Fight tonight

What does the ADF need now to fight the war that might come earlier than expected? *Ian Langford* provides some answers.

ALLIANCE INTEGRATION: A US Air Force B-1B Lancer long-range bomber departs from RAAF Base Darwin during Exercise Diamond Storm 2022. *Image: Aust DoD*

AUSTRALIA'S DEFENCE PLANNERS must urgently recalibrate their focus from the 2030+ 'future force' outlined in the *2024 National Defence Strategy* (NDS) to a more immediate requirement: building a force ready to 'fight tonight' in a potential conflict as early as 2026 – within the next 12 to 18 months.

Under such compressed timelines, traditional acquisition pipelines – spanning years and in some cases more than a decade – become untenable. Consequently, the Australian

Ian Langford
Defence Analysist
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Defence Force (ADF) must prioritise rapid procurement of capabilities that can be integrated swiftly, enhance survivability in contested environments and exploit asymmetric advantages.

To this end, four interlocking imperatives emerge: layered air defence, stealth enablers, asymmetric strike options and reinforced alliance integration.

First and foremost, strengthening **air defence** is essential. Existing systems, such as the static and mobile capabilities of the ADF's integrated air defence architecture, must be swiftly augmented. Over the next 12 to 18 months, Canberra could accelerate the acquisition of additional National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS) equipped with the AIM-120 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missile – Extended Range (AMRAAM-ER) to address coverage gaps around key bases in northern Australia, north Queensland and down the east coast of Australia. These would include Darwin, and strategically vital nodes like RAAF Base Tindal, Townsville, RAAF Base Williamtown in Newcastle and Garden Island in Sydney.

In addition to NASAMS, the urgent procurement of ship-borne air defence missiles, such as the SM-6 or SM-2 Block IIIC for the Hobart-class destroyers, would enhance the ability of naval task forces to defend against high-end cruise missile threats. By layering medium-range NASAMS and naval Aegis-derived interceptors, the ADF can create overlapping coverage that complicates an adversary's calculations.

Stealth, though predominantly associated with fifth-generation fighters, must be reframed pragmatically for a rapid-response context. The acquisition of additional F-35A Joint Strike Fighters is unlikely to be possible within the 12 to 18-month window, but the ADF can pursue interim stealth enablers. For example, building an inventory of low-cost unmanned combat air vehicles (UCAV) armed with Joint Direct Attack Munitions or low-observable coatings would allow Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) F/A-18F Super Hornets to emulate stealth attributes during ingress and egress. Moreover, leasing or fast-tracking the acquisition of MQ-9B SkyGuardian remotely piloted aircraft, which incorporate reduced radar cross-section features and high-altitude endurance, could provide intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance and precision strike capabilities without waiting for full fifth-generation aircraft production lines.

Similarly, investing in expendable swarming drones or 'loyal wingman' program accelerants such as Boeing's MQ-28A Ghost Bat UCAV would inject a low-signature, attritable force multiplier into both strike and reconnaissance roles.

Asymmetry is the third pillar of a fight-tonight posture. Faced with an adversary that wields numerically superior

AIR DEFENCE: An immediate follow-on order for NASAMS, in both ground-fired and vehicle-mounted (shown) configurations, and coupled with the longer-range AMRAAM-ER interceptor, is essential to provide protection for critical ADF nodes across northern and eastern Australia. *Image: DTR*

conventional forces and a growing long-range missile arsenal, Australia must adopt cost-imposing, irregular approaches. The rapid fielding of HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket System) – just entered ADF service and still in limited numbers – must be scaled up immediately. Additional HIMARS launchers and rounds, including Extended Range GMLRS and Precision Strike Missile Increment 1, would enable stand-off strikes against supply nodes, enemy airfields and missile brigades.

On the maritime front, land-based anti-ship missile batteries need to be acquired without delay. Perhaps parking inconspicuous containerised Naval Strike Missiles on remote islands and in northern coastal areas needs to be investigated. This would make an opposing naval commander think

STEALTH: An MQ-28A Ghost Bat UCAV on the tarmac at RAAF Base Tindal as an F-35A Lightning II taxis after a sortie during Exercise Carlsbad in early April 2025. *Image: Aust DoD*

'FIGHT TONIGHT' CAPABILITES – LANGFORD'S LIST

Air Defence	Stealth	Asymmetry	Alliance Integration
Extra NASAMS with AMRAAM-ER	Low-cost UCAVs	Additional HIMARS for ER-GMLRS and PrSM Inc 1	THAAD & Patriot PAC-2/PAC-3
SM-6/SM-2 Block IIIC	MQ-28A Ghost Bat	Coastal and OTHR radars	Type 12 LBMS
	MQ-9B SkyGuardian	Sea Hunter USVs	B-52/B-1B Lancer bombers

carefully about making naval incursions into Australian waters. Simultaneously, advanced coastal and over-the-horizon surveillance radars linked to distributed missile cells would enhance sea denial. Bolstering cyber-electronic warfare units with off-the-shelf jamming pods and network-denial tools can neutralise adversary sensors and marginalise high-value targets.

In addition to kinetic asymmetry, non-kinetic capabilities must be rapidly scaled. The ADF should accelerate procurement of lethal autonomous systems that can be programmed for maritime or land surveillance and harassment missions. Examples include Sea Hunter–class unmanned surface vessels and small UAVs with electronic jammers to blind adversary communications. Expanding offensive cyber operations and procuring modular cyber-operations toolkits will support rapid effects. Joint training exercises with Five Eyes counterparts and partner-provided intelligence support packages will further enhance readiness.

ALLIANCE INTEGRATION: A US Army THAAD launcher deployed to Israel in March 2019. Canberra could readily request rotations of THAAD batteries into northern hubs such as Darwin. *Image: US Air Force*

The fourth pillar, **alliance integration,** is non-negotiable. Under a fight-tonight construct, Australia should seek arrangements for rotating US Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) batteries into Darwin and integrating US Marine Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) across northern islands. Similar arrangements should be made with the Japan Ground Self Defense Force's Type 12 land-based anti-ship missiles, co-located with Australian 'Coastal Strike Units', to enhance burden sharing.

In the air domain, securing B-52 or B-1B Lancer deployments to RAAF northern bases would enable true long-range strike options. At sea, combined task group protocols with the US Navy's Pacific Fleet would reinforce distributed lethality and interoperability.

But challenges persist. Global defence supply chains – particularly for semi-conductors, rocket motors and missile precision guidance kits – are fragile. Wartime allocation agreements and tapping allied stockpiles may require accepting second-tier systems like Patriot PAC-2 over PAC-3 if necessary. Training must also adapt: live, virtual and constructive simulation environments should be shared with allies to compress learning cycles.

Reallocation of defence budgets to fund fight-tonight capabilities will require political resolve and public support. Parliamentary oversight must be balanced against urgency, while industry guidance and orders on priority platforms and production ramp-ups must be issued swiftly.

Australia must also quickly invest in sovereign defence capability: munitions manufacturing, missile boat conversions, cyber and electronic warfare talent and domestic shipbuilding yards. Contingency plans for graduated allied reliance are essential to avoid being caught off guard.

Finally, realistic multi-domain wargames with allies will validate the fight-tonight force. These exercises must stress rapid decision-making, contested communications and hybrid threats so that the ADF is ready not in theory, but in action. DTR