


Public attitudes towards the Australian Defence Force



Interim Report

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Introduction

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) is one of the most important institutions in Australia, receiving a substantial proportion of the federal budget, and holding a unique set of rights and responsibilities. Recent geo-political shifts, which have seen a major deterioration in Australia's strategic position, have served to further underline the importance of defence and security to Australia. Despite this significance, we know remarkably little about how the Australian public views the ADF as an institution, its people, the operations it conducts in Australia's name and the place of veterans within society.

The War Studies Research Group at UNSW Canberra addressed this gap through a nationally representative survey of the views of 1,500 adults aged 18+ in Australia. The survey received ethics approval from the UNSW Human Research Advisory Panel (iRECS7568) and comprised four broad areas: attitudes to the ADF; role of the ADF; ADF operations in Afghanistan; and the support for veterans. It was conducted via iLink Research Services between 26 February and 4 March 2025.

In this interim report we release some of the key results from this survey to help inform the wider public debate on defence issues in the lead-up to the Federal Election being held on 3rd May 2025. A full report with a more detailed discussion of the survey and its findings will be released in due course.

This report reveals the complex ways in which the public engages with the ADF. It finds that Australians hold the ADF in high regard and have significant trust in the institution. Equally, public knowledge of the institution itself, and the activities it conducts, is limited.

There is some support for the ADF to grow, but arguably less than that assumed in much of the public debate. This highlights that there are complex dynamics at play drawing in diverse issues including Australia's strategic situation and the cost-of-living crisis. There are also largely positive sentiments that ADF should work with allies and partners to provide security for Australia.

While veterans make up a sizeable section of the Australian population, respondents reported limited awareness of veterans' issues and efforts to address their welfare. Despite this support for ensuring that veterans' needs were met was high.

Section 1 – Attitudes towards the Australian Defence Force

Australia's military history and defence forces are vital touchstones in the country's national identity, embodied in narratives around Gallipoli and Kokoda, and continuing to manifest through the concept of Anzac. Despite this, the ADF as a modern institution plays a limited role in current Australian society and culture. This survey seeks to move beyond the national myths to explore how Australians view the modern ADF.

Overall attitudes towards the ADF among survey respondents were very positive. 68% reported holding positive opinions about the organisation and only 8% held negative views.

Two thirds of respondents trusted the ADF to act ethically, but there were significant divisions on this question, including by political affiliation. 77% of people who were likely to vote for the Liberal Party trusted the ADF to act ethically, and 4% did not. By contrast, only 47% of Greens voters trusted the ADF to act ethically with 22% holding the opposite view.

One of the greatest indicators of trust in a military organisation is a willingness to serve or recommend service to a family member. The responses to the survey here were less clear cut. 46% of respondents would recommend service to a family member, and only 14% disagreed. However, 40% expressed neutral opinions.

There is currently considerable debate among politicians and the media about the size of the ADF and the need for greater defence funding. This did not come through to the same extent in the survey. The majority of respondents (52%) felt that the ADF was appropriately sized. There was significant support (41%) for an expansion of the defence force, and very few respondents wished to see it cut. Support for an increase in the defence budget was more limited. Only a third of respondents supported spending more money on defence, with the majority feeling that current spending was appropriate.

Support for additional defence spending was weakest among 18–29-year-olds, and grew relatively consistently in line with the age of the respondents. Liberal voters were most likely to support additional funding for the ADF (44%), yet less

than half of this cohort thought that more money was required. 28% of Labor voters supported additional funding. Greens voters were the only group among whom those supporting a cut to the defence budget (22%) exceeded those advocating for additional funds (17%).

Respondents were asked which armed service they saw as a priority for funding. The majority thought spending should be balanced across the three services. Out of those advocating for unequal funding the largest cohort believed that the Australian Army should be the priority, followed by the Royal Australian Navy and the Royal Australian Air Force.

Section 2 – Role of the Australian Defence Force

The tempo of ADF operations has increased amidst declining strategic circumstances and more frequent requests for domestic and regional assistance in the aftermath of emergencies such as disasters. This has meant that the ADF has undertaken a range of highly visible operations both at home and overseas in recent years.

However, our survey revealed that the Australian public does not feel well informed about the ADF and the operations it conducts, a sentiment supported by wider findings on specific issues within the survey. Approximately one-quarter of respondents (26%) felt well-informed about current ADF operations.

Respondents were very supportive of the ADF conducting Defence Assistance to the Civil Community (DACC) operations domestically with 84% agreeing and only 2% disagreeing. Support for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations in the region was also strong (69%), but there were greater divisions in attitudes dependent on political leaning, income, and education.

