



Public Attitudes Towards the Australian Defence Force: 2026

Richard Dunley, Nicole Townsend, Margaret Hutchison,
Tristan Moss, Ashleigh Brown and Rhys Crawley



ABOUT THE WAR STUDIES RESEARCH GROUP

The War Studies Research Group brings together scholars from within the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, who address modern defence and security challenges through applied historical research. Group members have 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 and space policy. The group works closely with partners in industry, government, and academia to produce relevant and problem-focused research and professional education.

The War Studies Research Group funded this survey.

Suggested citation: Richard Dunley, Nicole Townsend, Margaret Hutchison, Tristan Moss, Ashleigh Brown and Rhys Crawley, 'Public Attitudes Towards the Australian Defence Force: 2026', War Studies Research Group, UNSW Canberra, 2026

Contents

Key Findings	1
Introduction	2
Methodology	2
Section 1 – Attitudes towards the ADF	3
1.1 Attitudes towards and trust in the ADF	3
1.2 Size and funding of the ADF	6
1.3 Sexual violence in the ADF	9
Section 2 – The Role of the ADF	10
2.1 Threats to Australia and missions of the ADF	10
2.2 Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and defence assistance to the civil community	15
2.3 Roles and partnerships	17
Section 3 – Australia’s Defence Relationships	20
3.1 Defence basing	20
3.2 New defence agreements	22
Section 4 – Supporting Australia’s Veterans	24
4.1 Understanding of veterans and veterans’ issues	24
4.2 Support for veterans	25
Notes	29

Key Findings

Public trust in the ADF remains high.

69.4% of respondents stated that they trust the ADF as an institution and 65.7% trust it to act ethically, largely mirroring findings from the 2025 survey.

There is limited support for additional funding for the ADF.

Support for greater expenditure remained steady at roughly a third of respondents, despite the public reporting deteriorating perceptions of security. The most significant development from 2025 was the small but notable growth in those favouring cuts to defence spending.

Public awareness of ADF activities remains low.

Most respondents reported being unsure or uninformed about current ADF operations, indicating an ongoing gap between the breadth of Defence's operational commitments and the public's understanding of them.

Support for the ADF conducting disaster relief remains strong.

In a finding that mirrored our 2025 survey 82.2% supported the ADF carrying out domestic defence assistance to the civil community missions, and 68.4% supported the conduct of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief across the region.

A significant drop in support for the ADF operating with allies and partners.

Whilst more than half (54.4%) of respondents supported the ADF working closely with allies and partners especially the United States, this represented a decline of nearly 20% from 2025. Opposition to working with allies and partners also increased dramatically.

Australians broadly support the country's growing defence relationships.

Respondents reported clear views that the recent treaty with Papua New Guinea will enhance Australian security. However, knowledge of the treaty was limited, with only 37% reporting being aware of it.

The public backs government support for veterans, but there is limited awareness of veterans' issues or policy.

More respondents reported confidence in the Australian government's support for veterans (42.1%) than in 2025, and support for new initiatives was very high. However, there was limited awareness of veteran issues, suggesting that responses were based more on sentiment than knowledge.

Introduction

With conflicts raging in Europe and the Middle East, China continuing to undermine the established order in the Indo-Pacific, and threats at home from terrorists and foreign actors, recent polling has indicated that Australians are feeling increasingly insecure in a volatile world.¹ The situation is not helped by the often-erratic actions of the current Trump administration, which have generated notable uncertainty. Australian leaders have been saying for some time that the country faces the most serious strategic circumstances since the end of the Second World War, and the events of the past year have only reinforced this point.²

In this environment, defence and security issues have gained greater prominence in political discourse and the wider national conversation, both of which are, of course, dominated by the ongoing discussion over AUKUS. Popular opinion across these issues is important, and to better understand this sentiment, the War Studies Research Group fielded a second iteration of its survey on public attitudes towards the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

The 2026 survey has retained the focus on attitudes towards the ADF as an institution, something that sets it apart from similar endeavours focused on foreign policy and wider national security. Building on the success of the 2025 iteration, this survey asks questions about how Australians view the ADF, how much they understand about its activities, and what they perceive its roles should be. The survey asks many of the same questions, working to develop a longitudinal dataset on public attitudes towards the ADF. It also covers several new areas including a section on Australia's defence relationships, which illuminates public views on recent developments including the Papua New

Guinea – Australia Mutual Defence Treaty (Puk Puk Treaty).

The survey is divided into four sections, each of which assesses public attitudes towards the ADF and wider defence organisation in a specific area. These sections are:

- Attitudes towards the ADF
- Role of the ADF
- Australia's Defence Relationships
- Supporting Australia's Veterans

By examining public perceptions of the ADF across these four areas, the report offers valuable insight into attitudes toward one of Australia's most significant institutions. Through this, it contributes meaningfully to the public debate on defence. The survey data also provides an evidence base for policy decisions, which are often built on assumptions about how Australians view the ADF. While the findings frequently support these assumptions, they should also prompt reconsideration of some entrenched views held within policymaking and academic circles in Canberra and beyond.

Methodology

To conduct the research the authors employed iLink Research Services, who conducted a nationally representative survey of 1,529 adults across Australia. The survey was fielded at the end of January 2026, using iLink's online panel. The panel consists of adults aged 18 or over who are resident in Australia. The sample for this survey was collected to ensure that it was broadly representative of the Australian public, including in terms of age, gender, geography, political preference and income. The research received ethics approval from the University of New South Wales (iRECS10198).

Section 1 – Attitudes towards the ADF

The ADF depends heavily upon maintaining public trust. Its position as one of the very few organisations which, in certain circumstances, has the right to use lethal force places significant obligations on the organisation to retain widespread public support. The very considerable cost of defence also means that the ADF has both a responsibility and a need to explain what it does to the Australian public.

Our 2025 survey indicated a considerable level of public trust in the ADF. Despite ongoing issues that might impact public perceptions of the ADF, including accusations of war crimes and sexual violence, the result was mirrored in the 2026 results.

Across a range of different indicators Australians have reported that they are feeling less secure. This was reflected in our survey, but notably it did not translate into support for additional resources for the ADF. Only a third of those surveyed wanted greater defence expenditure, and notably there was a slight increase in those supporting a cut when compared to 2025. The reasons for this are unclear but could be related to the types of threats which the public view as most pressing, an issue explored in Section 2 of the report.

1.1 Attitudes towards and trust in the ADF

Overall, public attitudes towards and trust in the ADF were positive. As shown in Figure 1, 68.1% of respondents broadly agreed that they held a positive opinion of the ADF, while only 6.4% broadly disagreed.³ This is in line with the results of our 2025 survey. Men (75.1%) were more likely than women (61.3%) to have a positive opinion of the ADF. However, this did not correlate with stronger negative opinions among women, who were

more likely to favour a 'neutral' response (30.7% for women and 19.8% for men). Age was also a factor, with the proportion of those who broadly agreed steadily increasing across age groups. Positive views of the ADF were consistent across most states and territories, ranging from 63% (ACT) to 71% (Queensland).

The relationship between knowledge of the ADF and trust in it was one of the themes of the 2025 survey and we wanted to continue this focus. In 2026 less than half (42.5%) of respondents considered themselves knowledgeable about the ADF's size, role, and operations (Figure 2). This did, however, represent an increase of 5% from our 2025 survey. 24.9% stated they did not consider themselves knowledgeable about the ADF. Men were considerably more likely than women to claim an understanding of the ADF (52% compared to 34%). Age also proved a factor: those aged 25–34 were most likely (51%) to feel knowledgeable about the ADF, while those 75 years and over were least likely (31%). Positive responses increased in line with education levels, from 21% (those respondents with a high school education or less) to 57% (postgraduate education).

Despite most respondents not serving or having an immediate family connection to the ADF, Figure 3 shows that almost half (47.9%) broadly agreed they would recommend service in the ADF to a family member. A further 40% were neutral, with just 12.3% of respondents disinclined to do so. This data is in line with that collected for our 2025 survey. Again, men were more likely than women to recommend service in the ADF: 55% as opposed to 41%. No political leanings correlated with a position against recommending service in the ADF, although almost half of Greens (46%) and Independent (43%) voters were 'neutral'.

Figure 1: Overall, I have a positive opinion of the ADF.

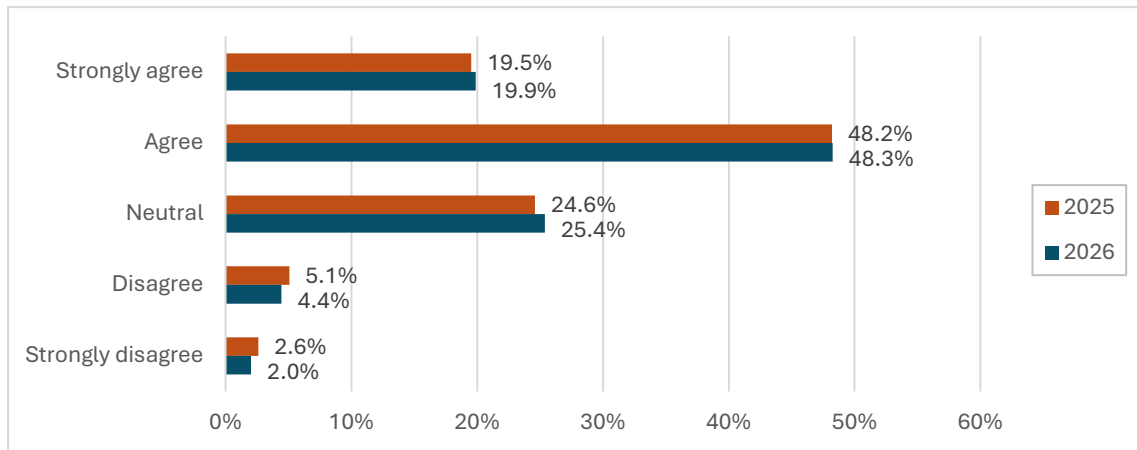


Figure 2: Overall, I am knowledgeable about the Australian Defence Force (ADF), such as its size, role and operations.

