

The Vernon Parker Oration: Address to the Australian Naval Institute Annual Dinner

7 May 2025

Admiral David Johnston, AC, RAN

Introduction

Good evening all; it is wonderful to see so many people here. I recognise shipmates, colleagues in many workplaces, more than a few people who have taught me many things over the course of my career, and collectively a wonderful group of friends.

It's a pleasure for me to have the opportunity to do the 2025 Vernon Parker oration. I do recognise the significance of the occasion, both with the appointment of a life member and on the 50th anniversary as well.

Can I add my acknowledgement, as we did at the start, to the traditional owners of the land, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging. And I also recognise the Indigenous Australians who have served and continue to serve in our defence force.

It's a great honour to be here, in part because of the respect that I have for the work that ANI do. I recognise Peter, both Peters, and those who set the work up before you. I would also recognise the importance of tonight for the Navy family: 7th of May marks the eve of the main conflict during the Battle of the Coral Sea. The battle's relevance to our contemporary circumstances is enduring, particularly the need to protect our sea lines of communication. Today, the range of modern capability doesn't require a potential adversary to control our northern approaches to undermine security in our country – and I might turn back to that theme in a little while.

Tonight what I'd like to do is discuss the contemporary international security environment and how we see it changing, what this change means for Australia, and how Defence is

responding to those circumstances. My remarks will complement an article that I have contributed to the *Australian Naval Review*, and I'm sure Peter would encourage me to encourage you all to get a copy of that once it becomes available.

The Contemporary International Security Environment

We are living in a changing world, and that might just be the greatest understatement that I offer you tonight.

For years now, the international system has been aggressively pushed and pulled between different visions of how it ought to be – between liberal democracy or authoritarianism, commercial globalisation or economic protectionism, and the ordering principles of rules and norms or the harsh reality of hard power.

This is fundamentally contests of values, and their historical realisation generally forms steadily over decades and then generates rapid change during a crisis.

In Europe, Russia has gradually extended its objective to achieve a sphere of influence. We saw this initially in the Caucasus throughout the early 2000s. Crimea was annexed more than a decade ago. European political institutions have been persistently undermined by Russia now for many years.

But it wasn't until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, now more than three years ago, that European states committed to significantly increasing their defence spending.

Since the invasion, Russian officials have threatened nuclear escalation and welcomed North Korean soldiers to reclaim Russian territory held by Ukraine – all of which makes a compelling case to demonstrate the regional interlinkages of security.

The rate of change often accelerates rapidly during a crisis. What previously seemed improbable becomes reality. For many Ukrainians, that is unfortunately brutal, distinctly unfair, and a sad, tragic reality.

The last decade in the Middle East has also been more volatile. As the then Chief of Joint Operations, I commanded counter-terrorism operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and the tail-end of operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

In the time since then, these conflicts have shifted and the region has changed significantly: civil war in Yemen; the Taliban's return in Afghanistan; regime change in Syria; and Israel's ongoing campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon.

Events in Europe and the Middle East are significant and affect our national interests, but our geographic priority is our region. It's here that the ADF is focused.

For more than a decade we've seen a steady shift in the balance of power and an ongoing revision of the norms that have previously underpinned our region's security and stability.

Maritime claimants in the South China Sea continue to bump into one another, in some cases quite aggressively. The risk and consequences of an accident or miscommunication remain serious. The potential for a Sino-American crisis and regional conflict has continued to increase.

And that's not all going on just, as we would know it, 'up top'. We've seen recent deployments 'down under', most notably the recent People's Liberation Army Navy task group that circumnavigated Australia.

No doubt you might be just a bit interested in how Defence responded.

I'll be succinct, and many of you have worked in operations and served in Defence, so have a good understanding of this. Defence was able to monitor that task group extensively in our northern approaches and right around the country. We employed a wide spectrum of methods, including, but not limited to, air and naval surveillance.

The task group was shadowed throughout their passage near our country. Concurrently other routine operations were maintained, comfortably within the capacity of the force.