The vast majority of respondents (75%) supported the idea that the ADF should work closely with allies and partners, especially the United States. This support was remarkably consistent across the different demographic breakdowns, including political allegiance. The strength of this support is noteworthy, especially given the widespread perception in the media of a major shift in attitudes resulting from changes in American policy under President Trump.

Support for deploying the ADF alongside allies and partners, including, if necessary, in a conflict, was still strong (64%), however there was a growth in those expressing neutral opinions, and a much greater divide along political lines.

Nearly half of respondents (46%) thought that Australia is best served by focussing primarily on the defence of Australian territory rather than supporting allies and partners in maintaining wider regional security, while only a small proportion (17%) opposed.

Section 3 – Australian Defence Force Operations in Afghanistan

The war in Afghanistan was the ADF's longest conflict. It cost somewhere between \$7.8 billion and \$13.6 billion, with more than 39,000 ADF members and Defence civilians, along with Australian diplomats, police and aid workers, having served in Afghanistan. 41 were killed, hundreds wounded, and even more have been lost to suicide. It is the most significant set of ADF operations in a generation, shaping the institution at the time, and having repercussions that continue to have a profound effect today. For this reason, we wanted to understand how the wider public viewed the war in Afghanistan and the role of the ADF within it.

Public knowledge about Australian operations in Afghanistan was very limited. Only 23% of respondents felt they had a good knowledge of what Australia had done in Afghanistan, and many were unaware that Australia had participated in the conflict at all. Even veterans and current serving personnel felt ill-informed about what Australian soldiers did in Afghanistan.

Nearly half of all respondents (44%) believed that the primary reason for Australia contributing to the war was in service of the Australian-United States alliance. This far exceeded the numbers who believed that the main motivation was to fight terrorism (25%) or assist the Afghan people (13%).

There appears to be a correlation between knowledge of the ADF, including its operations in Afghanistan, and trust in the institution. Those who felt that they knew the ADF were much more likely to trust it.

Despite the publicity, a large proportion of respondents (44%) were not aware of the allegations that some Australian Special Forces soldiers may have committed war crimes in Afghanistan.

Those who are serving or who have served in the ADF are more likely to believe that soldiers allegedly committed war crimes and that they should be prosecuted.

Section 4 – Supporting Australia’s Veterans

Australia’s commitment to the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have ensured that the treatment of veterans has become an important issue in the public and political debate. A particular focus within this debate has been on the prevalence of death by suicide among ADF personnel and veterans, which eventually resulted in establishment of a Royal Commission to examine the issue. The survey sought to understand public knowledge of veterans and veterans’ issues, and attitudes towards the support they receive from the government.

Knowledge of veterans and veterans’ issues among the survey respondents was limited. Only 25% of respondents felt that the Australian public has a good knowledge of the experience of veterans. Roughly one in three of those completing the survey indicated that they knew a veteran personally.

Respondents were divided on the question of whether the government was doing a good job of supporting veterans. 38% felt that veterans were well supported, with 30% feeling the opposite. 32% of respondents expressed neutral views on the question. These attitudes varied depending on the age of the respondents. Younger people tended to believe that the government was doing a good job of supporting veterans, whilst older respondents held the reverse view.

Despite the significant media attention that it has received, only 44% of respondents had heard of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.

Despite this, there was overwhelming support – 83% – for the establishment of an independent agency focused on veterans’ welfare, as recommended by the Commission.

About Us

War Studies Research Group, UNSW Canberra

The War Studies Research Group brings together scholars looking to address modern defence and security challenges through applied historical research. The Group has expertise across diverse areas within the history of conflict, including Australian and international military history, strategic policy, contemporary operations, operational analysis, the history of veterans' care, naval history & space policy. The group works closely with industry partners within Defence, government, and academia to produce relevant and problem focused research and professional education.

