

How Modern Warfare Requires a Whole-of-Nation Approach

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Introduction

Modern warfare is no longer confined to the battlefield; it demands the full weight of a nation. This blog will examine the national pivot towards war as a whole-of-society undertaking and outline what Australia can draw from these examples to strengthen its fighting depth. I will discuss the lessons identified in the Russia-Ukraine war and the Middle East, specifically the 12-Day War and Operation Epic Fury. I will then analyse what Australia can learn in order to develop fighting depth, enhance resilience, and prepare for war during a strategic autumn.

Australian Strategic Context

Australia's strategic circumstances are the most complex they have been since World War II, and as Chief of Air Force, Air Marshal Stephen Chappell has described, this period for Australia is a "strategic autumn". A period of deteriorating conditions and competition, but not yet open conflict. A time for preparation, investment, and innovation for the defence of the nation. Strategic autumn is perhaps the last opportunity to build fighting depth across time, space, and posture—the redundancy and resilience Australia will need—before the conditions that make preparation possible give way to the conditions that demand it. Yet, to build fighting depth requires more than increasing defence spending, acquiring new systems, or rapid recruitment of personnel. It requires a whole-of-society shift in mindset, an understanding that national defence is not the responsibility of the ADF alone but a whole-of-government, whole-of-nation endeavour.

Twenty-first century warfare has been characterised by its persistence, multi-domain operations, and fusion with the civilian sphere. Space operations, cyber operations, information campaigns, economic coercion, and long-range precision strike capabilities have expanded the battlespace beyond traditional military boundaries. Middle powers are now caught between competing great powers willing and capable of shaping their strategic environment without kinetic effects, while also preparing for high-intensity conflict that can rapidly deplete limited military stockpiles and overwhelm a constrained and non-diverse industrial base. Recent conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East underscore the need for Australia to prepare for the dual challenge of protracted attrition and rapid, high-intensity escalation.

Lessons from Ukraine

Ukraine's ability to withstand a larger, more technologically advanced adversary does not hinge on battlefield tactics alone. It has depended on the resilience of the population, national mobilisation, international partners, rapid adaptation, innovation, and the implementation of lessons learned in real time. The war has demonstrated consumption rates of modern conflict

reminiscent of World War I. Artillery shells, drones, jets, missiles, armoured vehicles, and, tragically, personnel are depleted at a pace that would overwhelm the stockpiles of most middle powers within weeks. Ukraine has demonstrated the criticality of decentralised innovation, civilian-military collaboration, and the strategic value of a population mentally prepared for hardship and resolute in expressing the will of the Ukrainian people.

The lesson Australia can draw from this conflict is the necessity of transforming military capability into a national capability, sustained by the convergence of industry, the fusion of civilian-military institutions, the economy, and society, rather than the ADF alone. Steps towards this are already underway through the National Air Power Enterprise (Australian Defence Force, 2025, p. 18), but they must be matched with deliberate and parallel investment in sovereign industrial depth—particularly in munitions production, fuel production, aircraft maintenance and manufacturing, and all aspects of air power sustainment—to enable Australia to endure the demands of modern conflict without reliance on vulnerable external supply chains. This will build the fighting depth required to withstand the opening phases of conflict and remain operationally credible long enough for allies to assist. National endurance, not just advanced platforms, will define Australia’s ability to deter, respond, and survive in a complex and contested Indo-Pacific.

Lessons from the Middle East

During the Air and Space Power Conference 2026, Dr Peter Layton discussed the challenges and advantages of emerging heterogeneous air power models in terms of scalability, mass, and resilience. Operation Epic Fury, while different in scale and context to Ukraine, offers a further perspective on the demands of modern conflict. It demonstrated that even wealthy, well-resourced Gulf states can struggle to sustain high-tempo operations without diverse and resilient supply chains. The opening weeks of Operation Epic Fury highlighted how quickly expensive munitions are consumed compared to inexpensive drones, and how dependent many Gulf states remain on overseas suppliers to replenish materiel—serving as a sobering reminder that wealth does not automatically translate into military prowess or wartime endurance.

Where Gulf states illustrate the dangers of wealth without resilience, Iran offers an instructive counterpoint: determined, decentralised preparation can enable sustained operations even against a larger and more sophisticated adversary. The 12-Day War in 2025 between Israel and Iran demonstrated to Iran the importance of hardened military logistics networks. Underground tunnels and shelters, dispersed munition factories and stockpiles, and decentralised command and control networks have enabled Iran to continue posing a credible military threat to the United States, Israel, and surrounding Gulf states.

Implementing Lessons in an Australian Context

From the Air and Space Power Conference 2026, a clear takeaway emerges for Australia. Australia should harden and disperse its defence infrastructure through protected fuel storage, distributed airbases, fortified logistics hubs, and resilient, decentralised command networks to enable sustained air operations even under prolonged attack. The conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East show the vulnerability created by centralised, above-ground infrastructure and fragile supply chains. While Iran’s model is not one Australia would emulate politically or ideologically, the structural lesson is clear: hardened and dispersed infrastructure enables operational continuity under sustained attack. These examples underscore that survivability and agile continuity of operations are essential for a geographically vast yet lightly populated nation such as Australia.

To meet this challenge, Australia should invest in hardened, dispersed, and survivable defence infrastructure, including protected fuel storage, distributed airbases, underground or

fortified logistics hubs, and resilient command and control networks to ensure the ADF can continue generating air power in the face of sustained attack or disruption.

So what does this mean for us every day?

Fighting depth is ultimately a human endeavour. It is worth pausing to ask: if your unit were ordered to disperse tomorrow, would you be ready? Do you possess the technical skills, initiative, and fortitude that distributed, high-tempo operations will demand?

If you answered no, on Monday ask your commander one concrete question such as: “Where would we actually disperse to, what would we take with us in the first 24 hours, and what do we already assume will still work that probably won’t?” then volunteer to run a short whiteboard walk-through or table-top to expose gaps in people, comms, fuel, or permissions.

If you answered yes, on Monday deliberately spread that readiness by pulling one junior aviator into planning or debriefs, talking them through the “why” behind decisions. Alternatively, in routine unit training set a simple rule like removing one assumed capability, like secure communications such as emails, and forcing the team to adapt around it.

Every RAAF aviator should consider what skills they are developing today that will matter when conditions change. Dispersal, hardening, and sovereign sustainment only succeed if the people executing them are prepared, adaptable, and ready to operate beyond the comfort of established bases and predictable supply chains. Strategic autumn makes the requirement for the multi-skilled aviator undeniable, and the strong foundation already built across the RAAF means that accelerating this development is both urgent and achievable.

References

Australian Defence Force. (2025). *Concept ASPECT Ed 1*. Air and Space Power Centre.
<https://airpower.airforce.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-08/Concept%20ASPECT%20Ed%201.pdf>