Integrate or die

AUSTRALIA'S FUTURE JOINT force will live or die on systems integration. Not rhetoric about 'fifth-gen enabled', but real, tangible integration between sensors, decision-maker and shooters from undersea to outer space. Three near-term decisions: Air 6500, Land 8113 Phase 2 and Land 156's Systems Integration Partner (SIP), will either be hardwired into the force, or consign us to another cycle of promise without effect.

Long-range fires are the sharp end of deterrence by denial, but range without integration is a paper sword. Land 8113 Phase 2 is the hinge. The Government has already set the direction for a second long-range fires regiment and a land-based maritime strike capability, with the options being a variant of a land attack missile or a purpose-built maritime strike missile. The choice here is less about brand and more about architecture: can the selected system ingest joint targeting data at speed, survive in a contested electromagnetic spectrum and deliver kill-web effects from the same fire unit against ships today and hardened land targets tomorrow? The recent radar and facilities moves, quiet but consequential, point to an Army that understands long-range fires are a system-of-systems, not just a launcher count.

Joint command and control is the keystone. The Air 6500 Phase 1 Joint Air Battle Management System is intended to be the brain stem of an integrated air and missile defence enterprise, fusing tracks from Air Force, Navy and Army, and arbitrating weapons-target pairing across domains. Get this right and Australian commanders gain time: seconds

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that decide whether an inbound threat is detected, classified, assigned and killed. Get it wrong and we field exquisite point solutions that cannot see or serve one another. The program's design intent is sound: an open, modular, government-owned architecture, upgraded in rapid spirals and interoperable with allies. What industry needs now is schedule clarity and discipline on 'minimum viable integration', so capability arrives in increments, not in one heroic drop at the end.

Air defence, though, is where the innovation edge must be sharpened. Land 156 is not just a program to design a counter-unmanned systems (C-UAS) capability; it is the crucible for Defence to prove it can absorb and operationalise disruptive technology at speed. The old

model, which locks in a capability system for 25 years, is unfit for an environment where cheap drones and electronic attacks proliferate overnight. The first wave of contracts has wisely put hardware into the hands of operators to test, adapt and iterate. However, the real leap will come with the SIP, which must act less like a prime contractor and more like a venture accelerator, curating, fusing and fielding rapid innovations into the layered defence ecosystem.

Here, sovereignty and cost discipline cannot be an afterthought. Australia has learned the hard way that some in defence industry are content to invoice heavily for 'studies' or infrastructure access, while delivering little in the way of owned, transferable capability. The result is that Defence pays first, waits years and holds nothing in its hands at the end but a bill. A sovereign-minded SIP must invert this model: Australian Defence Force (ADF) problems first, Australian engineers at the core, costs tied to tangible output and every dollar spent leaving behind something that strengthens the force.

By contrast, sovereign small-medium sized enterprises are already showing what 'good' looks like. Small Australian firms have fielded counter-drone kits within months, not years, often at a fraction of the cost of extensive multinational studies. These systems may not carry glossy marketing, but they deliver: deployable sensors, modular effectors and proven results in operational testing. This is value for money in the truest sense: capability in the hands of soldiers, evolving at the same pace as the threat.

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The C-UAS mission is the litmus test. These technologies have already proven themselves in live conflict zones, detecting, tracking and neutralising hostile drones in real time. They offer both soft- and hard-kill effects, are modular and can scale from protecting small patrol bases to shielding major airfields. Most importantly, they evolve at the same pace as the threat: fast. If Defence cannot find a way to integrate these systems into Land 156 quickly and seamlessly, it will send a stark signal: that Australia's defence enterprise still struggles to translate innovation into operational advantage. Success, on the other hand, would demonstrate an entirely new rhythm of capability development: iterative, agile, sovereign and relevant to the operational fight of today, not the imagined fight of tomorrow.

The policy significance is clear. The National Defence Strategy demands an integrated, adaptable force that can deny, defend and deter under pressure. These three programs are the near-term crucibles. If the Government holds to open architectures, spiral delivery, genuine innovation pathways and a sovereign-first mindset, Australia's joint force will not just buy capability, but learn how to reinvent it in stride. Fail, and we risk paying more for less, with innovation trapped offshore and the ADF left holding the empty end of the bargain.

Integration is the decision. Sovereignty is the filter. Value for money is the measure. Counter-drone is the test. And the future of the joint force depends on passing all four. DTR