THE ART OF AIR POWER:
OBSERVATIONS FROM THE 2010 RAAF AIR POWER CONFERENCE

The recently conducted 2010 RAAF Air Power Conference (2010APC) provided a valuable opportunity to consider key issues such as the role of air power in current and emerging national security concepts, Government requirements and intentions of the Air Force and the air power it generates, and what the Air Force can do in order to be prepared to meet emerging challenges as a first rate provider of air power. With the theme of The Art of Air Power (reflecting Sun Tzu’s enduring treatise on war and strategy, The Art of War), the 2010APC analysed current perspectives of air power in terms of where it is now, what its future may be, and the implications of this for Australian air power. This Pathfinder summarises the key points that emerged from 2010APC. More importantly, it will be through the art of air power, enabled by professional mastery, that the Air Force can both transform to a future force and successfully deliver air power for Australian national security with that force.

The conference focused on four key areas of air power in Australian national security, namely, the role of air power in national security in terms of the 2009 Defence White Paper; the challenges to air power in meeting its full potential in difficult geopolitical and security environments; the role of air power in irregular warfare; and the key air power capability requirements such as space and ISR as identified in the 2009 Defence White Paper.

Traditionally, the art of air power has been in applying the four key enduring air power roles: ensuring control of the air, affecting elements or events on the ground, observing things from the air and moving things through the air. Historically, control of the air has been viewed as the most important of these roles, however, there is a growing belief that information superiority is an equally important air power role. The Royal Air Force Chief of the Air Staff, ACM Sir Stephen Dalton reflected this emerging perspective in suggesting earlier this year ‘it will be air power’s ability to maximise its comparative

There were five key outcomes from the conference. First, there is a need to understand the way conflict, and the critical role of air power within it, has evolved. Second, the need to study current and emerging characteristics of conflicts and the strategies required to prevail in them. Third, the need to have a strategic understanding of Government’s requirements of the military for Australian national security; that is, having a military strategy that directly flows from a national security outlook. These three factors are critical for the Air Force to enable it to plan, prepare and conduct the increasingly complex operations Government requires of it across a broad spectrum of conflict. The fourth factor is the need to further develop air power enabled ISR and space capabilities in an integrated manner to meet the Future Joint Operating Concept and Future Air and Space Operating Concept in accordance with the 2009 Defence White Paper. Lastly, Air Force needs to leverage the flexibility inherent in a balanced force to counter irregular and non-state adversaries operating in a complex battlespace, while at the same time, retaining capability to meet high-end conventional threats. Importantly, each of these factors is integral to the Air Force and its mission in providing air and space power for Australia’s security.

Chief of Air Force, AM Mark Binskin, stressed the importance of professional mastery in his closing of the 2010 Air Power Conference.
advantage in the third and fourth dimensions and to
 dominate the information space that will underwrite its
 future utility as a useful, credible, viable and essential
tool in both the influence and hard elements of national
power.’ Such a statement challenges traditional air power
mindsets and the notion that air power is primarily
offensive in nature. ACM Dalton is not alone in
suggesting such change. LTGEN David Deptula, a pilot
like ACM Dalton, has led the USAF transformation of
ISR stressing the operationalisation of intelligence. Both
perspectives show the potential synergies in knowledge
dominance that air power can provide to the joint
commander. Knowledge dominance exploits the inherent
strengths and characteristics of air power—tactical wide
perspective, global reach, flexibility, penetration and
responsiveness that can create strategic effects.

In his presentation to the conference, the Chief of the
Defence Force, ACM Angus Houston, noted that the
enhancement of the Air Force’s ISR capability will be
impressive. More important, he acknowledged that the
Air Force will take a leading role in data sensor fusion.
To do so, it must transform its ISR capabilities and take a
leading role in developing and promoting the ISR concept
across Air Force and within the wider joint community.
Overall, there is much alignment in ACM Dalton’s,
LTGEN Deptula’s and ACM Houston’s understanding of
the capacity of air power to be the primary provider of
information superiority in the battlespace.

ISR is only part of the transformation that Australian
air power will undergo in the coming decade. As the
Minister and CDF outlined at the conference, the Air
Force is transforming from a modern Air Force to a future
force characterised by 5th generation air combat aircraft,
uninhabited aerial systems, networked ISR, and global
reach. This is a significant challenge that will require Air
Force to not only apply the art of air power to operations
but also to its transformation from a modern tactical Air
Force to a future networked enabled and strategically
influential force providing Government with effective air
power in support of Australian national security.

However, the critical need for Air Force is not just the
realisation of this future force through the application of
the art of air power but effectively applying the future
force’s capabilities in support of Australian national
security. This will require a clear understanding and
knowledge of air power and strategy. The fundamental

Building block to achieve this is professional mastery;
a key priority highlighted by CAF in his Commander’s
Intent.

Having air power strategists who can articulate the
integration of air power, and thus our future force,
in national security—in essence, having air power
statesmen—will represent the pinnacle of the art of
air power. It is only then that Air Force will realise a
future force capable of conducting integrated operations
to address complex security challenges and providing
Government with strategic response options in support
of Australian national interests. More importantly,
Australian air power will be effectively integrated into a
national effects-based security strategy by statesmen of
air power who can successfully articulate and integrate
air power at the national level. This can only be achieved
through mastering the art of air power.

The Art of Air Power, by Dr Sanu
Kainikara from APDC, examines the
relevance of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of
War* in terms of air power theory and
strategy, and was launched by Chief
of Air Force at the Conference.

- Conflict, and the role of air power within it,
is evolving and there is a need to ensure we
understand such change in developing the
future force.

- The rise of ISR as a key air power role
challenges traditional air power mindsets
and the tenet that air power is primarily
offensive in nature.

- Mastering the art of air power, through
professional mastery, will enable Air Force to
transform to the future force and apply it to
Australian national security interests.

‘Leading an Air Force, directing an air campaign
and controlling and conducting air operations is an
art—the art of air power.’

Air Marshal M. Binskin,
Chief of 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
Web: www.raaf.gov.au/airpower