



Attitude Matters: Public opinion in Australia towards defence and security

Executive summary

Defence as a political issue

Following the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001, defence and terrorism became national election issues in Australia for the first time in several decades. Overall, 51 percent of voters in the 2001 federal election considered defence and national security 'extremely important' issues, compared to 66 percent who mentioned health and 65 percent who mentioned education. This compares with 25 percent mentioning defence as 'extremely important' during the 1996 federal election.

Confidence in defence

Public confidence in Defence is high. Defence attracts substantially higher confidence than comparable public institutions, such as the courts and the legal system. Moreover, public confidence in Defence has increased significantly following the success of the East Timor operation.

While a majority of the electorate believes that Australia would not be able to defend itself if attacked, increasing numbers also believe that defence has become stronger in recent years.

Opinion towards government spending on defence over the past quarter of a century shows that views in favour of an increase in spending peaked at the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980, and declined until the collapse of communism in 1990. Thereafter, there has been an increase in those favouring more expenditure, peaking in 2000 following the East Timor crisis.

Perceptions of security threats

The public's perception that there is a security threat to Australia peaked in 1980 with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and again in 1990 following the Gulf War. After a low point in 1998, public perceptions of a threat have increased slightly.

Indonesia is viewed by the public as representing by far the greatest potential security threat to Australia, with the proportion naming Indonesia increasing consistently since the 1960s. China is the second most frequently mentioned threat, but the proportion has declined since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975.

Russia was perceived as a major threat following the invasion of Afghanistan, but has declined thereafter. Since the late 1980s, there has been a modest increase in the proportion seeing Japan as a potential threat to Australia.

Support for overseas operations

There was overwhelming public support for ADF's role in East Timor. In 2000, no less than 99 percent of those interviewed believed that the ADF had performed well during the operation.

In general, the public is most supportive of operations that involve defending Australia, either directly (by repelling a foreign aggressor), or indirectly (by stopping illegal immigrants or drugs coming into the country). The public is least supportive of operations that are intended to assist allies and, most particularly, operations that are conducted on behalf of the United Nations.

At the time of the 2001 election, there was widespread support for assisting the fight against terrorism. However, opinion has been more divided over Australia's role in Iraq and while a majority were in favour of participating in the war prior to its commencement, since its conclusion, a majority believe it was not worth going to war.

The United States and the ANZUS Alliance

The public is generally positive in their attitudes towards the United States, and trust in the US to defend Australia increased significantly after the September 2001 attacks. There was least trust in the US at the end of the Cold War, and again at the time of the East Timor crisis.

There is widespread support for the ANZUS alliance as being important to Australia's defence, and that proportion has gradually increased since the early 1990s.

Conclusion

The end of the Cold War, the 11 September and Bali attacks, and events in the Middle East, have all combined to undermine many of the certainties which informed the public's long-standing views on defence and national security during the latter half of the twentieth century. There is now greater volatility in public opinion on defence issues than at any time in the recent past.

As defence and security enter mainstream political debate, the public's awareness of the policy options is likely to increase. As a result, the traditional policy freedom that successive governments have enjoyed in the area is likely to diminish.



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