There is in Australia an enduring myth that in the 1960s the French Government refused to supply spares and munitions for the Dassault Mirage IIIIO fighter aircraft then in RAAF service. The myth suggests that the embargo was imposed because of the Australian involvement in the Vietnam War. In truth, no embargo ever occurred, nor was there any such threat made by Dassault or the French Government.

While the origins of the story are difficult to determine, the perceived consequences of a disruption of supply to a fundamental Air Force capability ensure that the essence, if not the accuracy, of the myth endures. Embargoes on the sale of select military equipment to Australia imposed by the governments of Switzerland and Sweden in the 1960s have only served to fuel inaccurate speculations made in relation to the Mirage aircraft.

The saga began when the French Government initiated a policy shift of its position on the Middle East in 1967. The shift encompassed a withdrawal from Algeria and re-engagement with the Arab nations of the region. This renewed policy also resulted in a reduction of support for Israel as well as an embargo on the sale of military equipment to all nations in the region. While ostensibly applicable across all of the Middle East, it was Israel who suffered the most as a result of this policy shift. Fifty Dassault Mirage III fighters and sixteen patrol boats built in France and paid for by Israel were impounded and retained in France, while all further military sales in support of the Mirages and other French military equipment, then in service with the Israeli military forces, was stopped.

In response, the Israeli Government sought to acquire weapons and spares for its Dassault aircraft from other nations. This included an approach to the RAAF in August 1967. This approach was not unrealistic. At that point, Australia was domestically manufacturing approximately 15 per cent of the Mirage airframe, 80 per cent of the engine and 5 per cent of the avionic and flight control systems. Increasing the production of certain spares in order to open an export market to Israel was well within the capacity of the Australian aviation industry at the time.

The Israeli request was duly discussed by the Air Board in September 1967. The Air Board had to two concerns: was there an implication of a similar embargo on the sale of munitions and spares to Australia and whether or not the sale of Mirage parts to Israel would be the trigger for such an embargo? It is somewhat surprising that the Air Board would have discussed such a proposal prior to obtaining clear guidance from the Government—and the then Department of External Affairs—on the matter.

By a coincidence, the same agenda for the same meeting when the Israeli proposal was discussed also contained a review of the lead times for overseas-acquired spares for every aircraft then in RAAF service. Not surprisingly, Mirage logistics requirements came under particular scrutiny. It was determined that some 45 per cent of the Mirage sustainment budget was spent on French manufactured equipment and that some 94 per cent of the line items required to maintain that equipment was sole-sourced from French industry. Any disruption of the supply of spares for the Mirage, regardless...
of its cause, was of great concern. The reliance on overseas suppliers from a region as remote from Australia as France was considered a high risk strategy especially in the advent of a major conflict.

The outcome was that firstly, the Air Board decided to increase the war stock of Mirage spares held in Australia from four to eight months at a cost of some $8.8 million. Secondly, it was also decided at the meeting to approach the French Government to seek clarification of their position on any possible embargo of Mirage spares and munitions for Australia. While action was being taken based on these decisions, the Air Board received direction from the Government that there would be no supply of military equipment to Israel at that time.

The French response to Australia’s question concerning the possibility of an arms embargo is extremely interesting given the enduring nature of the myth. In an October meeting in Paris between senior RAAF officers and the head of the French Aeronautical Material, General Yves Ezanno, the French stated ‘there would be no French embargo on arms in any circumstances in which Australia may find itself’. Ezanno went on to state that the assurance was given in full knowledge of Australia’s ongoing involvement in the Vietnam War and appreciation that the RAAF’s Mirages could employed as part of the conflict. Furthermore, the French Defence Minister offered to add his assurance in writing, if so desired. This assurance was reiterated in more detail by the French President, Georges Pompidou in 1971.

There are two possible threads that appear to have seeded the French embargo story. The first element was the very real embargo imposed by the Swedish Government on the sale of warheads for the Carl Gustav anti-tank weapon. The second was the embargo by the Swiss Government of the last Pilatus Porter aircraft of the order for the Australian Army. In both cases, these embargoes were directly related to the possible employment of the materiel in Vietnam by the Australian Army.

The consideration of the Air Board into the possibility of arms embargoes and into the broader question of guaranteed supply in times of conflict highlights an enduring challenge for Australian air power. Australia’s geostrategic position is both a blessing and a curse. Australia’s isolated landmass is free of common borders and any adversary would face complex logistics issues in mounting a serious incursion into its territory. However, Australia’s isolation, coupled with a small aviation industry, results in a reliance on oversea supply via long and vulnerable trade routes. An enduring challenge faced by the Air Force has been the access to aircraft and spares from overseas manufactures.

Threats to the supply of new and replacement airframes as well as spares support are critical matters. From 1913 to 1939, it was aircraft of British origin that formed the backbone of the Australian Flying Corps as well as the successor organisations, the Australian Air Corps and the Royal Australian Air Force. However, this reliance was found to be detrimental when expansion plans in 1936 were delayed due to a lack of capacity within the British aviation industry to supply both the RAF and the RAAF.

Similar examples during World War II and in more recent years have occurred where suppliers have been unable to meet the needs of their national military and that of the ADF simultaneously resulting in shortages of critical spares. The protection of Australia’s trade routes, the fostering of the Australian aviation industry and the retention of war stocks remain expensive, but critical, components of Australia’s national security strategy.

Key Points

• The story of a French embargo on the sale of Mirage spares to Australia is a myth.

• Air Force must plan and prepare for a possible disruption of supply during times of increased threat.

• Australia’s geographic position requires specific strategy and plans to mitigate against inherent vulnerabilities.