Time to turbocharge GWEO

THE WORLD HAS now run short of the weapons that modern war consumes fastest.

Precision missiles, air-defence interceptors, long-range strike weapons and guided artillery are now subject to extended production queues. Ukraine, the Middle East and growing Indo-Pacific demand have exposed the uncomfortable truth that exquisite weapons cannot deter anyone if they exist only in procurement plans as vapourware or press release promises.

This should represent an extraordinary strategic and industrial opportunity for Australia. Instead, we continue to move with remarkably little alarm

The Guided Weapons and Explosive Ordnance (GWEO) enterprise was announced in 2021. A more detailed plan followed in 2024, supported by up to AUD$21 billion over a decade. There has been progress, including local Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System munitions assembly and initial agreements with major international manufacturers. But 5 years after the original announcement, and apart from Kongsberg Australia kicking off manufacture of Naval Strike Missiles and Joint Strike Missiles at its Newcastle facility next year, Australia remains closer to being an expert at assembling selected imported designs rather than establishing the sovereign, scalable weapons enterprise demanded by the strategic environment.

The problem is not a lack of companies, talent or industrial resources. Australia has innovative defence businesses, advanced manufacturers, engineers, explosive ordnance expertise, abundant energy and many of the critical minerals required for modern weapons. What remains missing is the national drive to connect these assets, underwrite demand and accept the commercial and technical risk involved in accelerating production.

ABOVE: In the 5 years since its inception, GWEO has delivered little in the way of added capability for the ADF and even less in sovereign manufacturing capacity for the nation. Time to get a move on.
Image: AI

Elsewhere, traditional defence primes are expanding factories and production lines, while neo-primes are collapsing the distance between design, testing, manufacture and battlefield adaptation. Australia still too often treats sovereign capability as a carefully managed procurement activity rather than an urgent national enterprise.

The same sluggishness is visible in robotics and autonomous systems. It is visible in sovereign artificial intelligence, where Australia risks becoming a consumer of foreign models, foreign computing infrastructure and foreign-controlled data architectures. These are not separate technology questions. Missiles, autonomous systems and AI are converging into the combat system of the future.

The Government has demonstrated through its critical minerals policies that it can move decisively when it chooses: investing directly, creating incentives, establishing strategic reserves and accepting market risk to shape an industry. The contrast with defence manufacturing is increasingly stark.

Leadership is ultimately the scarcest resource. Australia needs faster contracting, larger production commitments, export pathways, competitive prototyping and greater tolerance for failure. Not every investment will succeed. But in the present environment, the greatest risk is not moving too quickly. It is arriving late again, with money, announcements and ambition, but without the weapons, industrial depth or sovereign technology required when they matter most. DTR

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