

2024 Air and Space Power Conference

Transcript – Always Operating: Organisational, Structural and Cultural Elements

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GREG BILTON: Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. Before I commence, I would just like to offer my own warm welcome to all of our international guests. Thank you for taking the time to travel, in some cases significant distances, to join this very important conference, and your presence elevates it and its value to all who have the opportunity to attend. I'd also like to take the opportunity just to thank our Chief of Air Force, Air Marshal Rob Chipman. Rob, thank you for the opportunity and the invitation to speak today. My topic today: Always operating model: organisational, structural and cultural elements, I'm pleased to report won't incorporate a whole series of organisational diagrams. I do have a slide pack. It was prepared by my petty officer in the executive cell, and in his words, it's "the Royal Australian Air Force and other Air Force partners doing cool joint stuff". (LAUGHTER) So, if I bore you, at least the pictures behind me should provide some entertainment.

The important point I want to make about structures before I get into it is, you know, I believe in the theory that form follows function. So, the reason I don't want to focus on organisational tasks is it's actually functionality that's important. And the Australian Defence Force has been on a journey since 1976, when the Australian Defence Force was first formed, to find ways to operate more effectively in a joint manner, integrate the capabilities of each of those domains, and then equally exert their strengths and protect their vulnerabilities by virtue of being able to integrate effectively. The strategic circumstances in which we find ourselves actually frame this work. 1989, at the fall of the Wall in Berlin, there was a general sigh of relief and a view that state-on-state conflict was something of the past. We find ourselves in 2024 with a state-on-state conflict in Europe, a complex arrangement, a recidivist and revisionist Russia seeking to invade and secure at least parts of the Ukraine. A war of ideology in part, given that the

West is deeply committed to supporting Ukraine and the complexities that come with providing the equipment necessary for what is effectively a war of attrition. We go to the Middle East - again, something that's been brewing for a while, and I know there's a lot of people in the policy world that would like to wish the Middle East away. But the reality is, it's not going to go away. There are too many fishes there and too many struggles there, and we have a conflict in play, a significant conflict in play, that involves both a state actor and a non-state actor. One, that non-state actor, that's sponsored by a nation state. So, another complex set of circumstances. And then, if we come into the Indo-Pacific - and whilst I would suggest what I'm about to say is not reflective of the fact that the challenges in the Indo-Pacific are actually a global challenge, not a regional challenge - China is an emerging global power, but the behaviours of that country as it rises and competes to be a global power are in ways concerning. I talk about those three conflicts in particular, and there are other tensions and frictions in the global order, but I talk about them because they all have, in one way or another, direct effects on Australia's national interests, both in terms of protecting them and also projecting them.

So, how do we actually respond to those set of circumstances? The greatest challenge for a theatre commander - anywhere, in any organisation - is to orchestrate the effects of the capabilities that are force assigned to them, and then equally to be able to apportion effectively in time and space, sequence activities, events, operations in a way that ultimately achieves the strategic objectives set by the respective government. Our objectives as set today, our military strategic objectives, through the National Defence Strategy - very clear guidance. My organisation takes those objectives and turns them into what we call a "theatre campaign plan". It has a 5-year time horizon and it is about being able to synchronise and coordinate and orchestrate the activities of the Australian Defence Force, married with those activities of other government agencies and departments, and with partners and allies in a way that enables us to achieve those strategic objectives. The thing that guides us most today is the objective of deterrence by denial. Our primary objective is to navigate a course that enables us to avoid major conflict in the Indo-Pacific. That is the primary driver for our

thinking and planning. That does not mean that we don't plan for the worst case, and we do develop contingency plans in cooperation with allies and partners that make sure that we are preparing appropriately for the worst-case outcomes. That's just part of our job. Now, the integration across five domains - and I'd ask you, and I'm sure others have talked through this, ask you to think about playing chess in five dimensions. It's an ability to bring together cyber, space, maritime, air and land domains in a coordinated and sequenced way. It's being able to do it in a way that allows you to repeat it, to sustain it, to create concurrency. And in a small defence force like the Australian Defence Force, that's one of our principal challenges, it actually building concurrency. And it does take skill and a particular penchant - the art, if you like - of operational planning to achieve that outcome. Now, we are in a very fortunate situation that we don't do that on our own. We have very strong alliances and excellent partnerships. And as we confront this period in our own region of the Indo-Pacific of heightened competition, that alliance and partnership relationship, and integrating that into our five-domain approach, is critical to success.

