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Our twin terrors: Yanks and Islamic fanatics
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OPINION & ANALYSIS

In February the Lowy Institute for International Policy conducted the first of a series of annual public opinion surveys of Australian views on foreign policy.

The Lowy Institute Poll is designed to track changes in Australian opinion over time, and to differentiate between transitory views and those more deeply held.

These are some of the results of the initial survey. We asked first about our own country. Australians feel positive and self-confident about Australia's place in the world, but we also have a realistic sense of our limitations and vulnerabilities.

A vast majority believe Australia is "a good international citizen" (82 per cent), "important in Asia" (82 per cent), and "well-placed to succeed in a competitive world" (79 per cent). But three-quarters of respondents also think we are "vulnerable to external threats" (76 per cent), and while the population is evenly split on whether we are "independent minded", 65 per cent think we are "a follower not a leader".

Looking beyond our shores, Australians feel most positive about the countries with which we have longstanding, deep and stable relationships. New Zealand (94 per cent), the United Kingdom (86 per cent), Europe (85 per cent), Singapore (83 per cent) and Japan (84 per cent) are our favourites, quite closely followed by China (69 per cent).

The glaring omission from this list is the United States, for which only 58 per cent of Australians have positive feelings.

The only places we asked about that generate fewer positive feelings than the US are Indonesia (52 per cent), the Middle East (25 per cent), Iran (24 per cent) and Iraq (23 per cent).

So what is it about America that we don't like? For a start, 68 per cent of Australians think we take too much notice of the views of the US in our foreign policy. When we asked respondents to rate a series of potential threats, we discovered that by one measure both Islamic fundamentalism and US foreign policies are worrying to 57 per cent of Australians: a startling equivalence.

By the same measure, China's growing power worries only 35 per cent of Australians, and comes last in a list of threats.

Australians are pragmatic about the value of the ANZUS alliance, with 71 per cent saying it is either very or fairly important for Australia's security. But when we asked whether Australia should act in accordance with the alliance if it meant following the US to war with China over Taiwan, the answer was a resounding "No". Only 21 per cent of those surveyed would support such a move.

Turning to trade, Australians feel ambivalent at best about our free trade agreement with the US, which only 34 per cent of respondents think will be good for Australia. In contrast, the idea of a free trade agreement with China commands majority support: 51 per cent of respondents think it would be good for Australia.

But whether the imbalance in our feelings towards the two great countries will survive China's growing diplomatic and strategic power remains to be seen.

Another clear finding is the importance Australians place on environmental concerns. "Improving the global environment" should be our number one foreign policy goal, along with "strengthening the Australian economy" and "protecting the jobs of Australian workers".

About 57 per cent of Australians think that globalisation has had a bad effect on the environment, and the second most worrying international threat is "global warming".

International legitimacy is important to us. On the difficult question of military intervention, Australians feel much more comfortable using armed force if it has been endorsed regionally or by the UN. Almost two-thirds of respondents (64 per cent) prefer that we rely on international law even though decisions may go against us, while only half as many (33 per cent) would do whatever benefits us most in any given situation regardless of international law.

Australians are as divided now about our military contribution to Iraq as they were about the war itself, and have remained largely consistent in their views over the past two years. Forty-six per cent believe we should continue to be involved militarily, and 51 per cent believe we should not.

The major reason for keeping out of Iraq, with 58 per cent support, is that "we should never have been there in the first place".

But if we are directly threatened, a clear majority of Australians would not hesitate to take pre-emptive action.

Two-thirds of Australians (66 per cent) agreed that if we believed that terrorists based in another country were going to launch an attack against Australia, and if the other country could not or would not take action to stop them, we should have the right to strike directly at the terrorists.

The full report is available at www.lowyinstitute.org .

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