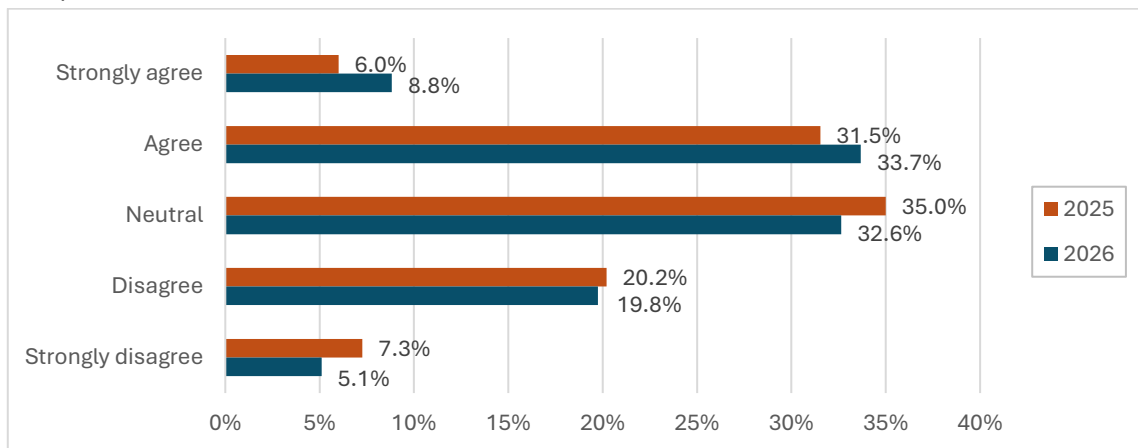
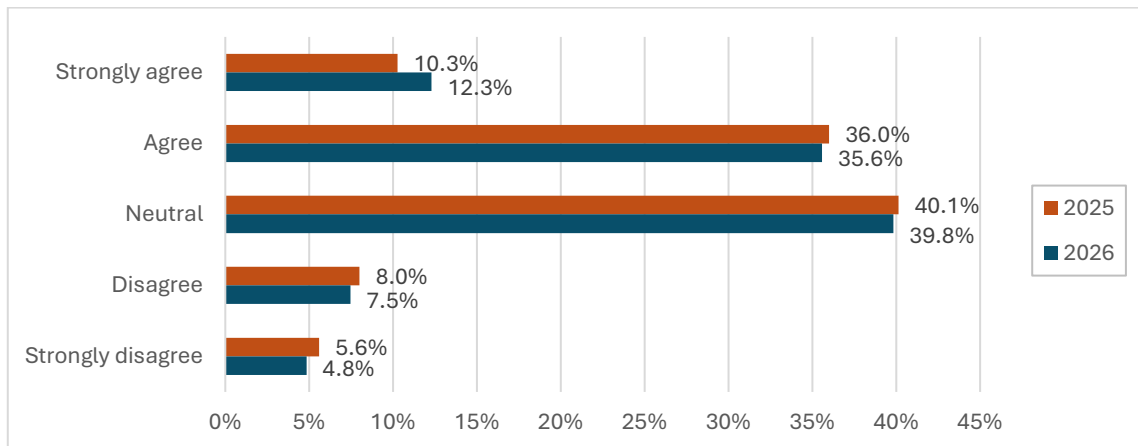


Figure 3: I would recommend service in the ADF to a family member.



Maintaining the public's trust is vital to the ADF's ability to effectively carry out its role. The data collected indicates that there is a high level of trust in the organisation. Respondents were asked two questions on the subject: whether they trust the ADF as an institution, and whether they trust the ADF to act ethically. As shown across Figures 4 and 5, the responses to both were positive. Given less than half of respondents believe they are knowledgeable about the ADF, however, there is a considerable degree of implicit trust.

Mirroring the results from 2025, 69.4% expressed trust in the ADF as an institution, while 65.7% trust it to act ethically. Again, men were more likely than women to hold a positive view (76% and 70% from male respondents, and 62% and 61% from female respondents). Several demographic factors affected respondents' trust in the ADF. The youngest demographic (18–24) was slightly less likely to trust the ADF, with 61.9% indicating a trust in the institution and 57.9% trusting it to act ethically. This does not represent a substantial outlier, however, as responses from the other age ranges were 68–72% and 65–70% respectively.

Political leanings were a more significant factor. Liberal voters were most likely to trust the ADF as an institution (82%) and to act ethically (80%), followed by Labor voters (73% and 69%). Greens voters were the least trusting of the ADF, with just 49% indicating they trust it as an institution and 41% trusting it to act ethically. These differences are mirrored in respondents' general opinion of the ADF.

Importantly, just 8% of respondents indicated distrust in the ADF as an institution, with 9% saying they do not trust it to act ethically. This comparatively low level of distrust in the ADF is significant, particularly in the context of the highly publicised allegations of war crimes involving members of the Special Operations Task Group in Afghanistan between 2005 and 2016. A redacted public version of the Afghanistan Inquiry Report was released in November 2020.⁴ Two former members of the Special Air Service Regiment (SASR) have since been charged with war crimes.⁵ Whether the results of these trials will affect the public's trust in the ADF remains to be seen.

Figure 4: Overall, I trust the ADF as an institution.

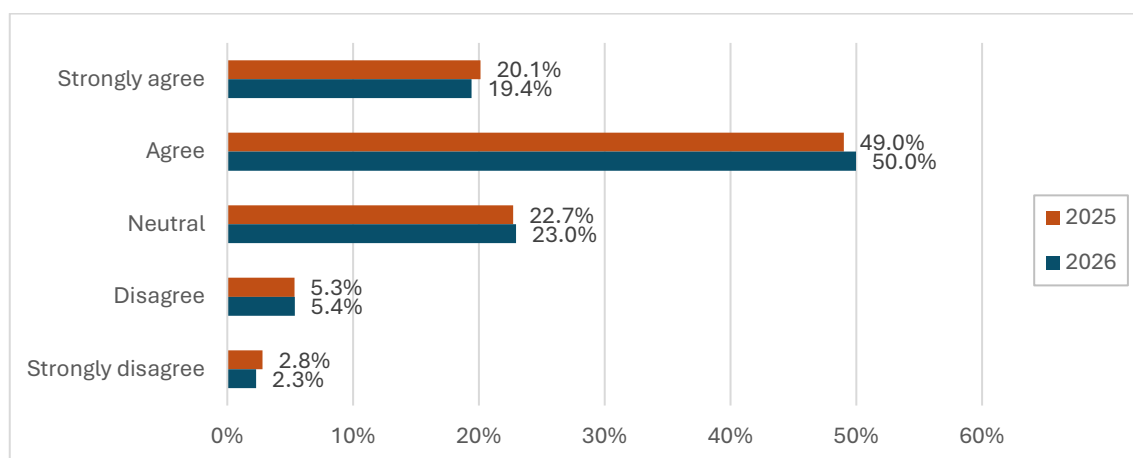
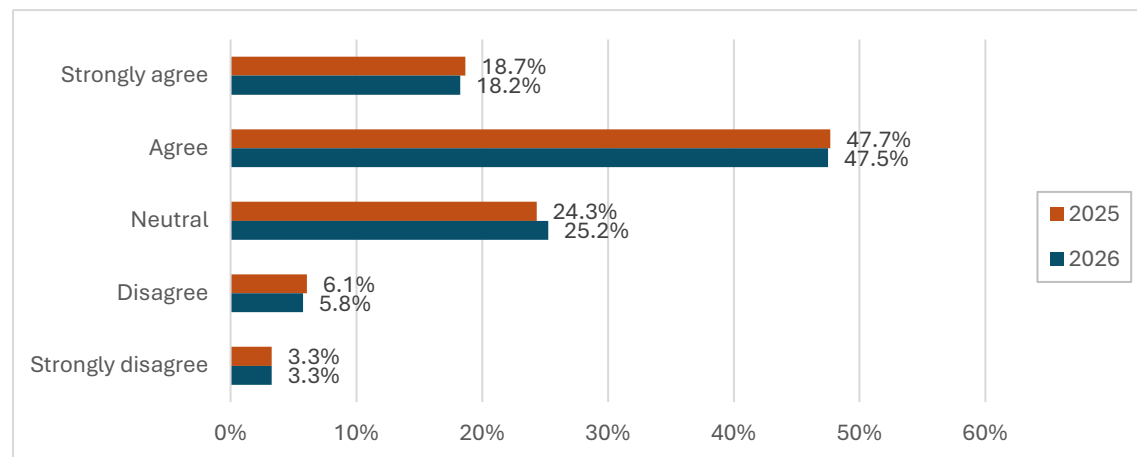


Figure 5: Overall, I trust the ADF to act ethically.



1.2 Size and funding of the ADF

Much of the current debate over defence matters in Australia revolves around questions of the size of the ADF and the amount of funding allocated to it. Most commentators have been calling for a significant increase in investment in defence, an argument that has also been made forcefully by senior figures from the Trump administration in Washington.⁶ Both major political parties in Australia went to the 2025 election promising to spend more on defence, but public engagement on the issue was muted. In this survey we found that the gap between the attitudes of the public and those of policymakers and commentators has, if anything, grown over the past year. Despite public concern over increasing insecurity, there remains limited appetite for additional resources for the ADF.

46% of respondents to our 2026 survey felt that Australia's security situation had deteriorated over the past 12 months, set against 18% who disagreed. This perception of growing insecurity aligns with findings from the Lowy Institute Poll and a recent National Security College report.⁷ However, a significant proportion (35%) expressed neutral views, and this was consistent across all demographics.

As Figure 6 shows, this perception of growing insecurity only partially fed through into a belief that the ADF is too small. 39.8% of respondents held this view, a figure that remained steady from the 2025 iteration of the survey. Notably, however, over 48% of those surveyed in 2026 felt that the ADF was appropriately sized, and the number who consider it too large grew from 7% in 2025 to 12% in 2026.

These attitudes varied considerably by age. Younger Australians were most likely to believe that the ADF was appropriately sized or too large, with 20% of 25–34-year-olds holding the latter view. By contrast only 3% of 65–74-year-olds felt the ADF was too large, set against 58% who considered it too small.

Respondents were also asked two questions about their opinion on current levels of defence spending. The first asked their opinion generally, while the second asked the same question in the context of defence spending as a proportion of GDP for Australia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand. In both instances, around half of respondents felt current spending was appropriate. The additional context of the data on Australian spending as set against that of the United Kingdom and New Zealand

did not significantly alter the responses. Across both questions 34% of those surveyed thought Australia currently spends too little on defence (Figure 7). This represents a small but notable drop from the 40% who felt the ADF was too small. Perhaps most interestingly, the largest shift year-on-year was the increased number of respondents who felt Australian spending was too large. This grew from 11% to 15%.

We also surveyed the priorities within that funding, asking which ADF service respondents considered to be most important to Australia, and which they viewed as being the priority for funding (Figure 8).

Across both questions the Army fared best: 42% of those surveyed considered it the most important service to Australian defence, and 37% believed it should be the top priority for expenditure. By contrast, the Royal Australian Navy ranked third out of the services. This is particularly noteworthy, given the maritime focus of Australia's current strategic approach, as reflected by actual defence expenditure in the 2026 Integrated Investment Program, which is heavily weighted towards the maritime domain.⁸ It also speaks to some of the ongoing challenges around maintaining public support for AUKUS.

