



## Transcript of General Angus J Campbell's address to the 2023 ASPI Conference - *Disruption and Deterrence*

14 September 2023

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is a pleasure to be here with you this evening.

I wish to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, the *Ngunnawal* people, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

I also acknowledge all those who serve, or who have served, in defence of country and nation in peace and war.

Just over four years ago, I had the honour of addressing this conference, which considered the prospect of *War in 2025*.

In that speech, I explored the threats posed by operations, actions and activities undertaken by competitors against our interests in the grey-zone between peace and war.

Pleasingly some nations, including Australia, have taken substantial steps to protect themselves against political warfare's worst excesses. Yet these pernicious and insidious threats persist. Continued vigilance is essential.

The Conference theme of *Disruption and Deterrence* is very timely.

The recent *Defence Strategic Review*, and the government's response titled *National Defence*, are centred on the concept of deterrence, and in particular a strategy of deterrence through denial.

*National Defence* is a response to our deteriorating strategic environment.

It is an environment made much more confusing for both the analyst and the practitioner by at least five global, complex, non-linear, interdependent disruptions; each the very definition of a disruption.





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These disruptions lie at the heart of our understanding of the nature and utility of power: strategic, economic, diplomatic, climatic and informatic.

It is imperative that we understand them, individually and in systemic combination, if we are to have the appropriate Capability, Credibility and modes of Communication that are the essential and classical foundation of stable deterrence.

Before plunging into this challenge, let me offer an analogy.

Looking up at the stars for inspiration, Sir Isaac Newton quickly realised the limits of his newly discovered mathematics in what has become known today as the 'three body problem'. Newtonian physics cannot precisely predict the motion of more than two celestial bodies. And while today's supercomputers do an excellent job of approximation, the problem remains.

In every direction I look we are confronted by serious, novel and consequential three, four, five body problems, both within and across disruptions.

For example, within the realm of one disruption - the strategic - keeping the peace on the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel was once a bipolar, linear problem; very dangerous to be sure but limited. Over time it has grown from a peninsula problem to a North Asia problem to an intercontinental problem, directly involving four independent nuclear armed states, our four largest trading partners, and the future of the entire region.

And across disruptions, you only have to consider the economic, diplomatic, climatic and potentially strategic implications and interdependencies of the global clean energy transition agenda.

In a world characterised by disruption, each solution to a problem is at best an approximation, and each effort to resolve a problem likely affects all the other problems.

It has never been a more fascinating time to look up at the stars.





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Power, and the Rules designed to govern, enable and constrain that power, have always been at the centre of the international system, usually in tension.

As a middle power, Australia values rules and we have benefited greatly from the post Second World War international order, as have all those willing to commit to it.

But as you know that order is under great strain, with some states preferring a rebalance in favour of what might be described as the innate ‘privileges of power’.

*Strategically*, the proliferation of advanced sensors and weapons give rise to reconsideration of the ‘correlation of forces’ informing capability and credibility.

We are in a time of rapid technological advances and a changing calculus between detecting and concealing, striking and shielding, human and machine, overt and covert, civil and military.

Advanced missile systems are the exemplar breakout technology of the day with ballistic, manoeuvring ballistic, cruise, hypersonic manoeuvring, hypersonic boost guide and fractional orbital bombardment all being fielded or explored here in the Indo-Pacific. As a nation whose largest trading partner is, as Deputy Prime Minister Marles has said, also its “biggest security anxiety”, Australia finds itself in uncharted geostrategic territory.

*Economically*, strategic infrastructure investment races, coercive trade practices, debt trap diplomacy, the prioritisation of supply chain assurance and resilience, and trade diversification agendas are all aspects of an underlying breakdown in the globalisation consensus, to the degree it ever existed, of the post-Cold War era. The lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic also continue to exacerbate these challenges.





