force enterprise, has the potential to fundamentally alter the way the RAAF operates. It is a tool set that enables disproportionately greater outcomes for a given input.

- *Decision superiority allows a force to seize and maintain the initiative—a fundamental prerequisite for military success*
- *Diverse education and broad experience are critical to superior decision-making, especially in complex and ambiguous environments*
- *Decision superiority is the outcome of an organisation's processes, structures and design that facilitate superior decision-making*

*This is the key point: the effective employment of air and space power has to do not so much with airplanes and missiles and engineering as with thinking and attitude and imagination.*

General Merrill A. McPeak,  
Chief of Staff, United States Air Force



**Air Power Development Centre**  
Level 3, 205 Anketell Street  
TUGGERANONG ACT 2900

Ph: 02 6266 1355 Fax: 02 6266 1041  
Email: [airpower@defence.gov.au](mailto:airpower@defence.gov.au)  
Web: [www.raaf.gov.au/airpower](http://www.raaf.gov.au/airpower)