Figure 6: The ADF is currently composed of around 61,000 full time personnel. This compares with around 147,000 personnel in the British armed forces and around 9,000 in the New Zealand armed forces. Is the ADF:

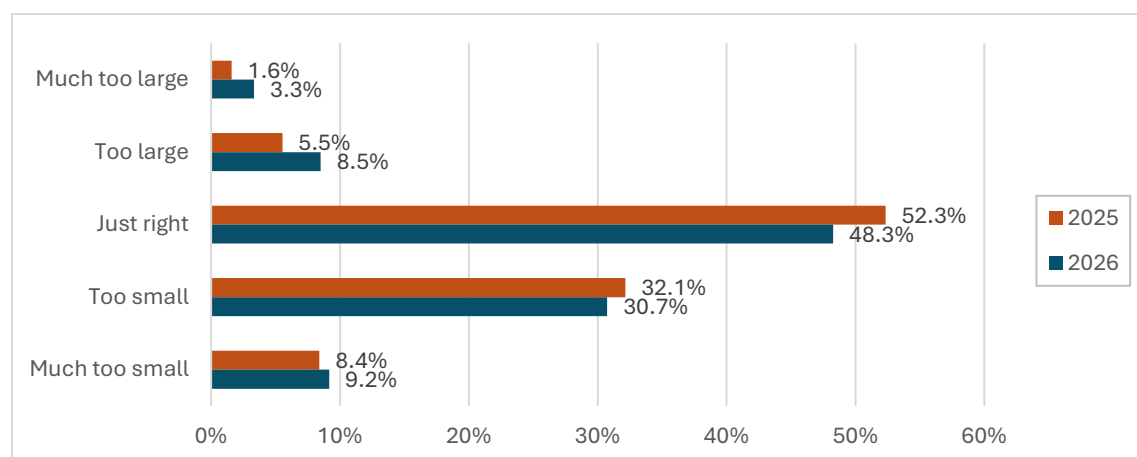
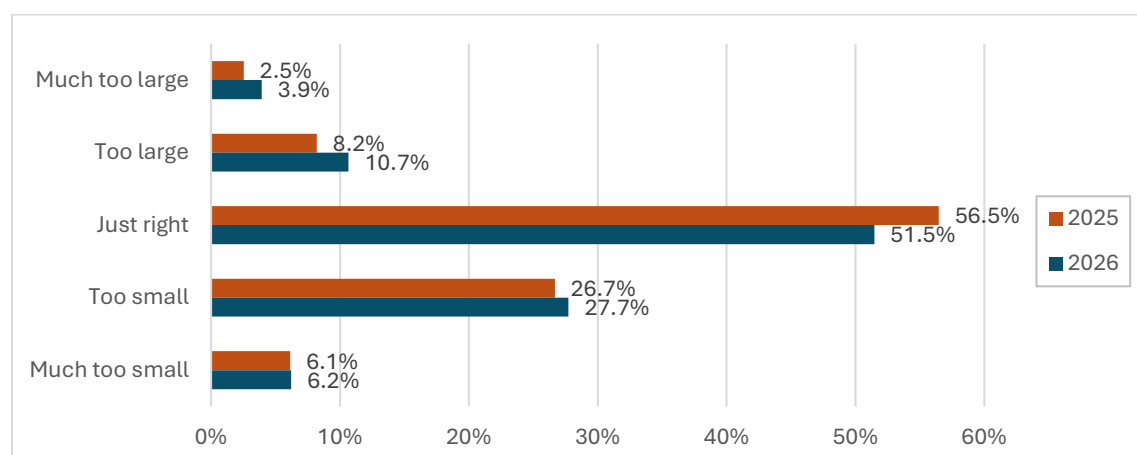


Figure 7: Australia spends around 2% of GDP on Defence. This compares to around 2.4% in Britain, and 1.2% in New Zealand. Given this context, is the Australian figure:



The final question in this section addressed levels of public trust in the Department of Defence and the ADF to spend taxpayers' money effectively in supporting the defence of Australia. Defence has been the subject of a series of damning Australian National Audit Office inquiries, and media headlines have consistently reported cost blowouts on

a range of different acquisition projects.⁹ Despite these challenges, respondents demonstrated a considerable degree of confidence in Defence: 60% broadly agreed the department can be trusted to spend its money effectively. By contrast, only 11% disagreed, and just under 30% gave a neutral response.

Figure 8: Rank the three services in order of what you believe should be their funding priority.

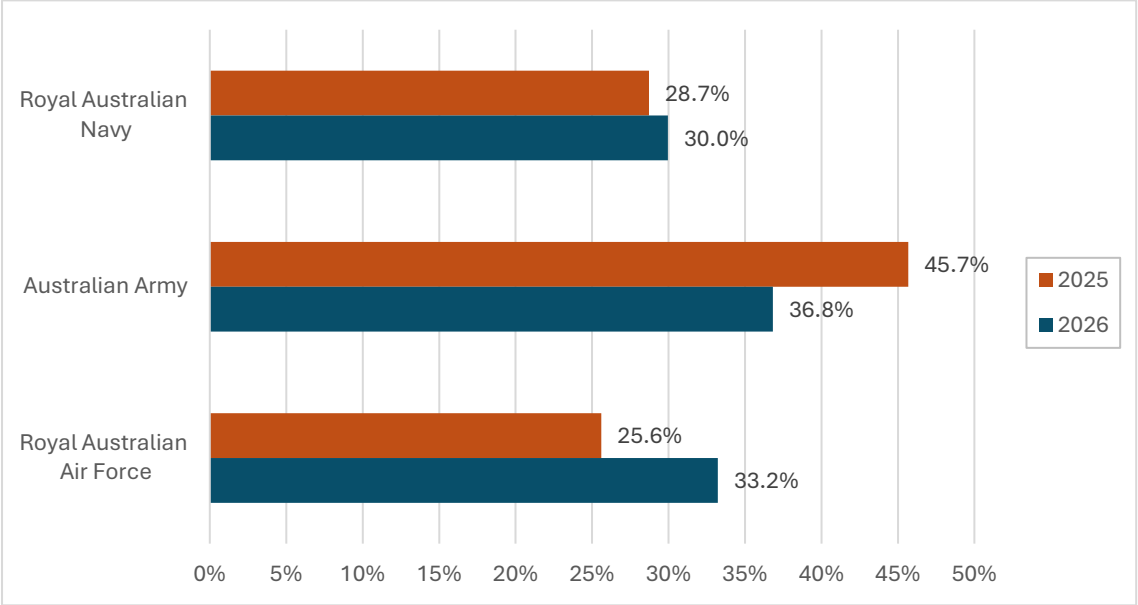
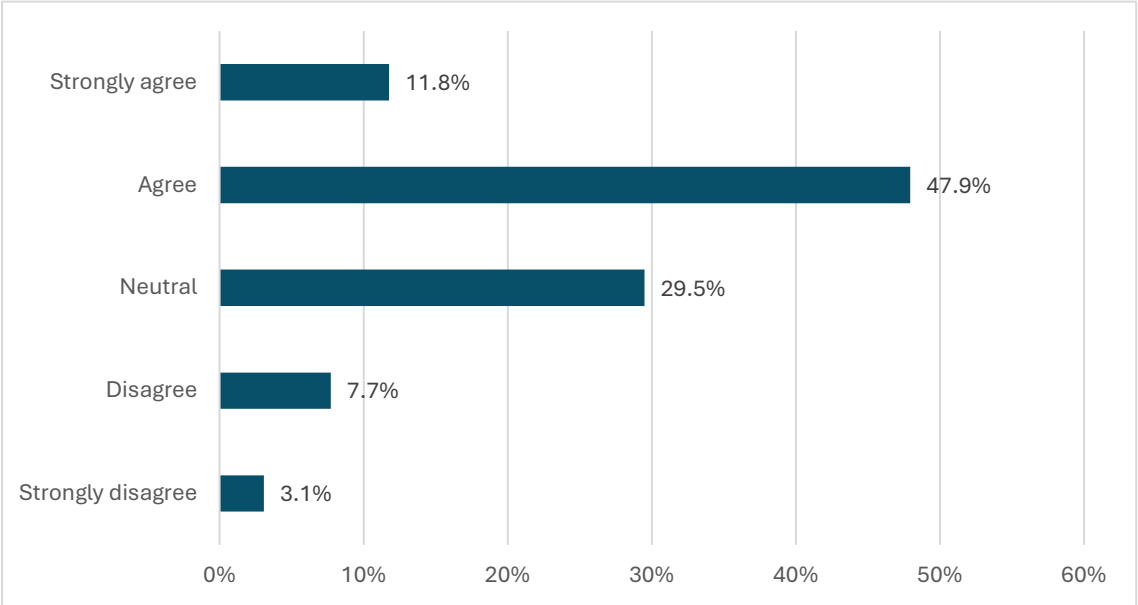


Figure 9: I believe that the Department of Defence and the ADF can be trusted to spend its funding effectively to provide the capability needed to defend Australia.



1.3 Sexual violence in the ADF

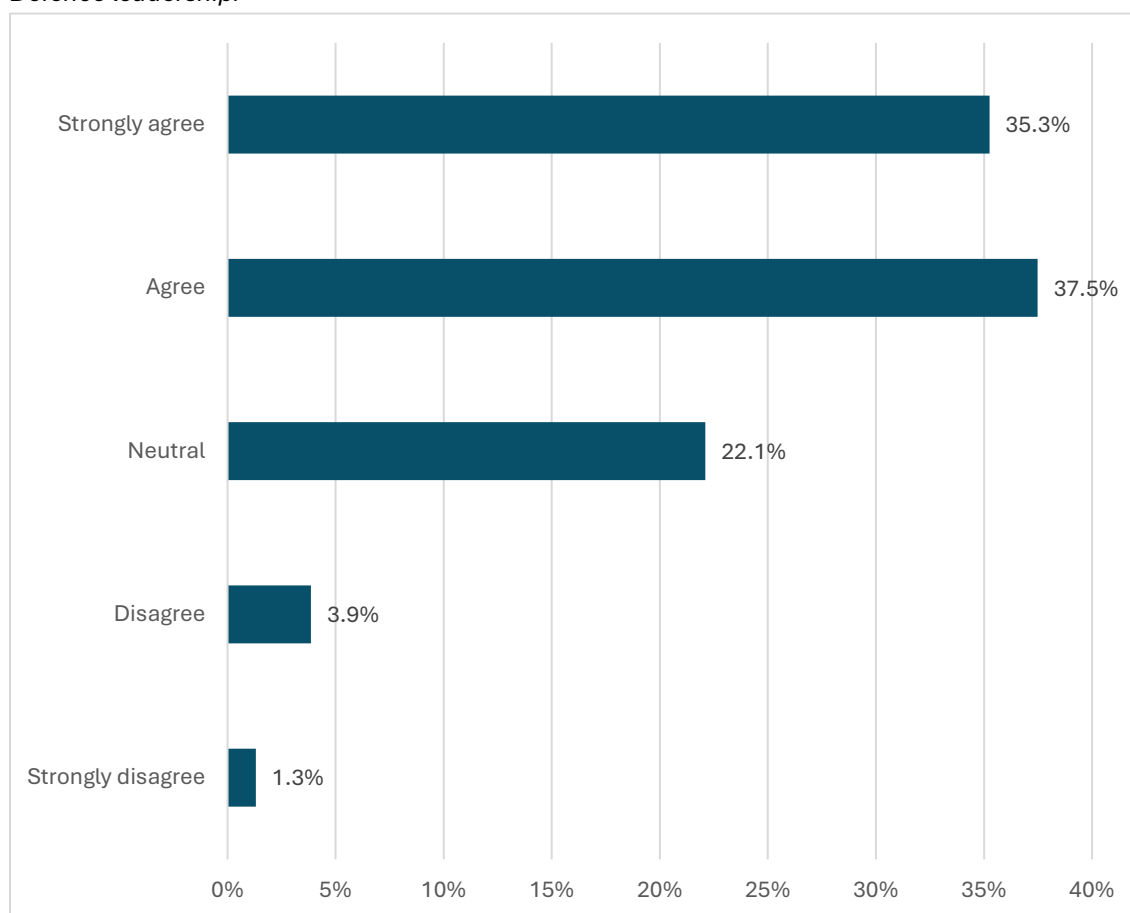
Sexual violence within the ADF continues to be a point of concern for both Defence and the broader Australian community. Investigations and media reports on the issue of sexual harassment, assault and trauma are a regular occurrence.¹⁰

When asked whether sexual violence within the ADF is a serious issue that requires stronger action from Defence leadership, a considerable majority of Australians agreed (72.7%), with 22.1% neutral. There was no significant difference between men and women in their responses.