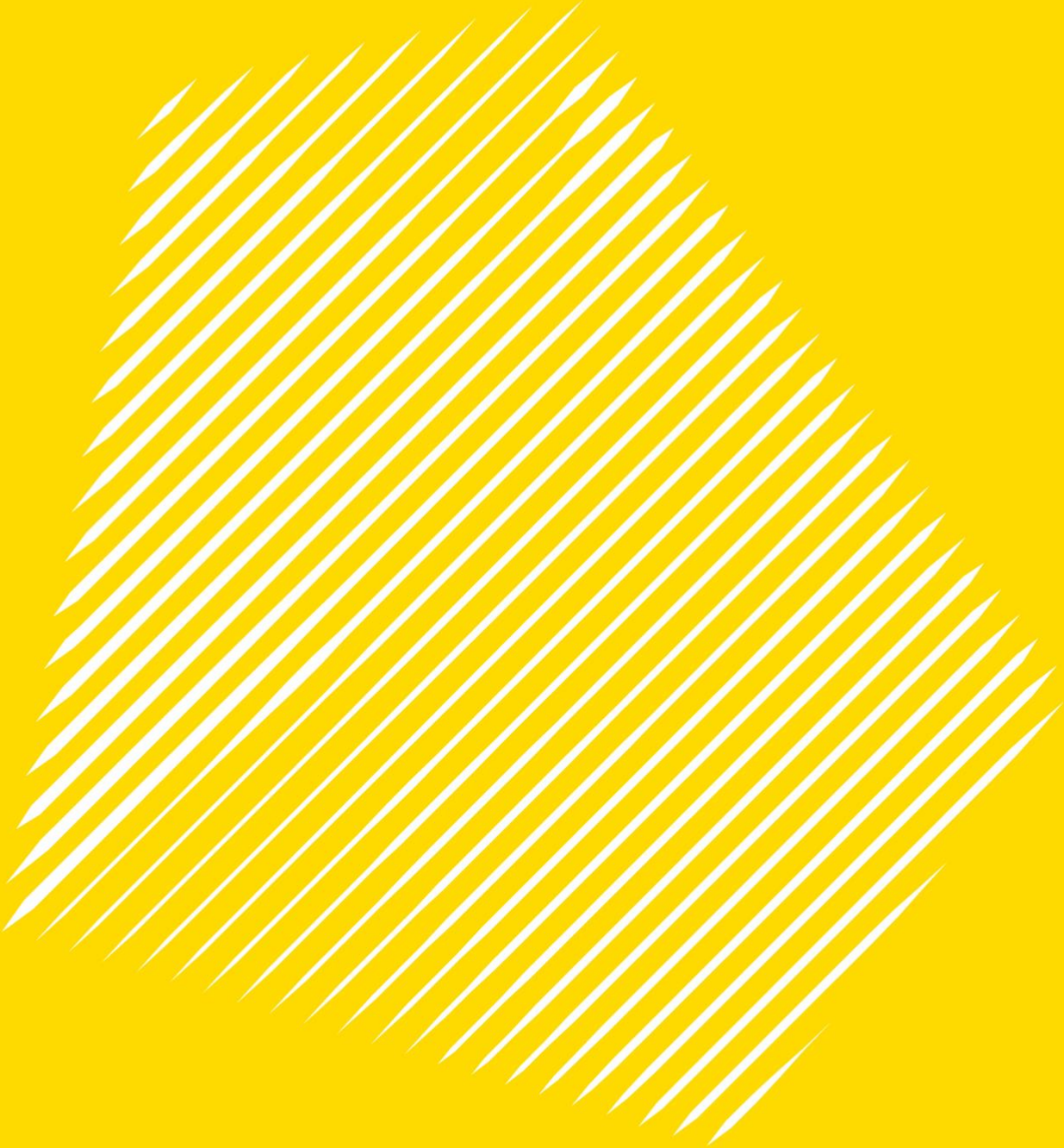
The University of New South Wales Australia's Global University

Established in 1949 with a unique focus on the scientific, technological and professional disciplines, UNSW is a leading Australian university committed to making a difference through pioneering research and preparing the next generation of talented global citizens for career success. The University's motto *Scientia Manu et Mente* ('Knowledge by Hand and Mind') succinctly reflects UNSW's central philosophy of balancing the practical and the scholarly.

UNSW has a proud tradition of sustained innovation, focusing on areas critical to our future – from climate change and renewable energies, to life saving medical treatments and breakthrough technologies. In the social sciences, UNSW research informs policy and expert commentary in key issues facing society ranging from human rights and constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians, to public health and population ageing. Our 50,000-plus students come from 128 countries, making us one of Australia's most cosmopolitan universities.

In Australia, UNSW has campuses across Sydney, NSW and in Canberra, ACT. UNSW is also a member of a series of alliances, including the Association of Pacific Rim Universities – an association of universities in Canada, Chile, China and Hong Kong SAR, Chinese Taipei, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Philippines, Russia, Singapore, Thailand and USA. In addition, UNSW is a member of the PLS alliance and Global Tech Alliance with campuses in USA, UK, India, Singapore, China and Germany.

UNSW leverages its global presence to conduct development research and projects in countries around the world. At present, UNSW has more than 80 academics conducting research in the Pacific. Via the Institute for Global Development, UNSW intends to continue to build relationships with Pacific institutions and organisations with a view to expand our presence and engagement to affect positive change. In addition, UNSW sends and receives students from overseas tertiary institutions on reciprocal student mobility arrangements to dozens of countries every year.



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