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The worst potential legacy of this disruption, the impoverishment of decoupling, is a real concern, hopefully to be avoided. But so too is rampant intellectual property theft and the undeclared application of dual use technology. In a world that aspires to hyper-connectivity, keeping high fences *only* around small yards, as US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan sensibly proposes, will be a constant challenge. As the foundation of military hard power, the economics of deterrence will always matter.

*Diplomatically*, the effort to sustain, reinforce and evolve an international system under great strain, indeed in some cases attack, is a constant and demanding task without map or compass, albeit with a clear eyed sense of what we may lose if not successful. And as we have recently been reminded by China, maps matter!

While a lofty aspiration, an international system for all, by all, that enables and constrains all, and evolves with the consent of all, may ultimately prove illusory but is a better target than any other. Our diplomatic effort is made doubly more difficult by the magnified, digitally enabled battle of the narrative in both the corridors of power and the global commons, which I will explore in more detail shortly.

*Climatically*, our planet is clearly moving away from the system within which modern human endeavour has flourished. A hotter environment, with larger, more intense climate events, more often, will be the norm.

As *National Defence* recognises, climate change is now a national security issue. It has immediate disaster mitigation and response challenges, along with food and water security implications and longer term human migration impacts. This disruption is happening faster and less predicably than we all hoped. Without the global momentum needed we may all be humbled by a planet made angry by our collective neglect.





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And finally, to round out these four harbingers of a brave new world or horsemen of the new apocalypse depending upon your perspective – *Informationally*, we are on the cusp of an extraordinary new era characterised by both knowledge and uncertainty. How we respond to this disruption will in many ways determine the possibilities inherent in our response to all the others.

The disruption resulting from the development, introduction, exploitation and use of big data, machine learning, autonomous systems and artificial intelligence (AI) is of particular interest and concern given its enormous potential for both good and ill; to inform, enhance, confuse, obscure, fabricate or delete the inputs to our perception of reality.

Like a silicon sword of Damocles hanging above our heads, a significant number of leading AI experts and tech entrepreneurs, including Yuval Harari and Elon Musk, believe AI systems with human-competitive intelligence will shortly have the potential to pose profound risks to our system of government and the health of our body politic writ large.

As a set of disruptions - strategic, economic, diplomatic, climatic and informatic - the scale, and in some cases the nature, of these disruptions is new. And while each disruption can be understood independently, they are not occurring in isolation.

They are also now deeply enmeshed within, and as backdrop to, Great Power competition.

Such a complex interplay of disruptions challenges our current theory and language, both verbal and physical, of deterrence.

The purpose of deterrence is peace. Conflict in our region would be catastrophic for all. That makes it essential to build an appropriate language of deterrence, which confidently, clearly and consistently communicates capability and credibility within, and despite, these disruptions.

Let's now explore the dramatic way information is being harnessed and weaponised to shape will, and through it the ability to deter.





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Many of you will recall the opening scene of Stanley Kubrick's classic science fiction film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in which a hominid picks up a bone and uses it to defeat his rivals, before the scene transitions to an image of a space station orbiting Earth.

As Kubrick powerfully conveys, the story of humanity's journey from the savannah to space rests upon our superior intelligence and capacity to obtain and pass on knowledge.

Our larger brains enable us to self-organise, undertake complex tasks, innovate, and engage in abstraction to a level foreign to all other animals on earth.

It is also widely theorised that our brains have evolved in such a way that we can only maintain approximately 150 meaningful and stable relationships at any given time. This cognitive constraint, referred to as Dunbar's number after the anthropologist who first proposed it, reinforces in-group/out-group behaviours and biases in our nature.

It is perhaps this combination of intelligence and in-group favouritism that provides the underlying conditions for humanity's best and worst excesses, including that most complex and consequential of activities – war.

War is, as Clausewitz observes, a contest of wills in which force is used to compel an adversary.