The challenge of military sexual violence also forms a part of other issues, such as veteran suicide, the integration and retention

of women in uniform and broader ADF culture. The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide found that military sexual violence is closely linked to suicide and suicidality among serving members and veterans. It recommended an inquiry be conducted into the ongoing issue of military sexual violence; this was acted on by the government, who engaged the Australian Human Rights Commission in December 2025 to carry out this inquiry. Yet only one-third of Australians reported they were aware of the new inquiry, with 68% indicating they had not heard it. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that in 2025 only 44% of respondents had heard of the Royal Commission itself.¹¹

Figure 10: Sexual violence within the ADF is a serious issue that requires stronger action from Defence leadership.



Section 2 – The Role of the ADF

In the second section of the survey, we assessed public awareness of, and attitudes towards, the roles the ADF fulfils and the likely scenarios in which it would be called upon by the Australian Government to act. Building on the findings of the 2025 survey, respondents were asked for their assessment as to which tasks are most important and/or constitute the most likely threats to Australian security. We explored how these affected requirements placed on the ADF. We also examined how the public perceived the balance between the ADF's conflict roles and those it would be called upon to carry out in peacetime.

The survey found that the majority of respondents remained very supportive of a broad imagining of the role of the ADF, with positive attitudes expressed towards both domestic defence assistance to the civil community (DACC) and regional humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). The survey did, however, reveal a significant shift in the past year in attitudes regarding how Australia ought to be providing itself with security. A growing number of respondents backed a focus on military means to provide security rather than softer approaches. Yet support for cooperation between the ADF and Australian allies and partners dropped substantially, likely a result of growing public distrust of the United States. Instead, respondents increasingly saw a narrower focus on self-reliance and the defence of Australia as the best way forward.

2.1 Threats to Australia and missions of the ADF

According to the Department of Defence, in early 2026 the ADF was involved in 21 active operations in Australia's immediate region and further abroad.¹² Defence categorises these commitments into four broad groups:

global operations; Indo-Pacific operations; South-West Pacific operations; and domestic operations. Collectively, they encompass contributions to long-standing peacekeeping missions in the Middle East, Africa and the Korean Peninsula; participation in multinational maritime security and sanctions enforcement activities; targeted training and capacity-building partnerships with regional militaries; humanitarian and explosive ordnance disposal tasks in Pacific Island countries; and support to national functions such as border protection and the Australian Antarctic Program. This operational spread illustrates the extent to which the ADF's contemporary role integrates domestic responsibilities with international security obligations and regional engagement (Map 1).

Our 2025 survey found most Australians had only a limited understanding of what the ADF was doing at home and abroad. Only 26% of respondents felt well informed about the ADF's active operations, while more people felt uninformed (36%), and the largest group (38%) were neutral. Overall, the findings pointed to a public that is generally unsure about, rather than confidently aware of, the ADF's operational activities. There may be a correlation between how much someone knows about the ADF and how much they trust it.¹³

In our 2026 survey, we wanted to see if anything had changed. We also sought to go further in determining public views about Defence's overall mission, and how Australians rank threats to Australia's security and prosperity. Section 2.1 thus asked respondents if they felt well informed of current ADF operations; to rank the importance of ADF roles; what operational activities were most likely to be required of the ADF in the next half decade; and to rank

five threats to Australian security in order of their importance.

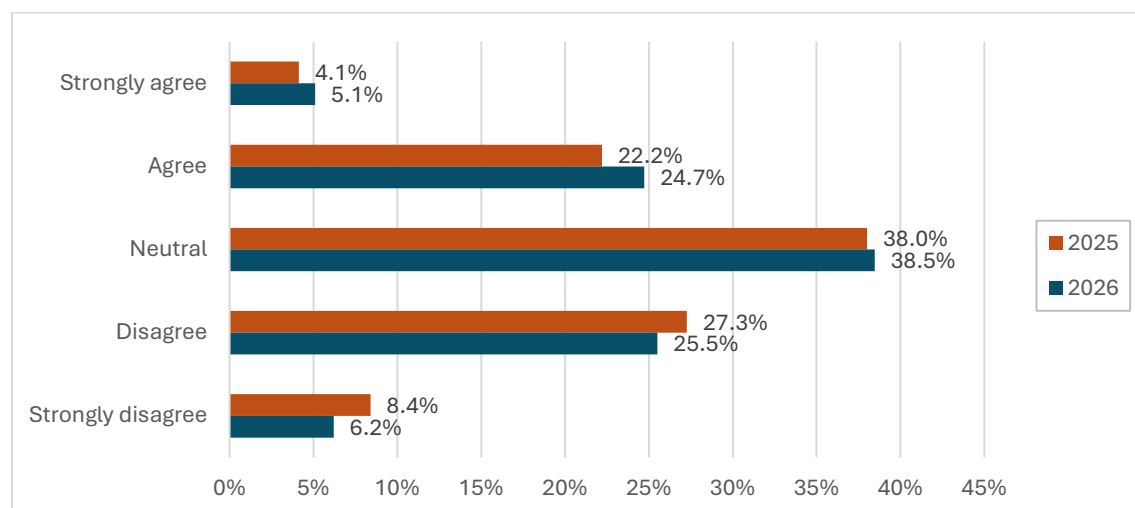
In 2026, as in 2025, a substantial proportion of respondents—approximately 38%—remained neutral about how well informed they felt about ADF operations (Figure 11). Among those who expressed a clear view, more respondents disagreed (25.5%) or strongly disagreed (6.2%) than those who agreed (24.7%) or strongly agreed (5.1%). This pattern suggests persistently low levels of public knowledge and a continued lack of confidence in understanding the ADF’s operational activities. Overall, the findings indicate that there has been a slight increase in knowledge of ADF activities, but significant work still needs to be done to raise public awareness.

Defence defines its mission as being ‘to defend Australia and its national interests in order to advance Australia’s security and prosperity’.¹⁴ Survey responses broadly mirror this statement. Nearly half of respondents identified the defence of Australia as the ADF’s most important role (Figure 12). This was followed by peacekeeping and regional stabilisation activities (18%), and by domestic emergency support which 17.4% viewed as the ADF’s most important function. A further 12.7%

highlighted regional HADR, an area in which the ADF has a long operational history. Notably, only 6.1% identified participation in US-led operations in the Indo-Pacific as the ADF’s most important role, a finding that sits in contrast to the centrality of the alliance in Australian defence policy, but appears likely to be a product of wider shifts in Australian views towards the United States over the past year.

The survey also asked respondents to consider what types of ADF activities were most likely to occur over the next five years—a question not included previously (Figure 13). Despite regular public statements that Australia faces the most challenging strategic circumstances since the end of the Second World War, only 8.4% of respondents judged high intensity conflict as likely. One-fifth (19.8%) anticipated the ADF would be engaged in low intensity conflict. By contrast, 38.3% identified peacekeeping or stabilisation operations as the most probable, with HADR being the most likely future activity for one-third of respondents (33.5%). These results suggest that public expectations continue to align more closely with regional stabilisation and humanitarian support than with scenarios involving major conflict.

Figure 11: Overall, I feel I am well informed about current ADF operations



Map 1: Current ADF operations as of early 2026 (Source: Department of Defence).

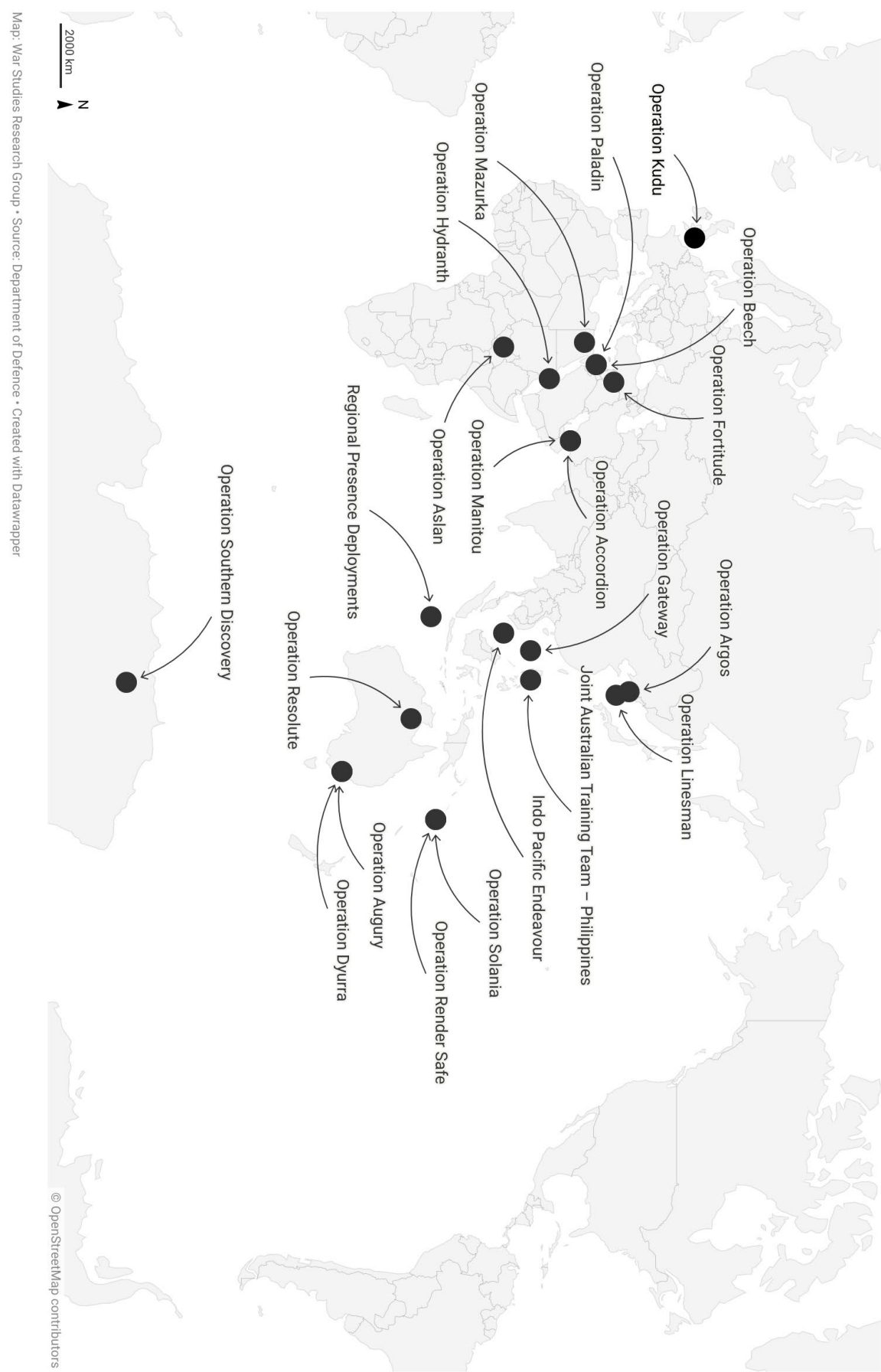


Figure 12: Rank the following roles for the ADF in terms of their importance.