Some commentators have clumsily confused the nature of the ADF's actions in February with the type of response that might be employed in a conflict. It is sufficient to say that these are very different scenarios and the options we would use would also be very different.

I would like to call out the New Zealand Defence Force's contribution – who provided a frigate, a tanker, and maritime patrol aircraft, their new P8s. That's indicative of the strength of us as partners – that we were able to coordinate at short notice, closely, to monitor the task group and shift responsibilities between the ADF and New Zealand Defence Force as we were operating together.

As an expanding blue-water navy, the PLA-N is employing these deployments and opportunities to expand its training, gain familiarity, and demonstrate its increasing capability and capacity. This deployment represents a pattern of behaviour that will increase. As China's maritime capabilities continue to develop, we should expect more vessels operating frequently near Australia.

As I mentioned earlier, change is often gradual until a crisis. We are observing this gradual process now in our region. Defence is actively working to avoid that crisis, while being suitably prepared and with the necessary capability to respond – which I'll come back to soon.

A Nation Girt by Sea

Simply observing that the international system is changing doesn't explain how Australia ought to respond to those changes. Unlike Hans Morgenthau's billiard balls, our identity and interests affect our behaviour.

Principally, I assert that Australia is fundamentally dependent on our sea lines of communication. Ninety-nine per cent of our international exports by volume are by sea, and a substantial proportion of domestic freight continues to rely on coastal shipping.¹ Ninety-nine per cent of our internet traffic passes through sea cables.

We are surrounded by three oceans and our vital organs are external to us, dependent on extensive connections and trade routes into Asia, America, the Middle East, and Europe.

Darwin is roughly 4000 kilometres from Taipei. Perth is a little more: 6000 kilometres. By contrast, Pearl Harbor is more than 8000 kilometres. We are central to the Indo-Pacific, and it's principally a maritime and littoral trade environment, home to more than half the world's population.

We seek security in our region, not from it. As the Defence Strategic Review made clear, 'the defence of Australia lies in the collective security of the Indo-Pacific, in the protection of our economic connection, and the maintenance of the global rules-based order'.

However, we have historically characterised ourselves as a continent.

Our national service memory, the military experiences we rightly revere, are generally drawn from the Army rather than the Navy – from the trenches of the First World War, then again to the Mediterranean theatre in the Second World War, to Korea, Malaya and Vietnam during the Cold War, and of course Iraq and Afghanistan since the turn of the century.

We recall Gallipoli, Tobruk, and Long Tan sooner than Cape Spada or the Coral Sea.

Our early culture also resonates with the poetry and paintings of the bush: the experiences of early pioneers, the flora and fauna that sustained them, and the ground that enriched them.

¹ 'Maritime', *Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts* [website], <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/infrastructure-transport-vehicles/maritime>.

Even our national anthem refers to ‘boundless plains to share’, a land that ‘abounds in nature’s gifts’, and ‘golden soil and wealth for toil’. By contrast, the ocean is described as a moat: a home that is ‘girt by sea’.

This is a conception of Australia as an isolated outpost, misplaced at the bottom of Asia and constantly fearing abandonment.²

Many of you would be familiar with the work of Professor Andrew Lambert of the Department of War Studies, King’s College London. He refers to the centrality of the sea in the political and military culture of seapower states, and contrasts this against the role of navies as components of national power for continental states.³

We have a long and proud land heritage, but I believe we are also a maritime nation – and perhaps able to be a seapower state.

Even on our vast continent, you could argue, we are an archipelago: cities separated by great expanses of distance. We don’t need to choose between these two visions of ourselves, but we do need to see ourselves in both of them.

In a sense it’s a discussion not dissimilar to the debate between Colonel Hubert Foster and Captain William Creswell more than 100 years ago. Standing on the shore, do we look inwards or outwards?

The Iteration to National Defence

So the National Defence Strategy is Australia’s response to two conditions: firstly, the contemporary international security system; secondly, how we conceptualise ourselves in our region. It reflects several years of evaluating those conditions, and it’s a considered and thoughtful response that appreciates our resource base and our circumstances.

