



Submission No 12

Inquiry into Australian Defence Force Regional Air Superiority

:

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The Hon Bruce Scott, Chairman,
Defence Subcommittee,
Joint Standing Committee on foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Dear Mr Chairman,

Inquiry into Australian Defence Force Regional Air Superiority

The previous Defence Minister, in an address to the Australian Defence College, stated that the ADF:

- Must be capable of acting swiftly;
- Is more likely to be deployed well beyond Australia;
- Cannot 'do everything'; and that the
- Defence of Australia does not stop at the edge of the air-sea gap.

From an Air Superiority perspective, this means that strategic airlift and air-to-air refuelling are critical components of any effective force. The number of fighter aircraft which can be used in combat is effectively constrained by the number of aerial refuelling aircraft available to support them.

Air to air refuelling and strategic airlift capabilities must not only exist, but must be fully capable of deploying and supporting in combat the required forces or resources where and when needed.

The planned RAAF A330-200 based Tanker Force will comprise five aircraft with limited range and fuel offload capability and be capable of refuelling only a small number of fighter aircraft.¹

For the tanker force to be effective, it must be capable of supporting larger forces over a much greater distance. To satisfy this need, either significantly more A330 tankers or around half the additional number of B747 or similar large tanker aircraft are needed.

The B747 type tanker option offers the additional benefit of strategic transport capability². The current C-130 fleets and recently proposed C-17 or A400M fleet offer limited strategic capability, by virtue of small numbers, and no flexibility. There is also a significant risk exposure in having strategic airlift aircraft operate within any forward action zone. A much more effective strategy is to deploy larger transport aircraft to a forward strategic base and transfer the freight to smaller aircraft, such as the C-130, Caribou or Chinook, which operate into the action zone.

¹ From my perspective of experience in air to air refuelling planning in both the USAF and RAAF.

²A B747 can carry most payloads sized to fit into a C-130 transport, including many armoured vehicles, 4WDs and trucks, in addition to 463L military pallets and commercial pallets and containers.

It is worth noting that when strategic transport was required at very short notice over the past few years, Qantas had aircraft on the ground many hours before any military aircraft.

To the main point of my submission.

Australia is a small/medium national power with a significant strategic airlift and air to air refuelling need in support of diverse global and regional commitments.

The relatively small Australian population means that the use of any national resource must be optimised. Duplication of effort and resources is clearly not in the national interest, especially when the resources are limited and relatively expensive.

Sufficient strategic airlift is an example of a very expensive resource which is generally difficult to justify within traditional defence budgetary allocations.

As emphasised by the Minister, the ADF cannot do everything. The Australian airline industry has the experience, operational control and manpower resources to man and operate any strategic airlift requirement for the Australian Defence Force.

While ad-hoc arrangements between civil and military services have served the national interest well in the past, a formal and more structured approach would offer additional benefits in capability planning, timeliness and service fit, while continuing to contain and minimise costs.

This obvious synergy between the ADF and Australia's airlines should be exploited in terms of the national benefit.

In summary, Australia's existing and planned air to air refuelling and strategic airlift capability offer a token minimal capability. This is a consequence of historical defence funding priorities which did not focus on recently developed needs for significant regional or global reach. However, by utilising the capabilities and resources of the countries' airlines when the strategic need requires, this capability could be significantly enhanced to address most future operational scenarios.

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