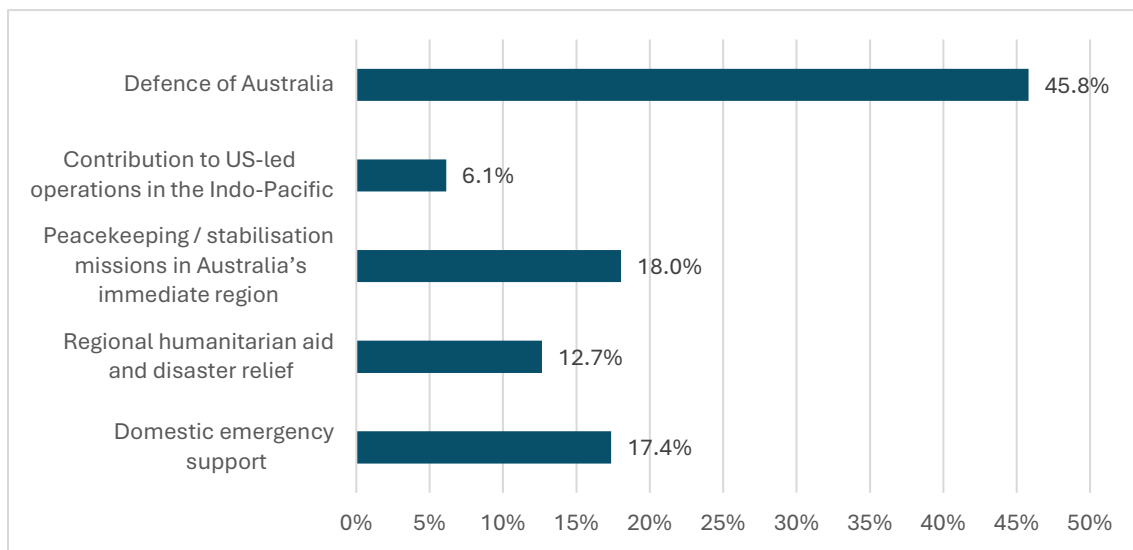


Figure 13: What type of operation is the ADF likely to have to undertake in the next five years?

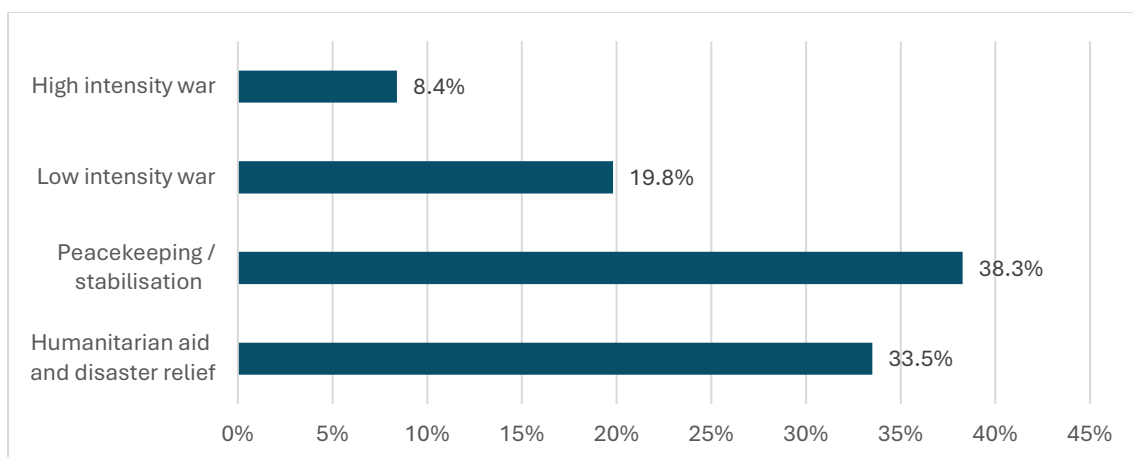
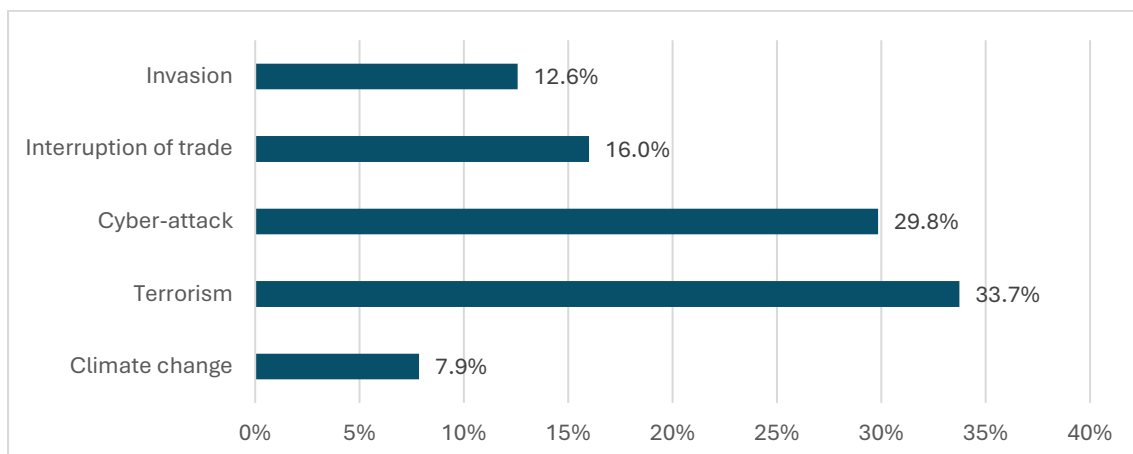


Figure 14: Rank the following threats to Australian security in order of their importance.



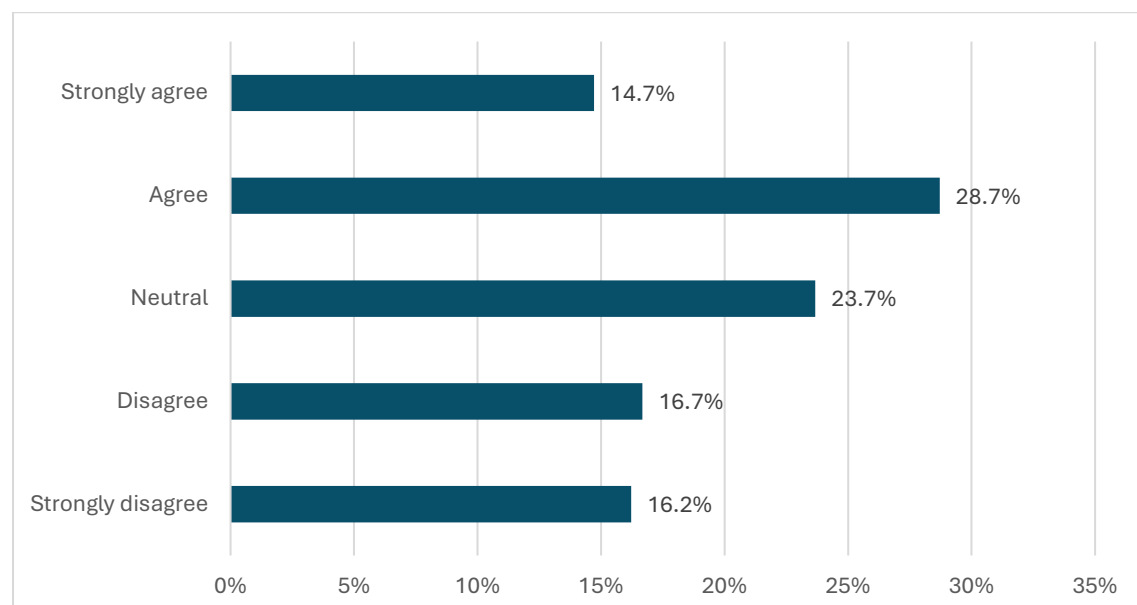
Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the survey was conducted shortly after the December 2025 Bondi terror attacks, respondents ranked terrorism as the most significant threat facing Australia (33.7%) (Figure 14). Second in order of importance were cyber-attacks (29.8%); this is significantly lower than the results of the 2026 Lowy Institute Poll, which, for the fourth year running, ranked such attacks as the leading threat.¹⁵ Interruption to Australia's trade routes (16%) was the next most important threat identified (and this, before the fuel crisis caused by closure of the Strait of Hormuz), ahead of the prospect of invasion (12.6%), which respondents continued to view as highly unlikely. Climate change ranked last in the threat hierarchy, showing that its security implications and government framing of it as a national security risk was not cutting through.

Taken together, these rankings suggest public perceptions emphasise transnational and non-traditional threats more strongly than conventional military ones, something that perhaps plays into the limited support for any expansion of the ADF.

Finally, within this section we posed the question as to whether Australia should adopt some form of national service for young people (Figure 15). This issue has gained considerable traction around the world, and several European countries have recently introduced a voluntary national service scheme. Some voices in the Australian defence debate have argued there is a need to return to conscription.¹⁶

The survey found that respondents were divided on this issue. Overall, 43.4% broadly agreed, 32.9% disagreed, and 23.7% remained neutral, although there were some notable demographic differences within this. 18–24-year-olds were among the most likely to oppose such a proposal (35.5%) and were least likely to support it (30.9%)—unsurprising, given they would be most affected by such a policy change. By contrast 71% of those aged 75 and older supported conscription and only 17% opposed it. Men were far more likely than women to back the idea, and there were significant differences by political affiliation: Liberal Party voters expressed the strongest support, with Greens voters being the clearest opponents.

Figure 15: Australia should implement a scheme of national service (conscription) for compulsory military training for young people.



2.2 Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and defence assistance to the civil community

Through activities including Operations Bushfire Assist and COVID-19 Assist in a domestic context, and Operation Tonga Assist in the region, defence assistance to the civil community and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief have given the ADF a significant public profile. However, there have long been concerns that these roles detract from the ADF's core military missions, a point reiterated in the 2023 Defence Strategic Review.¹⁷ We sought to assess public support for these missions and whether there is appetite for a different organisation to be established to take on this responsibility.

As in 2025, most survey respondents broadly agreed with ADF assistance to communities impacted by disasters such as bushfires and floods (83%) and only a minority broadly disagreed (2%) (Figure 16). Notable support emerged among those aged 75 or over, among whom the rate of broad agreement was 94.2%. None broadly disagreed; a unique result compared to all other age groups (where broad disagreement ranged from 1%–4%).