² Allan Gyngell, *Fear of abandonment: Australia in the world since 1942*, La Trobe University Press, 2021.

³ Andrew Lambert, *Seapower states*, Yale University Press, 2020.

A good starting point is the 2020 Defence Strategic Update (DSU), which observed that the regional security environment had deteriorated more quickly than anticipated. Critically, the strategic update raised that Australia was now inside the 10-year warning time that had been a pillar of defence planning for decades – certainly almost all of my time in uniform.

Competition between the United States and China has increased the prospect of major conflict; regional military modernisation has accelerated; and the rules-based order has been eroded by various forms of coercion, including the militarisation of disputed features, political interference, misinformation campaigns, cyber intrusions, and retaliatory economic policies. These generally were and continue to be gradual changes, at no point yet reaching a genuine crisis.

Importantly, the DSU also reoriented Defence's primary geographic focus back to the Indo-Pacific – encompassing the area from the north-east Indian Ocean, across the north, through South-East Asia, and into the South-West Pacific.

In 2023, the independent Defence Strategic Review (DSR) reaffirmed the points raised in the 2020 strategic update and additionally sought to reconceptualise Australia's approach to defence planning. Principally, the DSR advised that the ADF should transition from a balanced force to a focused force.

I was Vice Chief through that period and was deeply immersed in what were often difficult discussions around the type of defence force we would need in the future. Immediate investment priorities included nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS agreement, long-range strike, disruptive asymmetric capabilities – and a prize winner here tonight is an example of that – and more resilient infrastructure and command and control networks.

That brings us to April last year, when the government released the 2024 National Defence Strategy. It's a document that clearly outlines the ADF's objective: the force in being must be able to deter now and the force that we are developing must continue to deter into the future as Defence introduces and integrates new capability.

Australian Defence Force Capability

While National Defence is a whole-of-government and whole-of-nation endeavour, I am accountable specifically for the ADF's contributions across the three services and in all five of our warfighting domains. I would like to take this opportunity to briefly elaborate on what our capability objectives are and how we are progressing against them.

Looking around the room, I think you may appreciate me speaking about the Navy first – so let me start there.

The total investment in maritime capabilities comprises 38 per cent of the Integrated Investment Program over the next decade.⁴ That's what a focused force looks like. It's a substantial allocation of funds and demonstrates the importance Defence has placed on all three services achieving effects in the maritime domain.

We will increase the size and lethality of the surface fleet – including upgrading the Hobart-class destroyers, acquiring Hunter-class frigates and large optionally crewed surface vessels, and accelerating the acquisition of the general purpose frigates.

We're also investing in Navy's strike capability, and within the last 14 months have recently test-fired the naval strike missile, Standard Missile 6, and the Tomahawk missile – all in a short period of time.

In the undersea environment, Defence is investing in the development and acquisition of subsea and seabed warfare capabilities and autonomous and uncrewed underwater vehicles. As these capabilities progress, Defence is concurrently developing and integrating the legal frameworks and test and evaluation mechanisms that will be needed to successfully exploit these complex technologies.

⁴ Department of Defence, *Integrated Investment Program*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2024.

Undersea warfare forms the most substantial portion of the forward estimates under the capability plan, primarily due to the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines. AUKUS Pillar I is Defence's signature acquisition project – the largest investment in military capability, industrial capacity, and skilled workforce development in Australia's history.

The Australian Submarine Agency, established in July of 2023, is making significant progress towards safely and securely acquiring, constructing and sustaining Australia's nuclear-powered submarine capability. This is a hugely challenging undertaking that does require whole-of-nation, whole-of-government and whole-of-Defence outcomes.

AUKUS has been one of the most-debated subjects in defence circles, including a few in this room perhaps, and very reasonably given the amount of money dedicated to this capability.

Let me take the opportunity to offer three reasons why we are pursuing a nuclear-powered submarine.