It is the issue of will that sits at the very heart of war; ask any Ukrainian, including their President, whose declaration '*give me ammunition not a ride*' galvanised a nation and a world. To paraphrase Napoleon, the moral is to the material as three parts out of four.

Given war's inherent risks and high costs, achieving one's aims without resorting to violence is rationally preferable. Success in this regard depends upon one's ability to undermine an adversaries' will to resist.

We attack the physical in order to dominate the psychological.





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Leonardo da Vinci once said that all our knowledge has its origins in our perceptions. Indeed, humans have long pondered the essential nature of reality and our perception of it.

For the prisoners in Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, chained in the depths of a cavern since infancy, the shadows projected onto the wall by the people and objects passing by the fire behind them, were *their* reality.

Your perception is your reality. Our competitors and adversaries understand this. And we teach it, in Advertising 101.

It's much easier, after all, to outperform a competitor if they are oblivious to the competition, or indeed complicit in your success; the proverbial 'useful idiot' in political warfare terms.

As a part of my work, I try to understand the history, guiding military concepts, and declared doctrines of key regional partners and nations.

The aspiration of winning without fighting is common to many nations.

The foremost exponent of this approach is, of course, the ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu whose enduring dictum reminds us that '*supreme excellence consists of breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting*'.

However, it would be unwise to presume that 'winning without fighting' is an approach to warfare only embedded within the strategic cultures of the East.

But, there is no denying that the most developed doctrinal approaches that seek to 'win without fighting' are observed in non-Western institutions, particularly the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and their Three Warfares strategy; encompassing psychological operations, media operations and legal operations.

While these operations are, of course, not new phenomena, informatic disruption is exponentially, instantaneously and globally enhancing the prevalence and effectiveness of a Three Warfares approach, by any reasonably sophisticated practitioner.





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Such an approach may bypass the need for a physical attack and strike directly at the psychological, changing perceptions of reality, with profound implications for deterrence.

*'Speak softly and carry a big stick'* said Teddy Roosevelt. Deterrence is the art of credibly convincing an adversary not to start a fight.

Capability is essential but alone insufficient.

It is the combination of capability plus the will to use that capability that ultimately provides the basis of credibility.

However, both of these elements, capability and credibility, depend upon whether the deterrent threat is clearly and consistently communicated.

Fundamentally, deterrence is an attempt to shape perception. Its primary focus is psychological not physical.

And it is our ability to objectively perceive reality that can now be targeted on-mass by competitors, to perceive favourably their actions and undermine our collective will to resist.

In the early 1980s, the French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard argued that the advent and spread of sophisticated information and communication technologies were fundamentally impacting our capacity to perceive reality from simulation – a state he termed *hyper reality*.

According to Baudrillard, our increasingly advanced and technologically-dominated societies are creating what he said was a *'world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning'*.

Now, 40 years later his thesis is proving increasingly prescient.

Today, we are more connected, and have access to more information, than at any other time in history. And also more disinformation, targeting what General Sir John Monash considered the bedrock of our body politic; an educated electorate.







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We rightly pride ourselves on being an open, diverse and liberal society. In other words, exposed.

Healthy and functioning societies such as ours depend upon a well-informed and engaged citizenry. Unfortunately, it is often said we are increasingly living in a post-truth world where perceptions and emotions often trump facts.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union regularly engaged in disinformation campaigns to discredit or otherwise damage the United States and its allies.

Building on this inheritance, the Russian Federation wielded disinformation as a weapon of statecraft in the lead up to the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit referendum.

While the overarching intent of the Soviet and Russian disinformation campaigns was the same, what sets them apart is the Russian Federation's use of novel technologies to enhance the scale, speed and spread of their efforts.

By feeding and amplifying untruths and fake news on social media via the use of bots, troll farms and fake online personas, the Russians attacked American and British democracy, heightening distrust, sowing discord, and undermining faith in key institutions.