Just over two-thirds of respondents (68.4%) likewise broadly agreed that regional HADR was an important mission for the ADF (Figure 17). In 2026, broad disagreement remained relatively steady at 8%. Among National Party/Other voters, the rate of broad disagreement was double the net result, at 16%, indicating that political preference impacts public opinion in this regard.

Despite positive attitudes towards ADF assistance overall, the strength of respondents' attitudes with respect to domestic versus regional ADF assistance nonetheless varied. Broad agreement with the ADF's domestic assistance role was 14% higher than broad agreement with regional HADR, and stronger support for domestic assistance compared to regional HADR was particularly apparent within some age and political preference groups. Amongst National Party/Other voters, there was a 30% difference in broad agreement; and amongst respondents aged 55–64, the variance in broad agreement was 20%. In contrast, respondents within the 18–24 years age group expressed more consistent attitudes towards the ADF's domestic and regional assistance (4% difference in broad agreement), as did Greens Party voters (1% difference in broad agreement).

When asked if they supported the establishment of an alternative organisation to respond in times of national emergency other than war, almost two-thirds of respondents broadly agreed (64.7%) and less than one-tenth broadly disagreed (7.9%). Compared to 2025, respondents in 2026 were also slightly more likely to broadly agree (4.1% increase) and slightly less likely to broadly disagree (2.2% decrease) with this statement.

When examining respondents' attitudes towards the ADF's domestic assistance role vis-à-vis their support for an alternative organisation (Figure 18), respondents favoured the ADF's domestic role (18% difference in broad agreement).

Figure 16: I believe that the ADF should be used to support Australian people and communities during and after natural emergencies such as bushfires and floods.

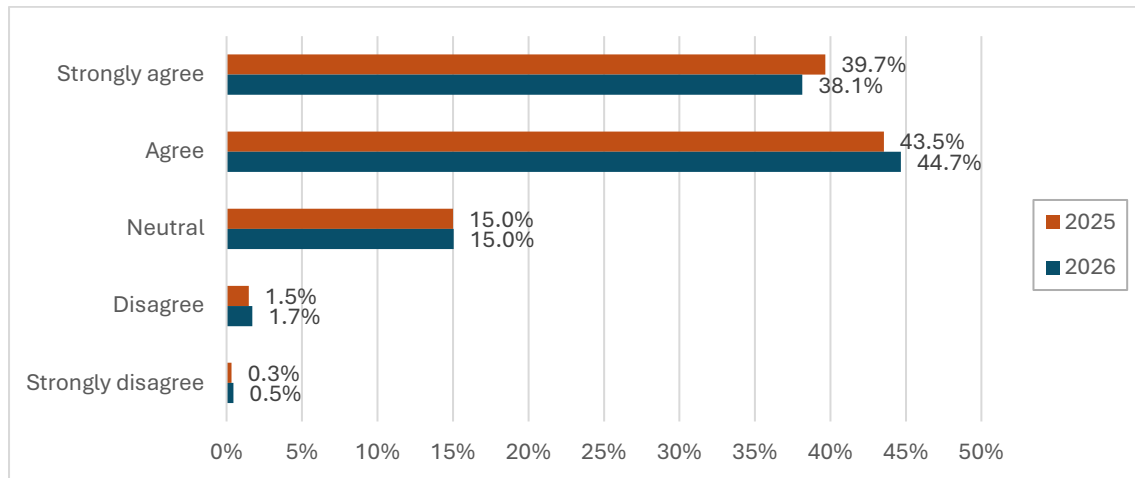


Figure 17: I believe that providing humanitarian aid and disaster relief to other countries within the region is an important mission for the ADF.

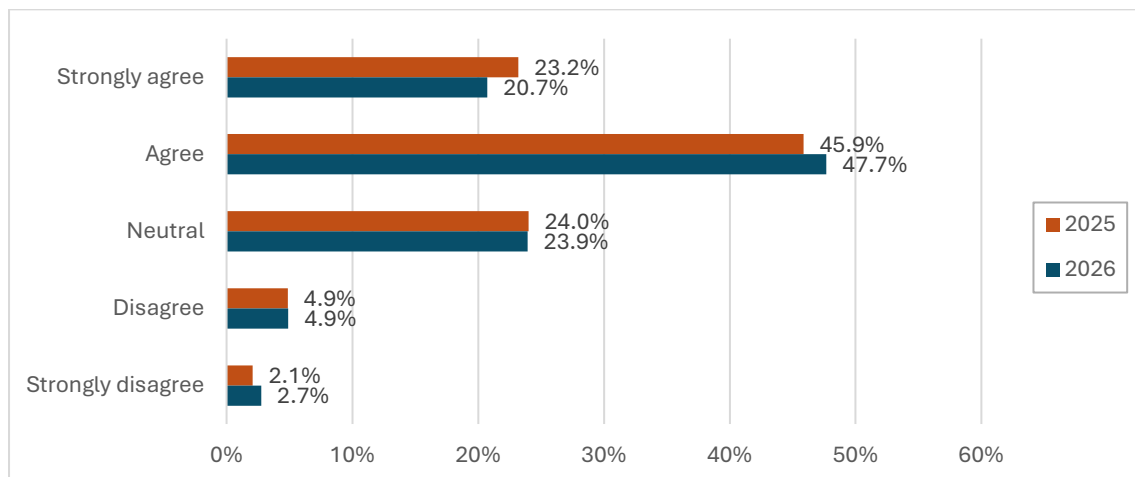
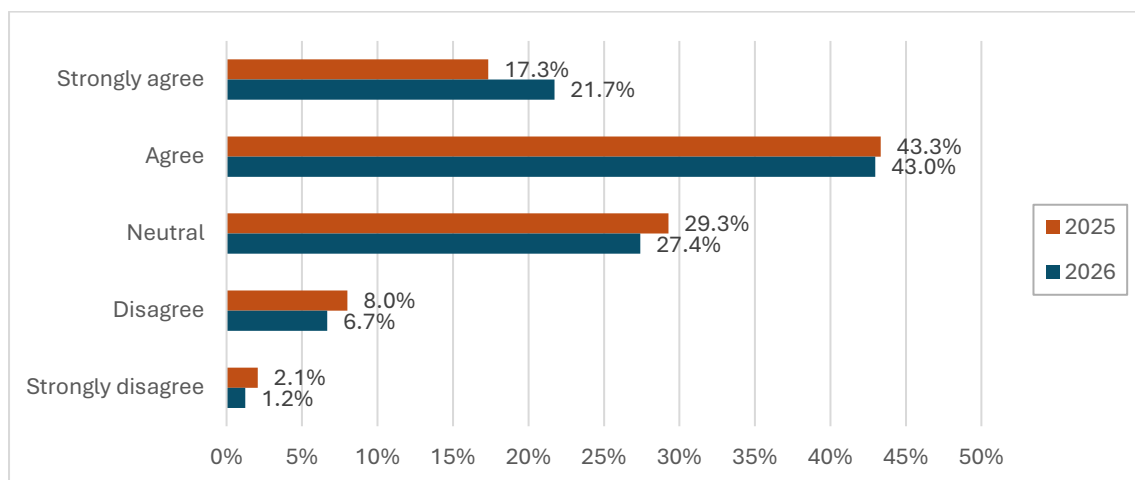


Figure 18: I support the establishment of an alternative organisation to the ADF to respond in times of national emergency other than war, such as disaster relief, to allow the ADF to focus on defending Australia.



2.3 Roles and partnerships

This section of the survey sought to gauge whether public opinion towards the roles of the ADF had changed over the past 12 months, particularly in relation to Australia's alliances and partnerships. To assess this, we asked the same questions regarding the roles and circumstances in which the ADF should be used as we posed in 2025. The differences in attitudes are instructive.

Slight changes in opinion emerged when Australians were asked about the balance between "hard power" and "soft power" in ensuring Australian security (Figure 19). Although the differences between the 2025 and 2026 data were relatively small in this case, more Australians broadly agreed that Australian security is best served by prioritising the development of a strong military, rather than focusing on diplomacy and foreign aid. The results show a 2.5% increase in the number of respondents who strongly agreed that a strong military outweighed diplomacy and foreign aid, while almost 3% more Australians agreed with the statement provided. There was a commensurate 5.9% drop in neutrality, with negligible change in levels of disagreement (<0.5%).

Public opinion shifted more dramatically when it came to the ADF's role in relation to its allies and partners, particularly the United States (Figure 20). Three-quarters (75.1%) of Australians surveyed in 2025 broadly agreed the ADF should prioritise working closely with these nations,

especially the United States. Disagreement levels were also negligible, with only 2.1% broadly disagreeing. By the time this survey was fielded, levels of agreement had dropped more than 20 points, with just over half (54.3%) of those surveyed broadly agreeing. Neutrality spiked (from 22.9% to 32.2%), but the increase in disagreement is most striking: 9.5% disagreed, and 4% strongly disagreed that the ADF should prioritise working closely with allies and partners, especially the United States. This equates to a more than 500% increase in disagreement overall compared to January 2025.

This pattern was reflected in the follow up question asking whether it was in Australia's best interests to support allies and partners in a conflict, as shown in Figure 21. Here support for the statement dropped from 65.3% in 2025 to 49.9% in 2026, and rates of opposition nearly tripled (5.5% in 2025 as against 16.3% in 2026). This pattern was relatively consistent across all demographics, but there were notable differences when broken down by political affiliation. Support for deploying the ADF to support allies and partners in a conflict was strongest among Liberal Party voters (62%) and weakest among independents and Green Party supporters, among whom there was almost an even balance between those in favour and those opposed (30.0% broad agree, 29.4% broad disagree).

Figure 19: To what extent do you agree that Australian security is best served by prioritising developing a strong military compared with focusing on diplomacy and foreign aid?

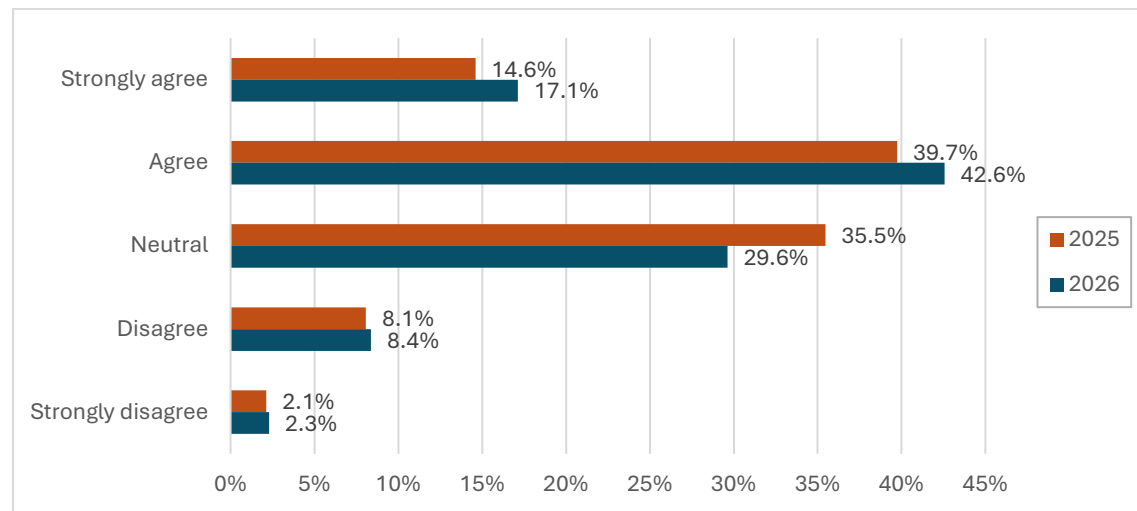


Figure 20: The ADF should prioritise working closely with allies and partners, especially the United States.