First, range and endurance are critical to protecting our lines of communication. The increasing lethality and range of surface and sub-surface vessels no longer requires a potential adversary to operate near Australia in order to threaten our trade, critical infrastructure, or military capabilities.

Second, below the surface of the ocean continues to provide some reprieve in an operating theatre now dominated by sensors. As a past operational commander – and I'm joined by many here – I know that submarines require a disproportionate amount of effort to locate. Just the possible presence of a submarine significantly complicates planning for any state attempting to project force into our near region.

Thirdly, and as you all will appreciate, submarines can still support a wide range of operations: land and sea ship strike, mine-laying, intelligence collection, and special forces deployments. They are versatile and multi-purpose in a way that provides defence planners more options to achieve effects. Having options is crucial as it will offer our government the capacity to pursue a broader range of approaches – some overtly, some covertly.

I know there are other arguments for and against the nuclear submarine program but, in the interests of speaking to all of the ADF, I'll continue.

Moving to the Army, they are adapting, in part returning to their past, for littoral warfare – able to operate from northern Australia and able to strike at long range.

Army has already reorganised its command and control processes. It's raised the 10th Brigade to introduce long-range strike and new modern air defence systems, and consolidated the roles of combat brigades.

Army is also acquiring long-range strike, advanced air and missile defence systems, and larger and more capable littoral manoeuvre vessels. These are capabilities that will integrate Army's contributions to operations within the maritime domain, so it is essential our soldiers and sailors accelerate the work underway to be highly adept at working together to achieve combined effects. We in this room are accustomed to a 'call for fire' from the land to sea. Very soon, the 'call for fire' will come from the sea to the land.

Finally, the Air Force will enhance its expeditionary air operation capability to enable extended surveillance and improved long-range strike. Critical to this are our investments in infrastructure and the supporting logistics that enable the Air Force to rapidly deploy, disperse, and sustain air power from northern Australia.

Earlier this year, Air Force commenced flying the MQ-4C Triton, the remotely piloted air system, which provides long-range and persistent sovereign networked surveillance of our maritime approaches. Future technological developments, particularly to remote and semi-autonomous systems, will disproportionately increase the combat and surveillance effect each aviator is able to generate and could offset the relatively small size of the ADF.

Another milestone for Air Force, very recently, was the successful firing of the long-range anti-ship missile from an F/A-18F Super Hornet. The LRASM, as it's known, significantly

enhances the ADF's ability to conduct long-range maritime strike. In the future, this weapon will be integrated with the P-8A Poseidon and F-35A Lightning II.

The warfighting functions achieved by the services are supported by critical enablers: space and cyber – the fourth and fifth domains. This is the responsibility of Joint Capabilities Group: a capability manager peer to the three services.

Space and cyber capabilities are essential for command and control, intelligence, meteorological data, and positioning, navigation and timing. Similar to the maritime domain, Defence will need to develop the capability to ensure our own access and deny an adversary in these domains.

We know space and cyber are already contested domains, and they are increasingly becoming more contested. Defence is investing in enabling functions, including satellites, sensors, and cyber and electronic warfare capabilities. Australia also has an important role to proactively influence the emerging normative frameworks that moderate behaviour in these domains.

In the future, the ADF will be able to sustain high-intensity operations from northern Australia, supported by sovereign intelligence, targeting and communication systems, more resilient logistics networks, and increased critical stores and reserves.

To achieve deterrence, Defence will project and sustain force to apply effects within our primary area of military interest across these five domains and the full spectrum of competition, crisis and conflict. For the first time since the Second World War, our country will form a combat operating base for the ADF, and potentially our partners, to project and sustain force.

Industry and Technology

I now want to turn my attention to the industrial and technology sections, which are critical to ADF capability.

In a short war, you fight with what you have. In a protracted war, you fight with what you can get. We can't achieve our mission without the innovation, manufacturing and sustainment these sectors support.

