



## Order of Australia Association – Australian Defence Force Oration by the Chief of the Defence

25 November 2025

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Ladies and gentlemen, it's wonderful to be with you tonight. I particularly am grateful for Andrew [Phelan AM, Chair of the ACT Branch] and Mick [Crane DSC AM, ACT Branch Nominated Director]. I know I have been a moving target in trying to lock down this date with the normal commitments that seem to crowd out the end-of-the-year period, and we've got the delight of Senate Estimates coming up again next week, so thank you for the opportunity, Mick and Andrew, to be here for what is a really important topic.

I will come to what I want to talk about and why in just a moment, but if I could first acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we are meeting here tonight, the *Ngunnawal* people. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging, and also recognise the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who have served and continue to serve in the defence of our nation.

Tonight, what I would like to talk to you about is the transformation of your Defence Force to meet the strategic circumstances that our nation needs. I particularly chose that topic because there has been quite a bit written, there have been many commentators offering a view of Defence and particularly of the ADF at the moment. I'd characterise some of that as well informed, not all of it, so what I hope to do this evening is to give you some insight into what we're thinking, how we are reacting to it, what we're learning from conflicts like Ukraine and others that are occurring around the world. And then I very much look forward, and I won't speak for much more than 20 minutes or so, to the questions that are on your mind and the opportunity to have that conversation with you.





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If I can start with a characterisation of where do we nationally find ourselves in looking at the world and the region that we are in. Mick challenged me then to describe 'Strategic Stewardship'; that might be another way of saying I go to a lot of meetings. But the benefit of going to a lot of meetings is that I get wonderful insights from, of course our intelligence agencies, the other national security partners that we have here, academia, think tanks and the international component of the role that I have as the Chief. So an opportunity to absorb quite a bit of both the Australian view and the view of others of the environment that we are in, and of others of our place in that environment.

Perhaps a few facts for you, and I don't think many of these will surprise you, but they are worth repeating for you. We do assess that we are in an ever-evolving and contested strategic environment. The international system that we are a part of is more connected than ever before, and of course that's brought to us many benefits – economic growth, cultural exchange, rapid industrial and technological innovation – all of which we see in different parts of our society.

But that interconnectedness also has serious implications for our national security. Particularly our supply chains, we remember the COVID pandemic experience well; our national resilience, you hear DG ASIO talking about some of the features of the environment in which our domestic security is in; and of course from a military perspective, our view of the vulnerability to military effects both physical and non-physical, or in other words we would say kinetic and non-kinetic.

The interesting fact, and I don't think this has been given the recognition or insight yet that it deserves, but in 2024 more countries were in conflict than at any time since the end of the Second World War, and that concerning resurgence of state-on-state conflict of course has continued through what we have seen in 2025. Israel–Iran, India–Pakistan, recently in our region Cambodia and Thailand, and of course that ongoing war that we see between Russia and Ukraine.





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So state-on-state conflict is very much back in the environment in which we think we are dealing with.

For our perspective, technological advancements, particularly in cyber, long-range strike and more available autonomous systems – often called uncrewed or unmanned systems – mean the geographic boundaries that Australia has been able to rely upon for our security no longer offer us significant protection. Our reliance on space and cyber domains, which underpin nearly every aspect of our modern lives, also introduce further vulnerabilities. Lacking physical borders and with a relatively low barrier to entry, the domains of space and cyber expose our trade routes, our military assets, our critical infrastructure to threats from both state and non-state actors.

As a result of the contemporary environment we find ourselves in, we can no longer rely on a 10-year warning time, and many of you who have served that are in this room will well remember the security blanket that goes with a 10-year warning time. You can change many things when you have the luxury of 10-years – some of our equipment, some of our training, the degree to which we prioritise current preparedness against future force requirements. When that security blanket of 10 years was removed from us, first in 2020 and then reinforced in 2023, in Defence we had to think differently. So those two characteristics or realities have had a significant impact on Defence planning.

What has our response to this been?

Well it's been characterised by the term 'National Defence' – a coordinated, whole-of-government and whole-of-nation endeavour that recognises safeguarding our national interests requires the use of all arms of national power. To protect our security, develop our national resilience and grow a workforce and skills base requires close cooperation and partnership between Defence, other government agencies, industry, academia and our community. A national approach to defence.





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It also requires integrated statecraft, and fostering partnerships with our allies and partners. As a middle power dependent on maritime trade, Australia benefits of course from the free and open Indo-Pacific, and a stable and rules-based international system. Accordingly, Australia works to continue with likeminded partners to uphold those international rules, norms and laws through dialogue – not force. We are also deepening our relationships with regional partners, and you've recently seen the historic Pukpuk Treaty with Papua New Guinea and the recently announced bilateral security treaty with Indonesia being the two most recent examples.

So what does it all mean for the Australian Defence Force?