Taken to their extremes, these types of operations have the potential to fracture and fragment entire societies so that they no longer possess the collective will to resist an adversary's intentions. Consequently, the aim of these operations is to change not only what people think, but how they think and act.

The emergence of AI enabled deepfakes are further complicating our ability to perceive reality and know truth. While still in their infancy, deepfake technologies are not only widely proliferating, but increasing in sophistication.

Their ability to simulate the appearance, sound, and movements of individuals pose obvious risks to the health of our society and national security, especially when their targets are leading public officials.





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Indeed, a crude deepfake video of US President Joe Biden criticising transgender women emerged in February this year, and a deepfake of Ukrainian President Zelenskyy was released in March 2022 in which he apparently urged his troops to lay down their arms in the face of Russia's invasion. Generative AI systems, such as ChatGPT, are of great potential benefit for modern society but also pose serious challenges.

As these technologies quickly mature there may soon come a time when it is impossible for the average person to distinguish fact from fiction. And although a tech counter response can be anticipated, the first impression is often the most powerful. This tech future may accelerate truth decay, greatly challenging the quality of what we call public 'common sense', seriously damaging public confidence in elected officials, and undermining the trust that binds us.

As the historian and political philosopher Hannah Arendt opined regarding the outrages of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, and still relevant as a cautionary warning today, *'the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lie will now be accepted as truth and truth be defamed as a lie, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world (and the category of truth versus falsehood is among the mental means to this end) is being destroyed.'*

So, what does this informational disruption mean for deterrence?

Deterring war requires hard power. To paraphrase George Orwell, people sleep peacefully in their beds at night because there are those who stand ready to deal violence on their behalf against those who would do them harm.

As you are aware, *National Defence* directed that the Australian Defence Force urgently transition to a focused and integrated force capable of undertaking high-end warfighting across the spectrum of competition and conflict, and across all domains.





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However, enhanced defence capability alone is insufficient. As a relatively modestly sized military, credible deterrence can only be delivered in partnership with those with whom we share common cause.

Australia has never fought alone, and we never want to fight alone.

Successful deterrence in this age of mass disruption will truly be a team effort, one that requires a deliberate, integrated and collective response. This demands effective, nuanced and active diplomacy.

But it is important not to see that diplomacy as the soft form of a securitised perspective of the world. Rather, within its full breadth, diplomacy is an innate complement to harder power like military capability and economic strength.

And engaging partners on their terms, and on the issues that matter most to them, such as the Boe Declaration's Pacific climate security agenda, is a critical facet of our diplomatic approach.

Diplomacy can prevent conflicts by conveying credibility. It can mitigate conflicts. It can provide partners in conflict. It can express and win wider global sympathy and support. It can mitigate the scale or escalation of a conflict. And hopefully it can bring conflict to an end.

Our understanding of and capacity to realise deterrence is inherently entangled with the major disruptions we are experiencing.

While the strategic, economic, diplomatic and climatic disruptions buffeting us are each very significant, our capacity to respond effectively and coherently is deeply undermined by the challenge of drawing wisdom, rather than uncertainty, from the increasingly contested information environment.

To abuse Nietzsche for a moment, if *'you gaze long enough into the disinformation, the disinformation will gaze back into you.'*

So what do I mean by uncertainty? Uncertainty in terms of the correlation of our forces strategically, our resilience economically, our efficacy diplomatically, and our coherent response climatically.





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Uncertainty erodes our traditional understanding of deterrence by undermining our calculus of capability, our assurance of credibility, and our clarity of communication.

Uncertainty is the bedfellow of timidity, the perfect foundation from which others may win without fighting.

Two thousand years ago Virgil the Poet recognised that *'fortune favours the bold'*.

Parsing knowledge and promoting wisdom from the ocean of chaff that is the information environment will get much, much harder.

But the search for wisdom remains our best path to navigate the global commons, retaining the will and agency to deter, and the foresight and compassion to build, a better future for all.

Thank you.

