The Royal Australian Air Force will become the world’s first 5th-generation Air Force. This is only a milestone on a journey that must continue for us. Air Force needs its people to innovate and embrace the possibilities of disruptions to guide us beyond the planned Air Force.

—Air Marshal Leo Davies

On 20 April, the Air Power Development Centre (APDC) published Beyond the Planned Air Force: Thoughts on Future Drivers and Disruptors (BPAF). It is a document that challenges the Royal Australian Air Force’s airmen to embrace the inevitable changes in the future. Technological, societal and environmental disruptors and drivers will require changes in the Air Force approach to generating the air power needed to support Australia’s national interests.

BPAF is the latest in a series of official publications designed to expand the perspective of Air Force and look at how we should operate into the future. Plan Jericho, released by the former Chief of Air Force in 2015, outlined a broad plan to make Air Force an agile, adaptive component of the joint force which will be required in the information age—a 5th-generation air force. Jericho continues to drive the development of a culture of innovation in Air Force. In 2016, the Defence White Paper 2016 and the Integrated Investment Program described the capabilities that will define Australian air power for the foreseeable future. These systems will be employed as part of an integrated joint force developed along the five vectors defined in the recently released Air Force Strategy 2017-2027. This combination of cutting-edge capabilities integrated into a joint force by an adaptive and innovative organisational culture is the vision for the Air Force. But where do we go from there? BPAF peers beyond this planned force and prepares to extend the five vectors of the Air Force Strategy beyond 2027 into an uncertain future.

The importance of looking beyond the foreseeable into the realm of anticipation is important in the current age of rapid change. Though Air Force has charted its preferred path into the near-future, we should not expect that the future will progress exactly as planned. New technologies, societal pressures, strategic shifts and environmental change will work in isolation, or in combination, to disrupt our plans, for better or for worse. Though the specifics may surprise us, we must be prepared to adapt rapidly and effectively to the opportunities that future uncertainty presents. To do this, we must plan for disruption and not rest assured on the continued validity of our current assumptions.

What is disruption?

Disruption refers to a development that prevents a system from continuing as expected. This can take many forms and can either evolve from observed trends or from a completely unexpected ‘black swan’ event. Regardless of the form when disruption occurs, Air Force will need to adapt to ensure that it continues to provide the air power required by Government to protect and further Australia’s national interests.

Despite the apparent novelty of ‘disruptive innovation’ as a catchphrase, examples abound in military history of disruptive developments requiring adaptation, either rapid or gradual, for military forces to remain effective, efficient and relevant. The arrival of gunpowder in the West, the harnessing of steam power, the societal and strategic repercussions of the French Revolution, the introduction of aviation and the splitting of the atom have all required changes in the way military power is developed, managed and employed in pursuit of national interests. Indeed, the advent of air power was itself a disruptive event.
Though disruption may not be a new phenomenon, the development of organisational approaches that seek to harness disruption’s positive effects and minimise potential threats reflects a shift in attitude towards uncertainty within Air Force. In a way, BPAF is itself a disruptor; it is an official document that does not lay down a plan and does not presume to predict the Air Force of the future. In fact, this is the key concept that drove the development of BPAF; we cannot predict the future but we can be confident that we will be required to adapt in some way. The key to our future success is being able to anticipate the need for adaptation and be able to respond to disruption quickly, effectively and efficiently when it occurs. To do this, Air Force needs to develop creative and critical thinkers.

**What Beyond the Planned Air Force is and what it is not?**

BPAF identifies a number of potential disruptors that may affect future Air Force. The disruptors listed in BPAF range from technological advances in quantum technology and artificial intelligence, through to the potential of environmental and societal disruption resulting from climate change and demographic shifts. The initial list of topics was selected by the staff of APDC, in consultation with the Defence Science and Technology Group, from reviews of defence, business, and technology forecasts. This list is not exhaustive, nor is it intended to be. The possibilities for disruption are not bounded by our ability to identify and articulate the risks as we see them at a specific moment in time. Instead, BPAF provides a sample of some of the more notable factors that we can see shaping Air Force into the foreseeable future. The challenge now is for the men and women of Air Force to continue to scan the horizon for developments that provide opportunities, create threats or simply require our organisation to adapt to a new and emerging reality.

This is more easily said than done. With such a broad arc of future possibilities, we cannot expect our airmen to understand and appreciate the full spectrum of disruptive developments that may emerge. Accordingly, the publication of BPAF is just the first step. Over next few years, APDC will publish a series of papers that explore the potential impact of specific disruptors on Australian air power. These ‘BPAF Papers’ will provide our airmen with an in-depth understanding of various technological, societal and environmental disruptors, and how they may influence the development, management and employment of air power into the future. Just as importantly, the ‘BPAF Papers’ will be developed through a series of lectures and workshops that will take place across Australia to engage airmen in the development process, gaining their insights into how those on the air power coal-face see their future changing in light of potential disruption.

BPAF is not a prediction of what the future will be, nor is it a development plan or force design document for Air Force beyond 2027. Instead, it aims to promote discussion, and creative and critical thought about the future of Australian air power. Accordingly, BPAF must not be seen as a policy document or a roadmap, but as a catalyst that should spark the imaginations of today’s airmen in envisioning their Air Force as it may evolve in an uncertain and unpredictable future.

**Key Points**

- A number of recent Defence documents look at various aspects of the future of the Air Force.
- The forces and disrupters affecting future air power are largely unpredictable.
- Air Force will need to adapt to an unpredictable future

You can download a copy of Beyond the Planned Air Force (BPAF) from the Air Power Development Centre’s website: www.airforce.gov.au/airpower