

[Opening music]

[Major General Michael Ryan speaking]

I'm very delighted to be here today to open the strategy and future of war conference and we really are in the company of some of Australia's and the world's great military and strategic minds.

To all our presenters and guests, some of whom have travelled tremendous distances thank you for being here.

Particularly I'd like to welcome our inaugural Professor Jeffrey grey visiting chair, Dean Eliot Cohen from Johns Hopkins School of International Studies in Washington DC. We are appreciative of your presence and the time you've taken to be with us. Thank you

Now in this distinguish company it would ordinarily be quite appropriate for me to commence with a quote from Clausewitz or Sunzu or even Kissinger, but this morning I'm reminded of a comment of the late and Great American baseballer Yogi Bearra, who went asked to reflect on the future of the game insightfully replied, the future ain't what it used to be.

Everyone here knows that declarations about the future are routinely proven false. Our world is complex, its dynamic and routinely ambiguous.

To confidently predict tomorrow is tough enough, let alone how war will look in 5 or 10 or even 20 years, but thinking about our shared future matters, particularly given the consequences of misunderstanding war and misjudging strategy.

Today the world is entering a period which may come to be characterized by more strategic competition than cooperation between great powers, something that's never gone away but which the US led west has not seen as prominently for perhaps three decades.

It's a dynamic that is seen greater contestability over rules and norms as well as sharper rivalries for influence and dominance, cooperation and competition are in tension across multiple regions in eastern Europe.

Russia is working to strengthen it's geopolitical position and probe the periphery of NATO and the European Union.

In the Middle East, Iran is seeking to assert it's dominance and in the indo pacific, our region, we are living through the early stages of a significant recasting of the us-china relationship whose future is unclear, but who's contours and frisian's will affect all of us.

Competition on and beyond the boundaries of established rules and norms creates uncertainty for all states but particularly middle powers like Australia trying to find their footing.

Now of course competition as a concept is not inherently negative, we lord competition within bounds as an extraordinarily productive incentive to excel, combined with the stabilising security presence of the united states, market competition has been at the heart of the prosperity of the indo-pacific, that its experience over the last several decades.

States were guided in these pursuits by a common rule book, the post-world war 2 international rules based order. Its worked and an evolving version of it can continue to work, provided changes to that order accommodate not only the Great Powers but sufficient of the rest of us as well.

If not our future may be characterized by tension distrust and insecurity.

Now Chief of Defence Force recently spoke about the emergence of a new modernised version of political warfare, active measures or grey Zone activities that subvert erode and undermine beyond or regardless of the rules and norms, from coercion and propaganda to diplomatic pressure, the use of proxies and much more besides.

whatever the activity happens to be, it breaks international rules and norms but it also in the eyes of the targeted state, falls short of requiring a war like response. Instead it is suspended in The Grey Zone, between war and peace and this is how great power rivalry's short of major war have played out for millennia.

But political warfare as practice today, the nature and intensity of actions is orders of magnitude greater and scale, reach and technological sophistication than anything we have seen in the past.

Last year General Steve Townsend of the US Army wrote an article for the Modern War Institute where he observed that, the world we operating today is not defined by battles but by persistent competition happening across multiple domains like political warfare the notion of multi-domain battle or operations is not new, but the diagram of overlapping domains of land sea air space and information or cyber has over time progressively and relentlessly merged towards coalescence, largely through advances in technology.

All domains are contested interactive and no one domain assures dominance. In battles combatants can win time and space but they do not win wars. Winning wars takes a whole of government.

For all of us the answer lies in an integrated and unified effort.

It's now accepted doctrine that Nations must be willing and able to master all levers of national power, but the theory is at best inconsistently applied, especially by democracies at least until they're truly riled into action.

A short while ago Professor Tom Mahnken also a professor at the school of Advanced International Studies spoke to the strategos course of the Australian Defence College.

He spoke about how to develop strategic thinkers and pointed out in short wars you fight with what you got, however short wars don't happen often and they are often infuriatingly difficult to predict.

War is usually a long protracted affair which increases the strategic importance of materials sustainment and conceptual innovation. In periods of enduring strategic competition such as that we may now be entering the health and the vitality of the politico-economic system as a whole is the centre of strategic success and as we look to the next generation of exquisite technologies that will influence the character of warfare, many settle upon some combination of artificial intelligence, biotechnology Robotics and autonomous systems hyper velocity weapons and so on.

Each presents a newer the allure of assured victory, the challenge of much shorten decision cycles and the fear of being second to market with the next Killer App. But I think that across whatever future is realised war is likely to remain a human Endeavour, with all the imperfections failures and flaws that that implies.

In Interesting times a US Ambassador to Australia, A B Culvahouse speaking last week reflected that the US has more confidence in Australia than Australia has in itself.

Perhaps it's time to take heed of his letter from America and while taking side of the challenges and pitfalls, step thoughtfully and boldly forward as a once and future member of the indo-pacific community.

I want to once again thank the amazing team at the Australian Defence College for bringing everyone together over the next couple of days.

I invite you all to listen, reflect network and question always. Be imaginative and be engaged in debating the future of our nation and when you go home, use the knowledge you've gained here

thank you

[Applause]