A resilient domestic industrial base with the ability to scale and innovate is essential to Australia's national security. Major industrial priorities for Defence include shipbuilding and sustainment, guided weapons and explosive ordnance, and critical technologies.

Australia experienced the effect of pressure on critical supply chains during the pandemic, highlighting the need for whole-of-government efforts to improve import resilience for necessary supplies, commodities and technology.

Our industrial resupply rate and logistics enablers are critical, particularly for fuel, munitions, and guided ordnance. It is very difficult to surge production, especially if our partners need to draw from the same pool of finite stores.

Defence will also need to develop and integrate new technology. Although the pace of technological change is a challenge for us, it also presents significant opportunities to introduce disruptive asymmetric effects and achieve capability outcomes disproportionate to the relative size of our force. We know we can't fill warehouses with products that are subject to rapid technological change, but we must introduce sufficient capabilities to trial, test and employ, as well as provide that baseline we need when expansion might be required.

There are a few particularly compelling opportunities for Defence and the national security community, including artificial intelligence, quantum computing, uncrewed systems, and the supporting enabling infrastructure.

We will also need a workforce and private sector that is technologically literate. The rate of change in my lifetime has been immense. I well remember the early computers we used in the 1980s, and a number of you were there with me, and how Navy has evolved to adopt

new navigation, sensing, targeting technology, weapons, and systems. But with the rate of technological change continuing to accelerate, our young members will have to do even more to keep up with the technological advancements of the modern world.

The functions of the industrial and technology sections are essential and I expect Defence will have an immense amount of work to do in the future to maintain an advantage in these areas.

It's a Strategy

There's one more point I would like to raise this evening: the National Defence Strategy is a *strategy*. It sounds kind of obvious.

While there are many definitions of strategy, it fundamentally involves how we use the available resources towards a desired political end state in an environment where others get to react.

As I said earlier, we are living in a changing world. Defence will revisit the National Defence Strategy every two years. For now, the assessments made in 2024 remain broadly relevant, but Defence will have to continue to adapt.

Let me share a quote from the late Colin Gray on the matter:

To tackle the fog and friction of strategy and war is not akin to exploring unknown terrain, with each expedition better equipped than the last to fill in blanks on the map. The map of fog and friction is a living, dynamic one that reorganizes itself to frustrate the intrepid explorer.⁵

Whatever our approach, we can expect efforts to undermine our planning and put us in the grey zone: on the horns of a dilemma where our choices are constrained between ineffective inaction and disproportionate escalation.

⁵ Colin Gray, *Why strategy is difficult*, Routledge, 2014.

So we need to have insight and seek to understand how others see the world. We need to communicate our intentions and interests clearly to avoid miscalculation or an arms race that tips over into combat. In any relationship, transparency and understanding are critical for all sides to be able to work together.

This is why the National Defence Strategy isn't a checklist, or a catalogue, or a program. We won't deter simply because we are able to meet the force structure plan. The pursuit of security is an enduring condition that we will have to manage, not a problem we can solve.

National Defence is a whole-of-nation endeavour. Defence must work across government and the private sector to improve national resilience, integrate statecraft, and promote a relatively stable and secure international order. Achieving deterrence requires each of us to bring our unique capabilities, perspectives and expertise together.

There is an immense amount of work to do, but Defence is stepping up to meet this challenge by drawing on our past and looking to the future. We recognise the urgency of the task and the increasing need to meet our national security challenges. We know there is much yet to do and have a clear eye to our vulnerabilities and our priorities. In an operational environment that is more complex, diverse, and continuously evolving, the ADF continues to provide for our national security.

I commend all ADF members – sailors, soldiers, aviators and our space and cyber operators, who continue to defend our nation, and all those across Defence, government, and industry who support our efforts. I seek your assistance to back those efforts as a fundamental national endeavour. We may not always get it right, but it won't be for want of trying.

My sincere thanks again, Peter, to you and the Institute, for the opportunity of making tonight's address. It has been a privilege. I'm very grateful to have had the chance to talk to a number of you tonight, and it's been a wonderful evening.

Thank you.