



Global reach

ADF capabilities boost Australian soft power

Much has been written in recent years about the RAAF's ongoing efforts to replace its F-111 long-range strike and F/A-18 'classic' Hornet multirole fighter fleets with a new air combat aircraft.

Despite the F-35 rightly remaining the ultimate choice to fulfil this role, ongoing project delays have seen the RAAF's introduction of the F-35 slip some six years, and forced the Howard coalition government to acquire the F/A-18F Super Hornet as a gap-filler capability.

Combat aircraft offer a nation a method of reinforcing its diplomatic efforts through the often persuasive but generally unstated threat of force or deterrence – the RAAF's F-111 along with the RAN's Oberon and Collins class submarines and Army's Special Forces were prime examples of this during times of tension with Indonesia and other regional nations in the past four decades. A highly capable air combat force presents a potential adversary with the risk of a bloody nose should it become overly aggressive or belligerent.

But on a quieter but no less costly scale, the ADF has also been building capabilities that will enable it to support government policy through the employment of soft power or soft diplomacy. In recent decades the ADF has been able to quickly respond to disasters or events in our region of influence via the employment of RAAF C-130 Hercules and DHC-4 Caribou transports, and RAN amphibious vessels such as HMA Ships *Tobruk*, *Kanimbla* and *Manoora*. Events in Cambodia, Timor Leste, the Solomons, Bougainville, and following the PNG and Indian Ocean tsunamis are all examples of where the quick employment of ADF soft power assets have resulted in closer and long-lasting allegiances and ultimately, diplomatic influence.



• Aid supplies unloaded from a RAAF C-17 at Nadi, Fiji following December 2012's Tropical Cyclone Evan. DEFENCE

“**ADF soft power assets have resulted in closer and long-lasting allegiances and diplomatic influence.**”

But with the introduction of the Boeing C-17 Globemaster III transport in late 2006, the ante was well and truly upped, so to speak. Suddenly Australia had an ability to rapidly exert soft power influence not only at a regional level, but also at a strategic one. The 2011 Japanese tsunami saw RAAF C-17s deployed to that country to support US and Japanese relief efforts. More recently, Australia's global reach was ably demonstrated by the rapid response to the initial recovery efforts following the July downing of Malaysia Airlines MH17 over the Ukraine, while fleeing refugees and forces fighting the Islamic State in Iraq have been supported by multiple RAAF C-17 flights ferrying relief supplies and weapons.

The initial fleet of four C-17s was quickly task-saturated in ADF service, and was soon bolstered by a fifth and then a sixth aircraft to provide sufficient capacity to support operations during planned maintenance cycles and unplanned unservicabilities. Now an additional two and perhaps as many as four more C-17s will further augment the RAAF's fleet, taking the total number of C-17s in service up to 10 and making the RAAF the second largest operator of the type.

In short, a C-17 can be employed twice as fast while carrying up to four times the amount of cargo than a C-130. While South-East Asia is a day's flight away for a C-130, a C-17 can be in the Middle East or even Europe in the same time. It provides Australia with the ability to apply powerful regional and strategic influence without resorting to a kinetic effect.

The introduction of the C-17 has also indirectly bolstered the ADF's tactical transport capabilities by allowing the retirement of the ageing C-130H, and the re-deployment of the younger and more capable C-130J to tactical tasks alongside the new Alenia/L-3 C-27J Spartan which will enter service next year.

The RAN will also soon add to Australia's capacity to apply soft power with the entry into service of the two 27,000 tonne Canberra class LHDs in 2015 and 2017. With each vessel able to deploy battalion sized forces of 1,000 or more troops and their vehicles and helicopter support elements and then support that force ashore for a number of days, the LHDs represent a similar step change in capability from the former LPAs as the C-17 does over the C-130. [▲](#)