

Defence Strategic Review and Adapt: Implementing DSR as a Wargame

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Australia's Defence Strategic Review (DSR) has been completed, with the final report handed to Government ([Prime Minister of Australia, 2023](#)). In considering priorities for Defence capability and assessing force structure, posture and preparedness¹, the DSR is likely to recommend difficult choices for a relatively small Defence Force which must live within necessarily-limited means. Much like in war itself, Defence's ability to adapt to DSR outcomes will be crucial. Indeed, former defence official Paul Dibb has warned Defence requires 'serious historical and cultural change' to implement the DSR's recommendations ([Hurst, 2023](#)). Such change could be painful, especially if each service views the DSR's recommendations through the lens of a zero-sum game, with winners and losers. Doing so not only misses the point of the review itself, but diverts our attention away from an important—arguably unique—opportunity offered by the DSR: using it as a wargame to practise the kind of adaptability we will need to fight the next war. Australia's current strategic circumstances, and their trajectory, mean we cannot afford to miss such an opportunity. This article discusses how the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) can use the DSR as a wargame to test its adaptability in a joint environment, and why doing so is an effective way to practice applying air and space power effects into the joint force, in preparation for the next war.

Opportunities for the RAAF to practise the art of adaptability should not be squandered. Because the future is unknowable², planning for future war—while necessary—is extremely difficult (Gray, 2014). And because the nature of war is a high-stakes dynamic contest, also involving uncontrollable forces of fortune and friction, our ability to adapt quickly to the enemy and the fog of war is even more important than planning for events which may not eventuate. In other words, what matters more than planning for day one of a fictional future war is to adapt to day one of the actual war that occurs. Wargaming is a common and effective means to practise such adaptability, in an environment where mistakes will not result in catastrophic consequences for national security.

While the need to adapt is nothing new for the RAAF, the required scale and urgency of adaptation is greater now than at any time in recent history. Cancellation of the MQ-9B Sky Guardian project is a contemporary example of the RAAF having to adapt to directed changes in capability. But there are two factors that make the current need to adapt vastly more important. First, the DSR is not routine. It is a holistic review with a broad mandate, arguably the most significant since the 1986 Dibb Review ([Hurst, 2023](#)). Consequently, it may require the RAAF to make much larger and more complex adaptations than were necessary in response to previous decisions targeting single projects or systems. Second, the context within which the DSR exists is unparalleled in recent history: Australia's strategic circumstances are the worst in living memory ([Tillett, 2022](#)). This means adaptation may need to occur more rapidly than was the case in the past. Strategically significant consequences may result, should that adaptation fail.

¹DSR Terms of Reference, accessible at <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review>.

²Churchill, 1958 (cited in Langworth, Churchill: In His Own Words) accessible at <https://winstonchurchill.org/churchill-central/quote/the-future-is-unknowable/>

The DSR allows the RAAF to test its ability to adapt in the face of significant and disruptive change. If the DSR is aligned with analysts' predictions (Davis, 2022; Vincent, 2022; Tingle, 2023), air power capabilities such as uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs), long range strike, and air and missile defence may be prioritised. Perhaps wisely, fewer people have speculated on what air power capabilities might be descoped, delayed or cancelled. As a holistic review, the DSR may recommend changes to a range of air power capabilities. Not only could these capabilities be interrelated, but they could also have interdependencies with other capabilities in the maritime, land, space and cyber domains. Adapting in response to the DSR therefore requires an all-domain, joint force mindset, to ensure the RAAF continues to achieve the Air Force Strategy (AFSTRAT) 2020's objective of delivering air and space power as part of the joint force. Rather than adapting to changes in a piecemeal fashion, a strategic perspective must be taken to ensure that changes directed remain integratable and combat effective. For example, DSR might recommend that the Royal Australian Navy acquire a fixed wing combat aircraft capability (Kuper, 2023), instead of funding additional RAAF capabilities such as fighter aircraft or UAVs. To remain effective, the RAAF would need to adapt by ensuring both current capabilities, and those being acquired, could integrate with the new naval air power capability. Multiple RAAF projects and capabilities would need to accommodate this change.

Due to the similarities between the complex adaptive challenges presented by the DSR and those imposed by war, the DSR can be used as a wargame scenario to test and hone our ability to adapt in war. For example, a post-DSR Government determination to delay or cancel a specific acquisition project is analogous to that capability being degraded or defeated in the early stages of a war. Adopting this mindset, the right course of action for the RAAF is not to assume a losers mentality (Kelly, 2019) of floundering or contesting the merits of the outcome. Rather, the RAAF should rapidly accept and adapt to the situation re-routing efforts into other capabilities that remain effective and thereby 'continuing the fight'. Similarly, a decision to accelerate or grow a particular capability should not be cause for celebration or comfort. On the contrary, it should be the trigger to redouble efforts to adapt the employment of that capability for optimal effectiveness, in light of the 'degraded' capabilities in other areas. The key, as noted above, is to ensure any adaption proceeds from an all-domain, joint force perspective, and that adaptations produce the best air power effects for the joint force, in all relevant domains.

The DSR wargame scenario can be taken as far as the limits of our innovation and imagination. Since there are no existential consequences to wargaming, it offers us the opportunity to test innovative adaptations, fail fast and adapt. Provided we remain within obvious boundaries such as legal constraints, the RAAF should be empowered to test imaginative ways to adapt and avoid self-censoring solution options. For example, the RAAF could accelerate acquisition projects by seeking bold exemptions to procurement rules, based on a capability-takes-primacy argument. If successful, such exemptions would pave the way for more rapid adaption during war, because wargaming would have taught us which rules to 'break' (and how) before the conflict starts.

While often misattributed to Charles Darwin, Megginson's (1963) explanation of the great naturalist's argument about natural selection can be applied to the context of war: 'it is not the most intellectual of the species that survives; it is not the strongest that survives; but the species that survives is the one that is able best to adapt and adjust to the changing environment in which it finds itself.' How well we adapt to the DSR will be an important test of how well we adapt to the next conflict. Consequently, it should be thought of in this light, through the lens of a wargame. If we accept this, the next challenge is to accept that we may already be at war (Hirsh, 2022). Day one was yesterday. Adaptation starts now.

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