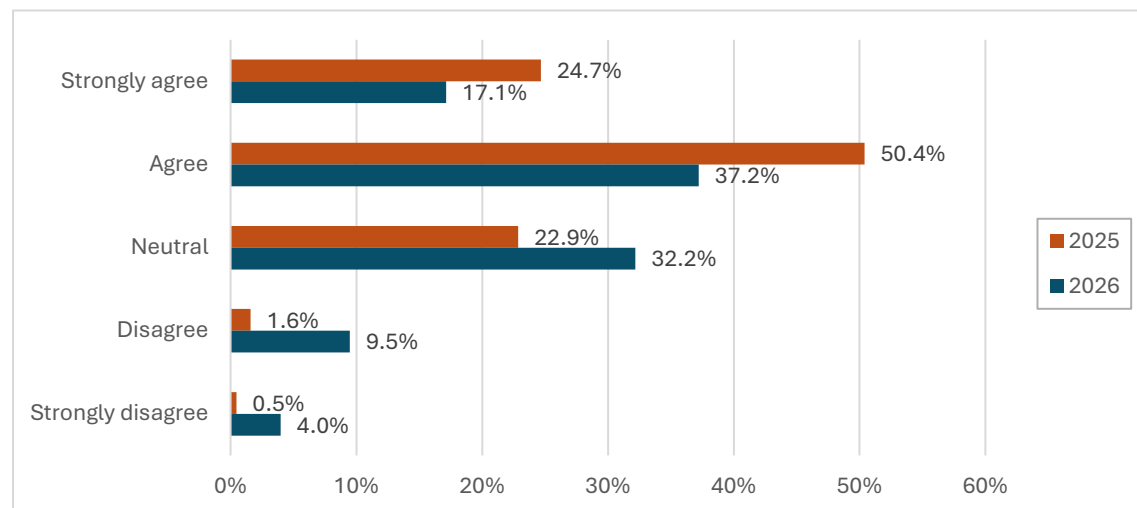
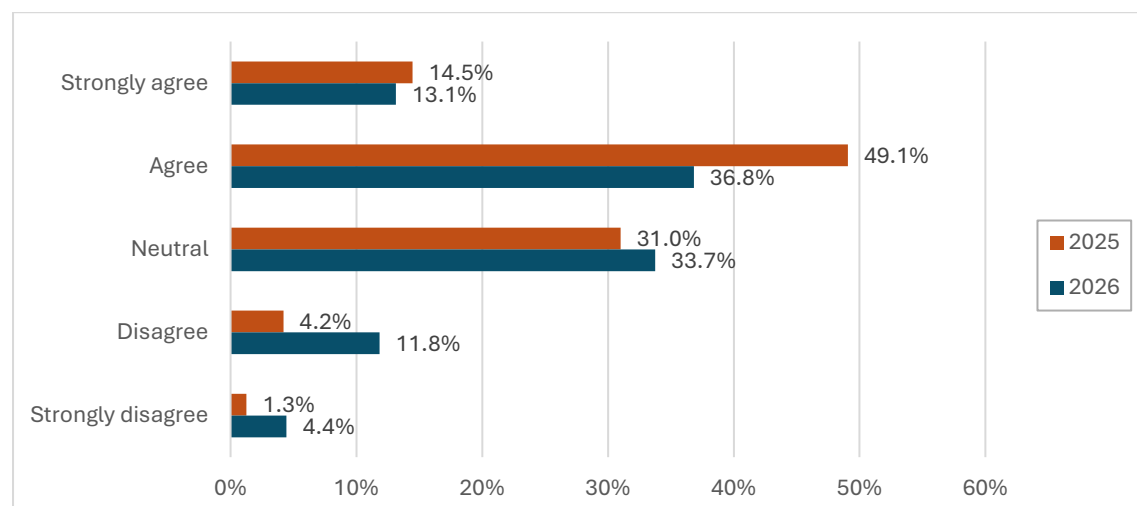


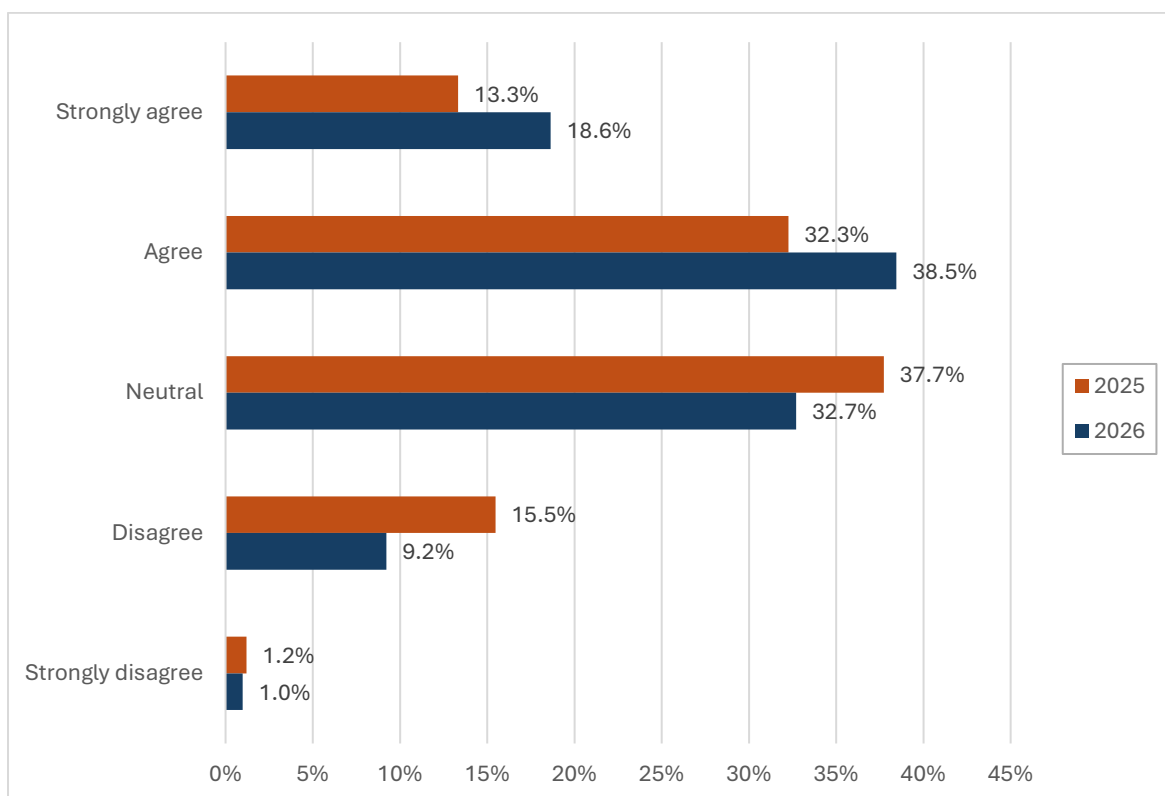
Figure 21: It is in Australia's best interests for the ADF to be deployed to support the country's allies and partners, such as the United States, including, if necessary, in a conflict.



Australians also proved more supportive of a focus on the defence of Australia over supporting allies and partners in maintaining regional security (Figure 22). Levels of disagreement and neutrality decreased between 2025 and 2026. This corresponded with a commensurate increase in levels of agreement, indicating that Australian public opinion is becoming more decisive in favour of a focus on Australian security over

broader regional concerns. Taken together, these results suggest that the volatile international situation in the past 12 months, particularly regarding the United States and the Middle East, may be affecting Australian public opinion towards the ADF's role in maintaining Australian security and balancing Australia's relationships with allies and partners.

Figure 22: Australia is best served by focusing primarily on the defence of Australian territory rather than supporting our allies and partners in maintaining wider regional security



Section 3 – Australia’s Defence Relationships

The past year has seen very significant shifts in Australia’s defence relationships. The signing of the Puk Puk Treaty with Papua New Guinea in late 2025 shortly followed by the Jakarta Treaty with Indonesia early this year has highlighted the government’s clear desire to build stronger regional relationships. At the same time existing relationships, most notably with the United States, are continuing to develop. Growing numbers of US defence personnel are being “rotated” through Australia, and AUKUS and other projects will see further expansion.

To better understand public attitudes to Australia’s defence relationships, we included this new section in the 2026 survey. It revealed that the public continue to hold mixed feelings about the presence of foreign forces on Australian soil. Notably, it shows only minority support for US basing in Australia compared to the majority support indicated in the 2026 Lowy Institute Poll, which included a similar question but did not offer a neutral option to respondents.¹⁸ The respondents were broadly supportive of the developing defence relationship with PNG, but the most notable finding was how limited public awareness was of this work. Only 37% of those surveyed had even heard of the Puk Puk Treaty, something that reinforces low public awareness of defence matters.

3.1 Defence basing

Conflict in the Middle East has highlighted the United States’ global footprint of military bases, installations, and other facilities. In response to US-Israeli attacks, Iran and its proxies have retaliated against US bases across the region, not only in the Gulf States but also in the neighbouring Mediterranean. There bases of US allies such as the United Kingdom have also been subject to attack.

Meanwhile, the presence of US troops and bases in Australia has garnered increased attention in the public sphere, with questions asked specifically about their role in supporting US and Israeli operations.¹⁹ Yet less is known about Australian public opinion towards these aspects of the alliance with United States, despite the notoriety of Pine Gap.

The survey therefore asked respondents a series of questions in the context of Australian national interests. It found that public opinion is indecisive. When asked whether they believe the basing of US troops in Australia is in the national interest, 39% broadly agreed, but one-third (34.8%) remained neutral, and one-quarter (26.1%) broadly disagreed (Figure 23).

Similar sentiment emerged regarding the presence of US and joint bases on Australian soil: almost half (45.1%) of those surveyed broadly agreed, one-third (33.5%) were neutral, and 21.4% broadly disagreed (Figure 24). Shifting the framing of the question from one of national interest to national security had little effect on the dynamics of public sentiment (Figure 25). When asked whether the presence of US troops and/or bases makes Australia more or less secure, the response mirrored earlier sentiment. A strong minority (43.1%) felt their presence makes Australia more secure overall. Just under one-third (31.7%) are neutral, and one-quarter (25.2%) believe US troops and bases in Australia make the nation broadly less secure.

Across all three questions, levels of agreement increased with age. Men were also more likely than women to answer affirmatively or positively, with women being slightly more likely to hold a neutral position.

Figure 23: It is in Australia's best interest to have US troops based in Australia.