As this, the strategic environment, changes and technology advances, it is vital for Defence to continue to change and evolve so that the force-in-being, today's force, can deter conflict now and the force-in-the future, the one that we are developing, can achieve deterrence in the future. My priority as the CDF is to ensure the ADF is ready and capable of defending Australia in both those time periods. I am fortunate to bring, and Mick was kind enough to allude to it, some of my varied operational experience and the command experience I have had in multiple roles. I have lived the transition that the ADF has been making and we are unquestionably a better force for the transition that we have been going through.

The organisation that exists today is vastly different from the one that I joined almost five decades ago. Defence has gone through, and in the lifetime of many of you here, a transition from a joint force through to a force that integrates much more closely in the way that we work. Not just in the uniform component, but with the Australian Public Service here, and of course the contractors and many others that actually form the Department of Defence in its entirety. In the 2023 Defence Strategic Review, and then reinforced in our 2024 National Defence Strategy, we are building a focused, integrated force. We might explore some of that in the Q&A.





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Through what we call the Integrated Investment Program, or our future capability program, the Government is prioritising the rapid introduction of next-generation technologies to transform the ADF over the medium to long-term. That's been quite a deliberate choice of strategy, recognising the Defence Force that we were was no longer fit for purpose for the environment in which we'd found ourselves. At the same time, the ADF must remain ready, well maintained, and sustainably supported to meet current and emerging challenges.

As a maritime nation, Australia's economic growth is tied to the economic opportunities afforded by maritime trade, and the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific region. As a result, investment in maritime capabilities comprise 38 per cent of our capability plan over the next decade.

This is a substantial re-allocation of resources and demonstrates the importance Defence has placed on all three Services, and enablers like Joint Capabilities Group, to achieve effect by each of them in the maritime domain. That is what a focused force looks like.

Undersea warfare forms a substantial portion of these investments, the most significant investment being the now well-publicised acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines under what is called AUKUS Pillar I. Australia's largest-ever commitment to military capability, industrial capacity and workforce development is what that submarine project means.

Why are we spending that much money on a single capability?

Well of course because submarines are versatile, they are multi-purpose. They offer defence planners incredible flexibility to achieve effects in anti-submarine warfare, land and sea-based strike, mine-laying, intelligence collection and special force deployments.





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I know that I, like many others in the room who have been responsible for operational planning, recognise the enormity of the challenge when you know you have a legitimate submarine presence and the way it makes you reconsider the military options that we offer to Government.

In parallel, Defence is modernising and enhancing the lethality of Navy's surface fleet through the introduction of the Mogami-class frigates – an enormous decision we have taken to work with Japan – upgrades to Hobart-class destroyers and of course the acquisition of Hunter-class frigates.

We are also investing in advanced maritime strike capabilities. Since July 2024, so just a period of a little over one year, Navy has successfully fired the Naval Strike Missile, that is the Harpoon missile replacement; the Standard Missile 6, the most advanced air defence weapon that we have offered or operated in the ADF inventory; and of course the Tomahawk missile very late last year, demonstrating our capability to project power and defend Australia's interests at range.

Uncrewed systems provide the means for us to generate mass, and of course, to rapidly change technology in a way some of our major hardware platforms are much less readily able to do so. Just last month Navy successfully launched and recovered the Integrator system, its newest uncrewed aircraft system that will provide airborne surveillance. Integrator progressed from concept to first flight in just six months, demonstrating our commitment to delivering capability at speed and scale. That complements other recent decisions, the Ghost Shark fleet which will significantly enhance Navy's undersea warfare capability. Ghost Shark offers a long-range autonomous capability for intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and strike. Both the Ghost Shark, BlueBottle – another uncrewed system in the maritime domain – and Integrator mark a major step forward in our use of autonomous and uncrewed systems.





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While Navy plays a central role in securing the maritime domain, it is not the only Service contributing to this mission.

Army is undergoing the most significant transformation of any of the three Services. In addition to its strategic shift to northern bases, Army is investing heavily in a larger, more capable littoral maritime fleet and significant long-range strike capabilities. Construction of the first Landing Craft Medium and Heavy will begin in the near term. Army will soon operate a larger amphibious vessel fleet than Navy does.

During Exercise Talisman Sabre this year, Army successfully launched its first Precision Strike Missile, while 16 Regiment – an air-defence regiment – conducted its launch of the brand new NASAMS air-defence system. Through these capabilities, Army will play a larger role in the maritime domain than it has ever preformed before. And I tell my Navy colleagues – and a number of them here with me have grown up in an environment where Navy was very used to being at the end of a radio answering a call for land-based fires – Navy will get used to calling into Army for maritime-based fires to support it in the maritime fight.

Army is also investing in the acquisition of low-cost, small, uncrewed aerial systems, such as the Integrator system as Navy is doing, as well as uncrewed ground vehicles to enhance operational effectiveness and reduce risks to people. Exercise Talisman Sabre just past saw Army test some of its uncrewed systems, including the Modular Robotic Vehicle fleet – which can be remotely controlled by soldiers over a kilometre away from their vehicles – and first-person view drones with a range of 20 kilometres in a combat field environment for the very first time.

