Command and Control (C2) is fundamental to the effective and efficient application of air power. The concept of C2 in the context of Australian application of air power has constantly evolved since the establishment of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in 1921, and prior to this as part of the Australian Flying Corps. Indeed the establishment of the RAAF, as a distinct and independent fighting force was an acknowledgement of the highly technical and specialised nature of air operations. The creation of an independent air force was also an acceptance of the importance of ensuring personnel who fully comprehend the complexities of aviation and the application of air power are appointed to command and control air power capabilities, normally vested in the Air Force.

The evolution of RAAF C2 has been shaped by the lessons learned across multiple theatres of operation and heavily influenced by major coalition partners. In the past decade this evolution has seen the Air Force's operational C2 largely modelled on the C2 tenets of the United States Air Force doctrine, suitably adapted to RAAF conditions. It acknowledges that Air Force capabilities tasked to support mainstream operations also require a degree of specialised control and oversight. This is particularly evident in the establishment of an air and space operations centre within Joint Operations Command and the use of the tactical air control system as the principle mechanism through which the tenet of centralised control and decentralised execution is applied to the conduct of air operations.

Under this model, Director General Air (DGAIR) or Director General Air Command Operations (DGACOPS) is responsible to Commander Joint Operations and Air Commander Australia for the operational planning and execution of air power contribution to operations and exercises. The RAAF Force Element Groups and Wings remain responsible for the capability management and force generation of their units against preparedness requirements. Until recently this model has been largely airborne platform-centric, based on the air tasking cycle and the air task order to generate air missions. A notable omission under the centralised control model for the employment of air power has been air base capabilities generated by the Combat Support Group. This support is often taken for granted and the means through which the capability is developed, planned, tasked and controlled have been ill-defined.

Historically, operational command and control of air bases have been ambiguous and inconsistent across the Air Force and/or Joint domains. Whilst air base support to operations has been a constant, there has been a paucity of doctrine on air base command and control. The doctrine that does exist primarily focusses on tactical C2 rather than operational C2 of air bases and their employment during the conduct of air campaigns and in support of Joint and Combined operations. This lack of doctrine has seen air bases assigned under varying degrees of operational authority of senior Australian Defence Force commanders including being directly controlled.
by the Joint Task Force Commanders, Land Component Commanders, and/or remaining under parent unit chain of command.

In the military context, air bases are a complex system of systems. They are the geographical locations from which the Air Force flies, fights and commands air operations and are a key aspect of Air Force's ability to project and sustain air power during both peace and war. Air bases are operated by a highly specialised and, at times resource constrained, workforce which is often required to support multiple lines of operation from permanent and expeditionary locations. The Air Force's ability to provide the Government with effective air power is dependent on the capability of the force to optimally operate as a system of systems that combine its airborne platforms, air power support systems and air bases. While the RAAF generates platforms from individual functionally oriented Force Element Groups, the operational employment of the force needs to be harmonised to optimise air power effects across the full spectrum of operations.

The diluted centralised control of air bases has been acknowledged as part of Plan JERICHO. There is now direction for the modernisation of air base C2 and the implementation of enhanced C2 applications and decision support tools for the Combat Support Group. Work has also commenced to achieve these objectives and improve the operational command and control of air bases. Most notably, Air Commander Australia has directed the establishment of a permanent and dedicated Combat Support Division (CSD) as part of the air and space operations centre under Operational Control to DGAIR / DGACOPS for the centralised control of RAAF combat support and air base functions. This provides the air and space operations centre with a dedicated Director Combat Support Division to support the centralised control of air bases and specialist combat support planning staff.

Additionally, the future Air Base C2 Capability Systems seeks to fuse digital data feeds from permanent and expeditionary air bases into a centralised Air Base Command Network, which in turn will be interoperable with the tactical air control system to better support operational control of air bases. This approach allows a cross-theatre perspective to be maintained, rather than continuing as a penny-packaged force meeting purely local objectives. This limited combat support force can be prioritised to achieve a multitude of tasks and employed appropriately to meet prioritised objectives. The prioritisation is particularly important for future agile basing concepts where combat support elements will require a higher degree of flexibility as their combat support activities become less static. Importantly, this centralised control does not forgo the requirement for air bases to be responsive to tactical formations that they are required to support to achieve their directed mission. However, control of air bases will generally be retained by DGAIR / DGACOPS.

Critical, as the Air Force continues to progress towards becoming a 5th Generation Air Force, air bases also are included as part of this evolution. The air bases must develop into 5th Generation Air bases that support the operation of 5th Generation air platforms. (Pathfinder 309, 5th Generation Fighting Airbases, May 2018). This includes empowering air bases with appropriate modern digital combat information systems which fuse and interoperate with the tactical air control system that provides DGAIR / DGACOPS and Director Combat Support Division improved situational awareness and decision-making support. Once it is matured, the system will result is a much more responsive and effective, centrally-controlled system of air bases.

Key Points

- Air base C2 has not evolved in parallel with the C2 doctrine of other air power capabilities.
- Air bases, as a critical enabler of power, will be employed under the fundamental air power tenet of centralised control, decentralised execution.
- The application of the 5th Generation Air Force will become constrained if the C2 systems for bases is not matured in parallel with that of other air power systems.