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FORCE STRUCTURE PLAN – AIR CAPABILITY INVESTMENTS

The release last week of the 2020 Defence Strategic Update and Force Structure Plan pledges \$65 billion of investment in air capability over the next 10 years but, as they say, the devil is in the detail – and what detail was provided in the documents raised more questions than it supplied answers.

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In an attempt to dig down into the detail, ADM provided Defence with several questions which immediately sprang to mind on our first reading of the documents and here are the responses, for the large part provided by Head Air Force Capability, Air Vice Marshal Cath Roberts.

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“Planning activities for major acquisitions starts well in advance of the entry into service,” AVM Roberts explained. “Funding needs to be provided to cater for preacquisition planning activities.” ...”

In terms of future investment in capability, one of the first strategies outlined in the FSP is the allocation of up to \$11.4 billion to replace the Boeing EA-18G Growler, with funding coming on stream around 2027. Given the Growler only entered service with the RAAF in Australia in 2017 and its current planned withdrawal date isn't until 2035, why is funding for a replacement being allocated so early?

"Planning activities for major acquisitions starts well in advance of the entry into service," AVM Roberts explained. "Funding needs to be provided to cater for pre-acquisition planning activities."

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With no US replacement platform yet on the horizon, it will be interesting to see what alternatives will become available to Defence in the next eight years or so.

Slightly earlier than the Growler replacement, in the 2025 timeframe, Defence will spend the first of up to \$6.7 billion on an 'additional air capability'. This funding is a separate stream to the Teaming Air Vehicles program, which will see up to \$11 billion invested from

2026, so what is an additional air capability?

"A capability edge in the air is critical for Australia. The future air fleet will be focussed around the F-35A Lightning II, the F/A-18F Super Hornet and the EA-18G Growler. Despite our confidence in these aircraft, it is important that we continue to look for opportunities to expand our air combat capability," AVM Roberts said.

"The Force Structure Plan provisions for the development of additional air combat options, especially in remotely-piloted or autonomous systems. This is an area of development where we expect to see rapid change in years to come, and it is important we stay abreast of technology. A number of options will be considered, including teaming systems, loitering munitions, and a future electronic attack capability."

Minister for Defence Linda Reynolds announced in June that Australia will acquire an additional Northrop Grumman MQ-4C Triton maritime ISR platform, taking the total number on order so far to three. Triton is being acquired under Air 7000 Phase 1B, which initially specified seven air vehicles, but that has since been reduced to six (although Air Force's website still quotes seven). Given the US has recently announced it would freeze Triton funding for the US Navy for at least two years, how will this affect the number eventually purchased by Australia?

"Plans for the further acquisition of Triton aircraft are yet to be considered by Government," AVM Roberts responded. "Australia is adopting an incremental approach to our acquisition, which balances our desire to acquire the Triton as a complement to the P-8A Poseidon aircraft, against the developmental nature of the program."

The 2016 White Paper included provision for a further three P-8As to be acquired, subject to future requirements. Given P-8A production for the US Navy, at least, is likely to come to end in the near future, will this option be taken up by Defence?

“Government will review the future balance between the MQ-4C Triton, the P-8A Poseidon, and other capabilities in light of emerging technological and strategic change,” AVM Roberts said.

In addition to Triton and Poseidon, the FSP allocates up to \$6.1 billion beginning in the 2029 timeframe for ‘additional ISR capabilities.’

“ONE SURPRISE EXCLUSION FROM THE FSP IS FUNDING FOR TWO ADDITIONAL AIRBUS KC-30A MULTI-ROLE TANKER TRANSPORTS”

“This new proposal will see the acquisition of additional crewed/uncrewed aircraft and aerial systems to provide increased surveillance and reconnaissance effects in support of the joint force,” AVM Roberts added.

AVM Roberts also said Defence’s acquisition of the GA-ASI MQ-9B SkyGuardian (Reaper) capability under Air 7003 will go ahead as planned.

“Air Force remains committed to the delivery of the MQ-9B. Following Government Second Pass Approval in FY2021/22, the MQ-9B capability is expected to be in-service by the mid-2020s,” AVM Roberts detailed.

“The MQ-9B delivers persistent ISR and strike in support of joint forces, (which are) necessary functions of deterrence and response in a contested environment.”

Air Force’s Boeing E-7A Wedgetail Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) capability is also under scrutiny, with up to \$21.1 billion of funding for a replacement to begin in 2029 but, as AVM Roberts noted, the program is not linked to the recapitalisation of the USAF E-3 Sentry AWACS fleet at this time.

“The ADF will begin to explore options to replace Wedgetail as early as 2029, through risk-reduction and capability assurance studies. Due to the criticality of the capability, these studies will focus on the future airborne command and control needs of the ADF,” AVM Roberts explained.

“There is no official link with the US E-3 recapitalisation program at this time. The RAAF will seek alignment with close allies such as the United States but is open to all technology solutions.”

The Force Structure Plan calls for an expanded capability to replace the C-130J-30 Hercules fleet, with up to \$13.2 billion of funding starting to be spent from around 2029. One of the interesting pieces of information elsewhere in the plan is the reduction in funding for the modernisation and future replacement of Army’s G-Wagon fleet. “Due to a lack of protection, these vehicles will not be deployable to future battlefields and

their role will be accommodated by other vehicles such as the Bushmaster, Hawkei and heavy truck protected mobility fleets,” the plan states.

This is interesting, given the requirement to carry a single G-Wagon was one of the ‘must have’ requirements which drove acquisition of the C-27J Spartan last decade and, according to an Army spokesperson, only one Bushmaster can be carried in a C-13J-30 (albeit with some prior preparation), or one Hawkei with trailer. Does this then flag a future requirement for a larger airlifter?

“The C-130J provides the medium air mobility effect as part of an air mobility capability. The Medium Air Mobility Replacement Project options have not yet been determined or evaluated,” AVM Roberts replied.

Finally, one surprise exclusion from the FSP is funding for two additional Airbus KC-30A Multi-Role Tanker Transports (MRTTs), as forecast in the 2016 White Paper. Although there is up to \$20.2 billion of investment for a KC-30A replacement, beginning in 2032. Given the rhetoric from Prime Minister Scott Morrison at the launch of the 2020 Strategic Update, about the ADF needing to deploy globally when required and/or project force into a region which has become more contested and less stable, the cancellation of funding for what is one of the ADF’s greatest force multipliers does not seem to make sense. Particularly so if the forecast for air travel in the post COVID-19 world is accurate, when there could well be a large number of low-time, second-hand A330-200s on the market. Why then were the additional aircraft cancelled, when the planned withdrawal date for the current fleet is not until 2041?

“The KC-30A replacement project is scheduled for the mid to late 2030s and has funding for an expanded fleet size. The project is pre-Gate Zero and options have not yet been determined or evaluated,” AVM Roberts said.

“Should the strategic environment change, available airframes in the marketplace would be considered.”

Note from the Managing Editor: ADM understands from other sources close to the FSR that the replacement to the C130J-30 Hercules fleet will see a significant increase in platform numbers.

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