If we look to the air, Air Force is expanding its operational capabilities to enable extended surveillance and enhanced long-range strike. Earlier this year, Air Force commenced our operational test and evaluation of the MQ-4 Triton, a remotely piloted aircraft system about the size of a 737, that delivers persistent, long-range maritime surveillance as a sovereign controlled system.





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Additionally, the MQ-28 Ghost Bat, the first military aircraft to be designed and manufactured in Australia in over 50 years, has successfully completed a capability demonstration and is scheduled to conduct a weapon firing before the end of this year. These platforms, once in full operational service, will provide a disproportionate increase to the combat and surveillance effect that Air Force can generate, and help offset the relatively small size of the ADF.

Air Force is also investing in long-range strike, and has recently fired the Long Range Anti-Ship Missile from an F-18 Super Hornet in March of this year. That system, which offers the longest range that we will have been able to apply maritime strike in the air domain, will be integrated into Poseidon and the F-35 Lightning.

Space and cyber domains are also warfighting domains in their own right and of course are critical enablers to the three environmental domains. These domains deliver their own military effects and underpin essential capabilities, such as command and control, intelligence, meteorological forecasting, and positioning and navigation. The transfer of single-service cyber warfare units into a centralised, joint Cyber Command – which we did almost twelve months ago – inside Joint Capabilities Group, alongside Space Command, are examples of the steps Defence is taking to enable an integrated, focused force. As with the physical domains, Defence needs to develop and sustain these capabilities to ensure access for Australia when we need it, and to deny our potential adversaries freedom of use of space and cyber when they may seek to use it.

To deter conflict and maintain a credible edge, it is vital that the ADF introduces new capabilities early in anticipation of these new, emerging threats. Defence's 2024 Innovation, Science and Technology Strategy identifies priority technologies for Defence, such as hypersonics, directed energy, trusted autonomy, quantum systems, information warfare and long-range strike.





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Supporting the development and acquisition of these technologies is ASCA, the Advanced Strategic Capabilities Accelerator, which is receiving up to \$3.8 billion over the next decade to fast-track solutions to Defence's most complex capability challenges. We are also working with our international partners through AUKUS Pillar II to develop advanced capabilities in undersea and seabed warfare, autonomous systems, cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum, hypersonics and electronic warfare. All to ensure that we continue to pursue technological innovation and strategic capabilities for our deterrence.

Our force posture is also undergoing a significant transition, with the focus shifting to our northern bases. In the future, the ADF will be able to sustain high-intensity operations from northern Australia, supported by sovereign intelligence, targeting and communication systems, more resilient logistics networks, and increased critical stores and reserves. This will be the first time since the Second World War that the ADF prepares to use Australian territory to conduct large-scale combat operations to defend, project force and sustain force in our region.

Our relationships with our allies and partners are another critical element to our approach. In particular, we are increasing the level and complexity of activities and engagements with partner forces, building both interoperability and people-to-people links. I regularly remind the force that Australia has never gone to war by ourselves.

That's a good thing, but it does mean we need to develop that capability and relationships with partners.

This year alone, the iteration of Talisman Sabre was the largest and most complex activity we have performed. It had over 40,000 participants from 19 nations, and for the first time we conducted an activity outside of Australia as a part of that exercise – in that occasion located in Papua New Guinea.





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The ADF has also participated in Exercise Keris Woomera, our largest activity with Indonesia, and recently, or in mid-year this year, Exercise Alon, our largest activity with the Philippines conducted on the islands of Luzon and Palawan, of course on the boundary of the South China Sea.

Throughout the year we have also supported French and United Kingdom carrier strike groups as they have entered the Indo-Pacific region and have supported our national objectives alongside their own.

Supporting all of our efforts, are our people. The quality of Australian sailors, soldiers and aviators have always been at the core of our combat effectiveness. As such, the recruitment, retention and growth of a highly-skilled workforce remains a priority for Defence. We've seen positive signs recently with our recruitment and retention efforts. In the last financial year we had 7,059 full-time enlistments, the highest intake we've achieved in 15 years, and as of 1 September the permanent ADF separation rate, or the rate at which people leave the force, was 7.6 per cent, significantly lower than the 10-year average of 9.5 per cent. Nevertheless, and these are good signs, we need to continue to explore improvements that will enable us to meet our workforce targets, as our people do remain key to a strong, prepared and integrated force.

If I can conclude – we are rapidly approaching 2026, and it's important to remember that the National Defence Strategy is now revised on a biennial cycle. So the next strategy will be produced and we are working on it now. Our assessment largely is that the views that we formed in 2024 remain relevant, and the plan that we have is largely the right plan for the Defence Force and the country. But there are elements of it that we will seek to update in the work that we are providing to the Government.

The evolution that we're on of course doesn't just depend on our investment in capabilities, but also on a people-first approach that empowers our workforce to meet the challenges that they have.





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In an era of uncertainty, characterised by rapid technology change, Defence must work with Government, with industry, with academia, with our community and of course with our international partners to prepare for that future.

If we can do so successfully, we will ensure that the force that we have is able to deter conflict occurring in our near region, and the force that we are developing will enable us to achieve that same effect in the future so that our country is safe, secure and able to live the lives that we seek.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

