

# From Firepower to Thought Power

AS AUSTRALIA APPROACHES the release of the 2026 *National Defence Strategy* (NDS) and the updated *Integrated Investment Program* (IIP), the capability debate risks defaulting once again to platforms.

How many ships? How many aircraft? How many long-range missiles?

These are necessary questions, but they are no longer sufficient ones.

The character of warfare has shifted. The decisive advantage in modern conflict is not derived from platforms alone, but from the cognitive systems that connect them.

Command and control, air battle management, and integrated air and missile defence (IAMMD) are no longer supporting functions. They are the operational brain of the force. There is a useful reminder from Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1930s: "When the money stops, the thinking starts". The context was different, but the lesson remains relevant.

Resource constraints should force intellectual discipline. If funding is tightening, then force design matters even more. If the 2026 NDS is to be credible in an era of compressed timelines, missile saturation, drone swarms and contested information environments, cognition must move from an abstract concept to an embedded capability.

The Australian Defence Force's (ADF) future effectiveness will depend on how well it integrates sensing, decision-making and action into a coherent, resilient system. In high-intensity conflict, decision windows may be measured in seconds. The ability to fuse sensor data, classify threats, prioritise targets and allocate effects at tempo will determine whether platforms



survive long enough to matter.

IAMD provides the clearest illustration. We can procure interceptors and radars, but without a decision architecture capable of rapid classification, engagement authority and cross-domain co-ordination, the system becomes brittle. The same applies to air battle management. Possessing advanced aircraft is irrelevant if the joint battle management system cannot dynamically allocate them, share targeting data and maintain tempo under cyber or electronic attack.

The updated IIP must therefore treat cognition as a core element of force design. That means investment in decision-support systems, AI-enabled fusion, resilient networks, human-machine teaming and mission command frameworks built for degraded environments.



This is not a future problem. It is a now problem.

The ADF's adversaries are currently investing in ways to disrupt our decision-making cycles through cyber intrusions, electronic warfare and missile coercion. If our capability conversation in 2026 remains dominated by platforms rather than the cognitive architecture that integrates them, we risk building a force that is technologically advanced but operationally disjointed. The next phase of Defence reform must therefore move from firepower to thought power. Because in the wars that matter, the side that thinks fastest wins. **DTR**