

Deterrence by design

A framework for Australia's next National Defence Strategy



'DETERRENCE BY DESIGN' should be the organising logic of Australia's forthcoming National Defence Strategy. Not as a rhetorical device, but as a disciplined approach to aligning capability, readiness and strategic intent. At its core, the concept recognises that deterrence is not simply declared; it is constructed through a force that is demonstrably ready, resilient and able to impose cost on an enemy immediately. In an era defined by compressed warning times and persistent competition, deterrence must be visible in the present, not deferred to the 2030s.

Australia's current trajectory risks a widening gap between strategic

ambition and operational reality. The language of deterrence by denial is now well embedded, but the force required to give that concept credibility, particularly in the near term, remains uneven. Too much of the current investment profile is weighted toward future capability, while the 'fight tonight' posture remains underdeveloped. Deterrence by design demands a recalibration: a deliberate prioritisation of readiness, deployability and sustainment in the immediate term.

Readiness, in this context, is not simply a measure of force availability; it is a function of integration, stockpiles, training and command responsiveness. A force that exists on paper, or in

ABOVE: Ultimately, the ADF will deploy into combat with the force it has in place and can sustain today, rather than one planned for future years. Image: Aust DoD



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limited quantity, does not deter. What matters is whether it can be brought to bear quickly, sustained under pressure and integrated across domains. This places a premium on fully realised capabilities, long-range strike systems that are not only acquired but stocked and networked; integrated air and missile defence that can protect key nodes and deployed forces; and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance architectures that provide persistent awareness and targeting fidelity. These are not abstract future requirements, but rather the baseline for credible deterrence now.

A passing but important observation sits beneath this: modern readiness is underpinned by logistics resilience, including fuel security. While not the central issue, it remains a critical enabler. Without assured access to energy and supply chains, even the most advanced force will struggle to sustain operations. Deterrence by design, therefore, requires that these enabling systems are sufficiently robust to support high-tempo operations, particularly under contested conditions.

Equally important is the question of depth. Australia's force structure still reflects, in many areas, an efficiency-driven model that assumes limited-duration operations and secure lines of support. That assumption no longer holds. A credible deterrent must be able to withstand disruption, whether through cyberattacks, long-range strikes or grey-zone interference and continue to operate. This requires redundancy in command and control systems, dispersion of key assets and sufficient munitions and critical component stockpiles to sustain operations. Depth is not

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excess; it is the foundation of resilience in a contested environment.

The implications of these gaps become most apparent when considering contingency operations beyond Australia's immediate approaches, including in the Gulf. While the Indo-Pacific remains the primary theatre, Australia's interests are global and its historical pattern of contributions to coalition operations in the Middle East underscores this reality. At present, however, the Australian Defence Force's ability to generate and sustain meaningful combat power at range is constrained. Limitations in naval sustainment, integrated air defence and logistics capacity reduce both the scale and duration of any deployment. In a high-threat environment, these constraints would be quickly exposed.

Deterrence by design requires that such contingencies not be treated as discretionary. Rather, they should inform force design choices, ensuring that Australia retains the capacity to project

force, protect sea lines of communication and integrate effectively with coalition partners. This is not about preparing for every possible scenario, but about ensuring that the force is sufficiently adaptable and robust to operate across a spectrum of likely contingencies.

Ultimately, deterrence by design is about coherence and credibility. It forces a discipline on defence planning that prioritises what can be delivered and employed now, while still investing in the future. It demands that capability decisions are tested against a simple question: does this contribute to a force that can fight tonight and sustain operations under pressure?

For Australia, the answer will define the credibility of its deterrence posture. A strategy that emphasises future capability at the expense of present readiness risks creating a force that is impressive in concept but fragile in execution. Deterrence, in the end, is judged not by what is planned, but by what is ready. **DTR**