

## Historic images shaping views on Defence spending

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Defence works differently on the voter's mind than most other major aspects of government. Public opinion about health, education, welfare or law and order are to some degree at least based on direct experience by individuals or families of the services that the Government provides: how long are the hospital waiting lists, how high is unemployment, how big are school classes? Most of us have no comparable personal experience of the service that Government delivers in return for the 2percent of gross domestic product they spend for us on Defence. Unless we happen to have been evacuated by the Defence Force from a regional trouble spot or caught up in a conflict somewhere where they have been engaged, we have no first hand knowledge of the work they do, or how well they do it. This has two important implications for the way defence policy works.

First, it means that the public's opinion of defence issues is more heavily shaped by what the Government says and how the media reports it than what is actually delivered.

Contemporary views are also shaped by potent historic images of the Australian Defence Forces Gallipoli, Kokoda and Long Tan. These images, however important they may be to our national self-image, have little to do with the practical business of developing and delivering defence capability today, but they frame attitudes to Defence in a way that is easy to manipulate. Second, it means the kind of direct voter feedback that governments receive about the quality of their work in most policy areas is not available in Defence. As long as governments have a good story to tell, and can link that story to resonant historical images, they can get away with poor policy at little political cost. There is thus little political incentive to do defence policy well. That makes it hard not to do it badly. Later this week, or early next week, Kevin Rudd will unveil his take on Australian defence policy when he releases the new Defence White Paper. The state of public opinion into which this document will be delivered has been interestingly mapped by two enterprises in recent weeks. Two weeks ago the Government released the report of a public consultation program led by ex-senator Stephen Loosely. Yesterday, the Australian National University released the latest in Professor Ian McAllister's ANU poll series, focusing this time specifically on defence issues. Three of the key conclusions from the ANU poll are particularly interesting. First, the public seems to credit John Howard with a substantial increase in Australia's military capacity over the second half of his term as PM the years after East Timor and the 2000 white paper. The proportion of

Australians who believe that the Defence Force is stronger now than 10 years ago went up sharply after 2001 and has stayed high ever since. Why should this be so? Since 2000 Defence spending has increased steadily by 3 per cent per annum in real terms, and the Defence Force has deployed continually on high- profile operations in our region and beyond. Big plans have been announced for the future. But in terms of concrete additions to capability it is hard to see that the Defence Force is much more capable today than it was in 2000. It is notable that Rudd and Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon seem intent on denting Howard's crown on this issue. They have begun something of a campaign about the deficiencies of the current force and the need to remediate what they regard as the neglect of Howard and his ministers to make sure the Defence Force actually delivered the capability it had invested in. Second, the public seems to think that defence spending has grown enough. For the first time in more than 20 years more Australians think the Government should cut Defence spending than increase it. That may in part reflect the public's recognition that tough fiscal times are ahead. But such a sharp dip in support for increased Defence spending suggests that something more is in the air. Whatever the cause, this is probably good news for Rudd. He has repeatedly committed to sustain Howard's long term trajectory of defence-spending increases, but it seems almost certain the forthcoming budget will at least slow the rate of Defence spending growth over the next few years. Moreover if the recession is prolonged, the fiscal pressure to cut Defence spending may become irresistible, especially once the economy starts to recover and the Government's priorities move from stimulating the economy to getting out of deficit. That is traditionally when recessions hit Defence budgets hardest. Thirdly, the ANU poll shows a fascinating set of attitudes towards the conflict in Afghanistan. Over half of those polled approve of our involvement in the war in Afghanistan, but 69percent believe we are not winning the war. That suggests a significant number of us think we should be there even if we are not winning. The explanation can perhaps be found in the responses to questions about the United States alliance, which show that Australians' regard for the alliance has recovered from the dent made by George W.Bush. The number of people who think it is very important to Australia has gone up sharply since 2007, and confidence that the US would come to our aid if attacked has risen too. Though Kevin Rudd says the threat of terrorism is the key reason for our involvement in Afghanistan, it has much more to do with sustaining our reputation in Washington as a good ally. This too is good news for Rudd, suggesting that there will be a degree of acceptance if, as seems almost certain, he decides to send more troops to support Barak Obama's surge. But the poll contains a warning, too: the slim majority who support the war is balanced by a large minority who oppose it. More casualties could easily turn the balance of opinion around. **Hugh White is Professor of Strategic Studies at the ANU and a Visiting Fellow at the Lowy Institute.**