The strategy, putting that into action, requires changes in approach that are reflected now in our command-and-control models. So, inside Joint Operations Command, we have adopted a new C2 model that assumes the five components into Joint Operations Command. I have a direct command relationship with those components and we live and work in the same building, so the Joint Staff and the Components Staff. Our critical functions, and those that require frankly the most amount of work at the moment, is the ability to actually conduct effective targeting across all five domains. That is a really critical function for us. We have ideas on how to do it, but given that in all domains we're able to apply effects and new technology, emerging technology that will arrive in our organisation over the next four or five years - and further into the decade - will require us to be not just good at this but superb at it. And so we're setting the foundations now, and I work very closely with partners particularly in the Five Eyes, to understand the journey they're on to achieve this same outcome. But we are working actively to refine and develop the optimal targeting system that enables us to effectively apply all of those effects that we can bring to bear across

agencies in what is a simple and coherent and, most importantly, effective manner.

We are also working on understanding how to plan effectively, but also maintain a time horizon of five years. So, I need parts of my organisation to be thinking five years out and starting to shape the activities we'll do as an Australian Defence Force, the activities we'll do with whole-of-government over that time horizon, and then, of course, the ability to work in combined environments with allies and partners. And that's very much the process of campaigning that is such a critical function in Joint Operations Command. The other area that is being challenged - and I don't think it will be unfamiliar to anyone in this room - is the challenges that come with change, and particularly cultural change. And I would highlight my first point: That no one service can effectively operate alone without revealing vulnerabilities. I'm happy to be contested on that. I will give you a bit of a chance to provide a little chance for Q&A towards the end of this session. But it's my firm view that that's just not possible. So, it's imperative on us to be able to bring those capabilities together, optimise their use, project their strengths, and then be able to protect their vulnerabilities effectively. Now, in the Air Domain, you know, the provision of long-range strike at long distance carries significant risk. It's also a significant capability in the ADF arsenal. But I want to make sure that I can do it repeatedly as a theatre commander, over long periods of time. So, the process of generating it, in the first instance, then being able to reconstitute, and then doing it again. And we want to be able to do it on more than one line of effort. And so there's pressure on our system to be able to generate the concurrency I'm describing. Now, it's the same in the other domains. And as the Australian Defence Force receives long-range strike capabilities in our Navy and in our Army, it does give us an opportunity to create much greater concurrency in our schemes of manoeuvre and the way in which we might deal with an adversary, should we find ourselves in conflict. The training of these particular skill sets are critical and the method by which you practise and train to be able to actually execute requires us to run very complex exercises and training. Some of this is done through simulation on CPXs, and, you know, again, we're able to work

with a number of partners in these command post exercises. And then we'll do live exercises, such as Talisman Sabre, where we can - in a combined environment - practice aspects of this both joint and combined integration. The training design is something that is driven for us by our contingency planning. So, quite deliberately so. When we work in a CPX or we work on a major exercise, we're seeking to evolve and develop our plans, we're seeking to learn from each and every event, and make sure that what we learn is injected into either our plans, our contingency plans, our campaign plan, or in our SOPs, our tactics, and other procedures. This is a fundamental part of being an agile and learning organisation. There's been work done across the Department of Defence in Australia for some time to do this but I believe there is still room to further improve our ability to not just take lessons but to actually learn them and demonstrate the capacity to learn them. And so this has been a project for some period of time. The other area of training that's critical for the team at Joint Operations Command - and I think more broadly for the ADF - is, in fact, individual joint training. And at the moment I have some work being done that is aggregating all of the training necessary for people at Joint Operations Command to actually have the professional acumen to execute their duties to the highest standard. We haven't done that before. We have joint training programs and joint courses, but there's not a proper demand signal for what's required. And what our individuals - our very capable individuals - need to know to be able to execute to their optimum ability. So, this is another body of work that will be critical. It will create a demand signal across the Department of Defence here in Australia. But, equally, it will align us and it will create a better foundation for better integration across our five domains, as I spoke about earlier. So, it does require an investment. It does require also relationships with the services and the Chief of Joint Capabilities Command, particularly the Space and Cyber Commands that sit underneath his leadership. It does require a level of engagement and it does require an ability to link into single-service training activities. And I think we have an adequate federation between the various service warfare centres. And as the Space and Cyber Training Centres grow and develop, that same relationship and the sinews

