

## **We see China and U.S. as central to our future**

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Whoever wins the next federal election will need deftness and subtlety in managing Australia's foreign relations. This year's Lowy Institute Poll indicates that Australians want a strong relationship with the US, are wary of China but think we should be able to maintain good relations with both countries.

Three in four Australians choose China ahead of the US and Japan when asked which economy is the most important to Australia. Yet more Australians place a higher value on our relationship with the US than China (48 per cent compared with 37 per cent).

This is interesting because it seems Australians see the relationship with the US primarily in security terms. Only 16 per cent see the US as the most important economy to Australia, despite the fact its economy is almost twice the size of China's in GDP terms.

Australians' overwhelming support for the US alliance continues, with 82 per cent regarding it as important for Australia's security. Significantly, support for basing US forces in Australia has grown, with those in favour up six points in 2011 to 61 per cent.

This strong support for the US alliance does not, however, translate into automatic backing for US military ventures abroad. Only 48 per cent support Australia following the US into another war in the Middle East, and 76 per cent believe Australia should support US military action only if it is sanctioned by the UN.

That reluctance may be a product of recent experience. This year marks the tenth anniversary of the US-led invasion of Iraq and will see the bulk of Australian forces leave Afghanistan. Some 61 per cent say that, "all in all, considering the costs to Australia versus the benefits", the Afghanistan war was not worth fighting.

Even fewer (38 per cent) think Australia should support US military action in Asia in the event of a conflict in the Asian region.

Yet the Australian public is hardly sanguine about the rise of China. Some 61 per cent believe China will eventually replace the US as the world's leading superpower, and a significant minority (41 per cent) think it likely that China will become a military threat to Australia in the next 20 years. And the majority of Australians think the government allows too much investment from China.

Yet 87 per cent of Australians think it is possible for Australia to have a good relationship with China and the US. More broadly, 90 per cent of Australians want the government to do more to help Australian businesses succeed in Asia. Seventy-three per cent support more embassies and consulates in the region.

At home, 68 per cent think the government has struck about the right balance between protecting the rights of citizens and fighting terrorism. Only 11 per cent say the government leans too much towards protecting the rights of citizens in responses to terrorism.

Finally, the poll results indicate Australians have formed firm views on who will do the better job at managing many of these challenges. The Coalition is backed by more than two to one margin on five of the issues polled, including managing the US alliance, maintaining Australia's security, managing foreign investment, asylum-seekers and the economy.

Labor leads albeit by a smaller margin on two issues: managing the relationship with China and responses to climate change.

The truth is any new Australian government will have its work cut out managing foreign policy. The challenges are considerable, especially as Asia becomes the new centre of global competition. And,

as the new poll highlights, expectations of how the government should deliver Australia's security and prosperity are not straightforward.

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