

THE WILLIAMS FOUNDATION

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ISR: The Comprehension Campaign

Enabled by stunning advances in sensors and information processing capabilities, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance – ISR – is invariably described as central to Australia’s current and future military capabilities. The hyperbole is based on technological advances, but intellectual developments in Australian ISR have not kept pace. Traditional perceptions of the roles and boundaries of intelligence and operations are being challenged, and new thinking is needed to capitalise on the opportunities technology makes possible.

Australia’s 2009 Defence White Paper lists ISR as an area that requires ‘particular attention to secure our unique strategic interests’. But what exactly does the government think needs ‘particular attention’? Is it referring to the collection and processing of information, exclusive of deeper analysis; or a broader definition of ISR that incorporates traditional ‘intelligence’ functions? The White Paper does little to clarify. Indeed, it muddies the waters by repeatedly referring to ISR but then having a separate section entirely devoted to ‘Defence Intelligence’, seemingly as a separate and exclusive entity.

The world’s most advanced ISR organisation, the United States Air Force, has staked its position clearly in favour of the broader functional definition, arguing that the goal of ISR is to ‘provide accurate, relevant, and timely intelligence to decision-makers’. The USAF’s conceptual evolution was led by Lieutenant General David Deptula – one of the leading military thinkers of the past twenty-five years – who argues that I, S, and R must be considered an indivisible whole because ‘intelligence relies on surveillance and reconnaissance for its data and information. Conversely, we do not know what to surveil, where to reconnoitre, or when to do either without intelligence’.

Deptula emphasises ISR’s focus on the end result rather than on process, ownership or level. This approach overturns two historical features of the intelligence system: a preoccupation on the source of intelligence as its defining characteristic; and its division into a strict hierarchy of strategic, operational and tactical levels. For Deptula and the USAF, ISR is a means to achieve the end of comprehending a situation.

Furthermore, the concept of ISR delivering a ‘comprehension effect’ means that, unlike traditional intelligence, ISR does not merely support operations, but rather *is* operations.

Emphasising ISR’s cognitive output provides a focus lacking in Australia’s intelligence debate. All too often, discussion of ISR is about platforms, sensors, and networks, and the ‘situational awareness’ that arises from their combination. This fixation with gadgetry and datalinks misses the cognitive application of ISR. Lacking a cognitive component, traditional intelligence services can force decision-makers into an excessively reactive mode; additionally, the vast quantities of information that are collected can paralyse action.

What leaders need is sufficient insight to comprehend what is occurring, what will occur, and – critically – *why* certain events are occurring, so that they can then dominate the decision-making contest.

No decision-maker can possibly comprehend all situations as they arise. They, and their staff, must have swift access to the best possible prediction and explanation of events as they arise. Access to analysis and assessment of situations cannot be constrained by industrial-age concepts of strategic, operational and tactical levels of warfare. Tactical actions inevitably generate strategic effects; thus, tactical actors must share the comprehension of their strategic masters because they share the same problems.

ISR resources are scarce, and need to be apportioned judiciously. Many of Australia's ISR resources are national assets and are prioritised at the highest levels of government. This is as it should be. Just as the output of ISR needs to be accessible at all levels, so too do ISR efforts need to be aligned across all levels. The master tenet of air power – centralised control, decentralised execution – applies equally to ISR.

Centrally controlled ISR must be driven by intelligence requirements. There is no room for organisational structures or cultural hangovers that impede the tasking and exploitation of collection and analysis, just as there should be no barriers to inhibit the free flow of intelligence to those who need it, when they need it.

The Williams Foundation believes Australia's ISR needs to be planned and executed as a discrete *campaign* – as a comprehension campaign. This campaign would be the 'way' that links the ISR 'means' with the comprehension 'ends' of Australia's national security. The ISR campaign must be centrally controlled to meet Australia's highest priority comprehension requirements, whilst remaining responsive to the needs of tactical actors.

'Comprehension' must be recognised as an effect in its own right – as the 'they know that we know' effect. It follows, therefore, that comprehension should be both the first effect the ADF seeks to generate and its primary campaign.

The superseding importance of the comprehension campaign reinforces the need for Australia to reconsider its defence posture, in favour of the Williams Foundation's policy of 'Control and Protect (see www.williamsfoundation.org.au). The scarcity of ISR resources dictates that they should be focused on Australia's highest priority area, namely, the near region. The question here is: how much less do Australia's decision-makers comprehend their own region because so much of the nation's ISR effort is expended elsewhere?

ISR facilitates comprehension. It must be indivisible, uniting all contributing elements regardless of traditional roles and organisational structures. Australia's ISR campaign must be centrally planned, executed and controlled to ensure that comprehension – not simply awareness – exists when and where required.