necessary will be built between the two organisations.

So, we do need to build that acumen. That, in part, addresses the cultural point. We still have a penchant for drifting into single-service views and perspectives of operations. So, there is still work for us to do to actually integrate our capabilities. And at the point at which it's done, I think is at Headquarters JOC, and as we build the relevant joint tactical elements groups or task forces that might be required, it plays out in that space as well. And again the training design that we've built also helps drive this. Now, nothing happens at Joint Operations Command without the services in CJC - in fact, the rest of the department. And the space of raise, train and sustain, and giving the adequate time for the preparation, training and certification of forces is a critical planning factor. And once those forces are force-assigned for employment operationally, then it's important for us to be mindful as Joint Operations Command, as the theatre commander of that flow, if you like, through the services, through Space and Cyber Command, through operational employment, and then hand it back to the services and CJC for reconstitution.

So, when I talk about always operating, the strategic environment requires us to view that requirement of being able to execute your campaign plan and consider every interaction as part of that plan. So, you might be doing a Defence Cooperation Program activity, you might actually be doing an operational deployment, you might be doing capacity-building. In my view, all of those things link to delivering the strategic outcomes that you're trying to achieve. So, from "raise, train, sustain", through operational deployment, through international engagement, Defence cooperation programs as part of that, we're trying to coordinate all of those things in a way that delivers on our strategic objectives.

So, that does require deeper coordination with the services. And the components model allows those levels of deeper coordination, a better understanding at theatre of the implications of the demand signal that are provided by the theatre commander. So, when I require ships, planes, army units, there's a very clear understanding of the impost of that. You know what's essentially being prepared in accordance with the Chief of Defence Force

preparedness directive, but equally there are times when you are making demands outside of the provisions in that document as well, and it's so fundamentally important to understand the implications of drawing forces through that RTS process. The Australian Defence Force has, since 2019, increased the amount of activity it does under the broad banner of international engagement, but offshore by nearly 300%. The Australian Defence Force hasn't grown by 300%. What's happened is that those activities that the services do, or some of them, in the "raise, train, sustain" space, the activities that JOC has oversight of and runs, they've blended. That's how the extra capacity has been delivered. So, rather than exercising in Shoalwater Bay or in some other training area in Australia, where it's suitable and sensible and we have the agreement of our partners, we're exercising offshore. We're training offshore in the environment where we're competing. And so we're building acumen in our force about the operating environment, about our partners and how to work best with them, what requirements they have, how we can work with them, and how, frankly, we can learn together. That's been a key characteristic of our approach going forward for some time now.

So, when I talk about an always-operating model, in summary I would say to you that we are trying to effectively address the current environment of heightened competition, we're apportioning forces consistent with our national interest to places like Europe and the Middle East because it's an imperative that we do. We want to uphold the rules-based order and we believe a contribution is critical in each of those locations. And then we're actively competing in our own region. So, we have made structural changes, as I have described, and we're making cultural changes. And I am seeing much better levels of effectiveness, given I'm coming to the end of my fifth year in this appointment, I can show you with empirical data just how far we've come as an organisation in terms of our ability to integrate across five domains. And I can also illustrate the improvement in interoperability with partners and allies as well. I've got empirical data that shows that trend very, very clearly. I'll leave you with this point, though. It's not a finished product. It requires us to continue to work away and refine it and improve it. It requires us to have a mindset that is always operational. And I

contend, if we can do that, we can achieve our strategic objectives. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much. (APPLAUSE)

JACINTA CARROLL: What an extraordinary insight and a wonderful descriptor of the many challenges that we face and the opportunities as well. We are now open to questions. If you are in the audience here, please raise your hand, a microphone will come to you. I will look at one of our online questions to pose to you first. You have, as you have noted, the head of the air domain here as well as the space domain. If you were king for a day, one of our conference participants asks "What air or space power capability would you fast-track to deliver better your integrated operational effects?"

GREG BILTON: Noting the audience I am in, the environment I am in, sorry, no problem with the audience, the integration of long-range strike weapons across more air platforms, if I could do that faster, that builds concurrency and that is in the plan, it is typical operator, it is not happening fast enough. Then in the space domain, our first of our Effecters will arrive towards the end of this year, the start of next year. We need a larger array of Effecters. Right now I would say to you the acceleration of high-energy weapons systems that could be used in space would be an area that I think would give us a significant step forward. The ability to actually achieve that technologically, I am probably skipping over a lot of steps but they would be the two off the top of my head.

JACINTA CARROLL: Music to our ears in Space Command. You talked about that extraordinary relationship and reliance on the services and on the back of your five years in this job, to date, what would you look for most from the services in supporting operations as we pivot to this extraordinary new focus from the National Defence Strategy? We need to do things in a focused way, what do you need from the services?

GREG BILTON: A good understanding of the preparedness of capabilities, which I think we do have, is clear and then an understanding of any employment

limitations and you do have those occasionally. I think we have got the right levels of communication between our services but what I would say is I get much better visibility with the componentry and arrangements, I am conscious there is no operations without well-trained, well-prepared and certified single-service capabilities. It is necessary for me to make sure that my demand signal is both achievable but also reasonable in that context, and it is probably for the service chiefs to give their views about whether I am a good interlocutor in those terms, but I would like to think that I take those things two account appropriately and properly and, as such, I have not been found - we could always do with more resources but I have not found a circumstance yet where I have not been supported in delivering an operational effect.

JACINTA CARROLL: Is there a question in the audience now?

>> Colin Clark, Defence. During the most recent Shoalwater, the combined Joint Operations Security Centre was set up to help share data among the allies. How useful was it? I understand the capability was left behind and are you developing it and putting money into it?

GREG BILTON: Yes, good question. I don't know how much money we are putting into it but it was another step forward in us learning how to properly use data to enhance decision-making, so I was particularly grateful for the output. I just will have to come back to you, I am not sure how much is being invested in that capability ongoing and, I apologise, I don't have it off the top of my head.

JACINTA CARROLL: Thank you. I will go to a question that we have online now. It pitches up to the National Defence Strategy, the National Defence Approach that is called out for Australia now. The question is "Does Australia have a coordinated National Command Structure with the necessary relationships, authorities and agencies to effect this national approach, to support it?"

GREG BILTON: I don't think it is in place yet. It is in discussion. It is a challenging conversation about how you effectively bring all government agencies

together in a unified way, with a unity of purpose around a challenge like homeland defence is one example. There are mechanisms that are in place that certainly form part of it and you see them play out when the government and the nation responds to national disasters and other crises, so there is an absolute foundation and I would make the observation that in crisis, we are actually pretty good at coordinating. Where we struggle, and where we have got to work as a whole of government enterprise is actually normalising the relationship, so it is every day that we're operating under that sort of model. That's probably the next goal, I know people want to do this, I know there is various, I guess, initiatives. I look at something like the Office of the Pacific as a really good example of day-to-day coordination of Australian Government efforts to promote and protect its national interests across the south-west Pacific. That is a good example of a model. Is that as effective as it should be yet? No, it is a harsh judgement but it is the right step.