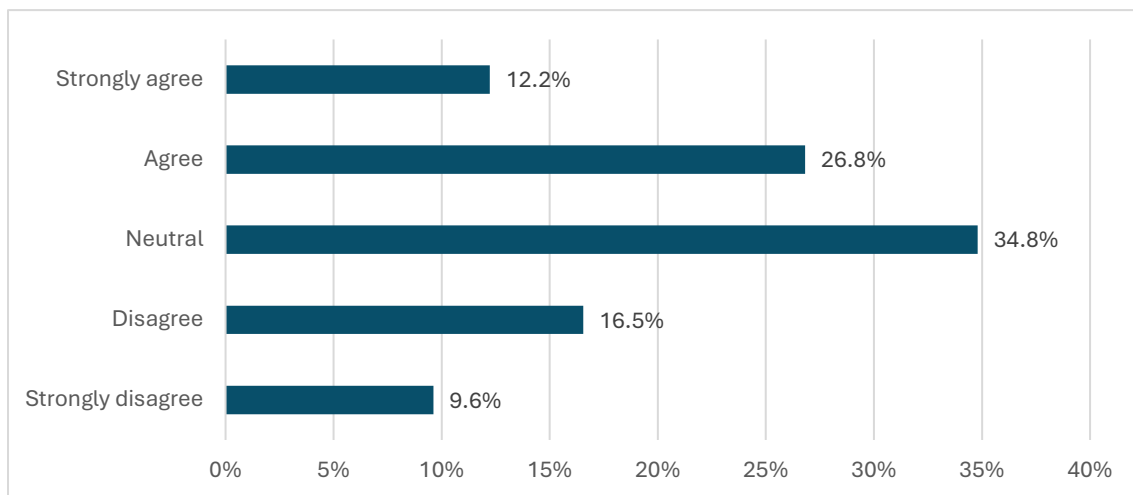


Figure 24: It is in Australia's best interest to support the presence of US or joint US-Australian bases on Australian soil.

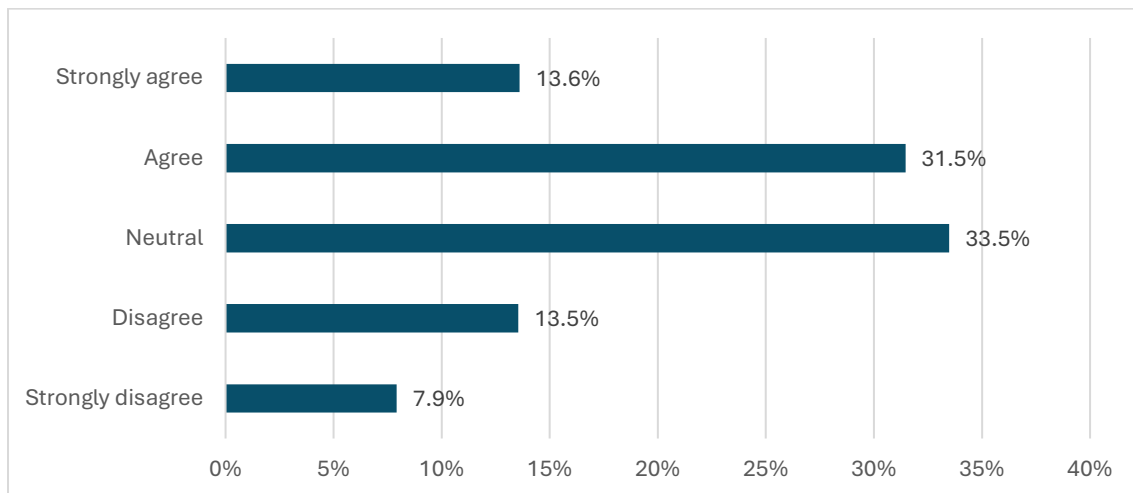
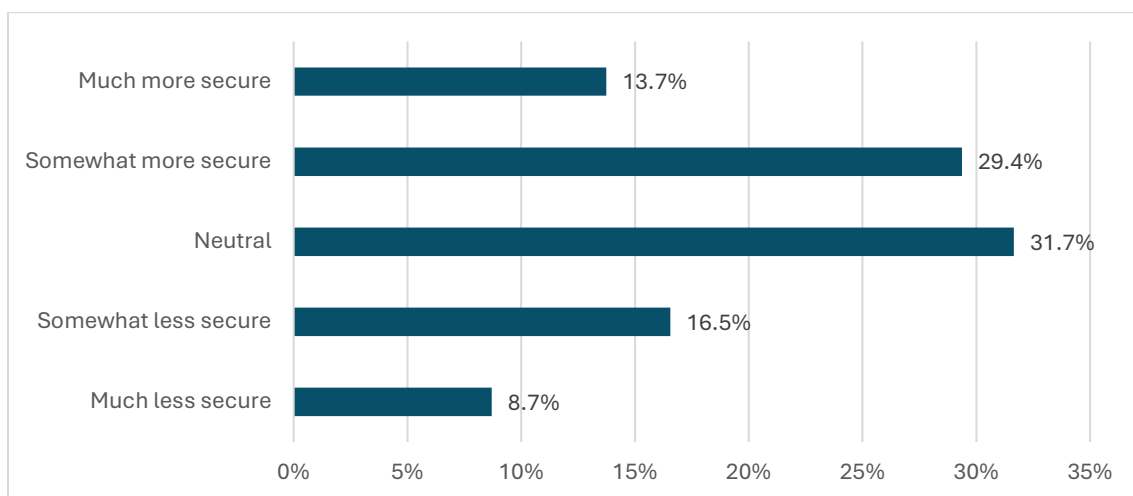


Figure 25: Do you believe the presence of US troops and/or bases makes Australia more or less secure?



3.2 New defence agreements

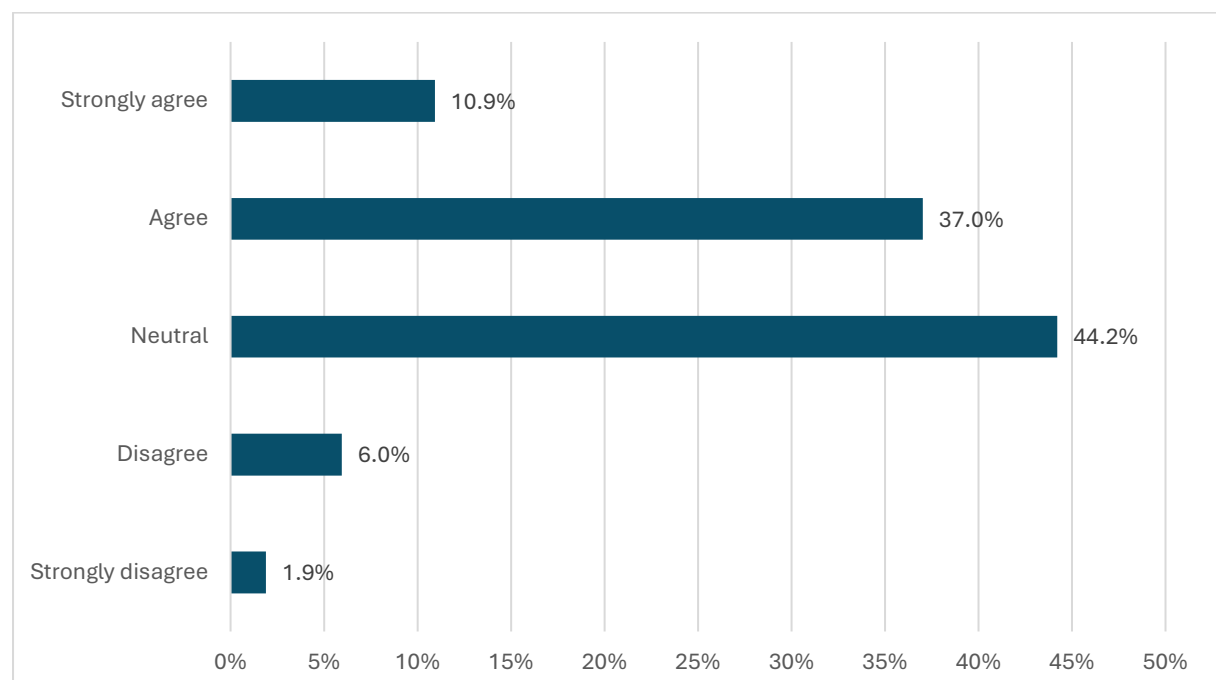
In September 2025 the Australian and Papua New Guinean governments signed Papua New Guinea – Australia Mutual Defence Treaty, also known as the Puk Puk Treaty, from the word for crocodile in Tok Pisin. This aimed to formalise a commitment to mutual defence including consultation and potential joint responses in the event of security threats. The treaty also included significant provisions around classification, the proposal to integrate not just personnel in the ADF, but logistics and procurement, and the possibility of forward basing for Australian forces. This treaty is only the second such treaty Australia has entered into after the 1951 ANZUS Treaty with the United States and New Zealand.

Despite media reporting on the negotiations and eventual signing, only around a third of Australians were aware of the treaty, with 63 per cent of Australians stating that they had not heard it. Awareness of the treaty was higher among older Australians, among

men, and those who had attained higher degrees.

When asked if they believed the new treaty would contribute to Australia's security, 47.9% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (Figure 26). The large percentage of respondents who answered that they were neutral about the question (44.2%), however, suggests a significant degree of uncertainty, lack of knowledge or disinterest in the treaty and broader relationship with Papua New Guinea. Here, there was a significant difference between men and women in their responses, with men more likely to support the treaty and women more likely to be neutral. The fact that the disagree/strongly disagree responses were close suggests that this is an issue of awareness. This is supported by a National Security College study that found that women were more likely to underestimate their knowledge of security issues.²⁰

Figure 26: *I believe that Papua New Guinea – Australia Mutual Defence Treaty will contribute to Australia's security.*



One of the more widely reported elements of the Puk Puk Treaty was its facilitation of each countries' citizens to serve in their respective defence forces. In particular, the proposal that up to 10,000 Papua New Guineans might serve in the ADF was consistently referenced by the media, despite perhaps not being likely or the most important element of the new agreement. As Figure 27 shows, a majority of Australians believed that this initiative would improve Australia's security, with 54% agreeing. Here, too, there was a significant minority of people responding neutral (39%), but only 7% believed that the recruitment of Papua New Guineans would not improve Australia's security.

The management of the relationship with Indonesia, as Australia's next closest neighbour, has always been a factor in Australian engagement with Papua New Guinea and in its engagement with the immediate region more broadly. Respondents were asked which of these (Papua New Guinea and Indonesia) nations was the most important to Australia's security (Figure 28). Indonesia was selected slightly more often (33.2%) than Papua New Guinea (31.7%), but the margin is negligible. The most striking feature is the large proportion of respondents who answered, 'don't know' (35%), indicating a high degree of uncertainty or low salience of the issue among the public. Older Australians felt Indonesia was more important, while younger Australians answered PNG.

Figure 27: The Australian Government has announced that as part of the Papua New Guinea – Australia Mutual Defence Treaty, up to 10,000 Papua New Guineans might be recruited into the Australian Defence Force. I believe that this will improve Australia's security.

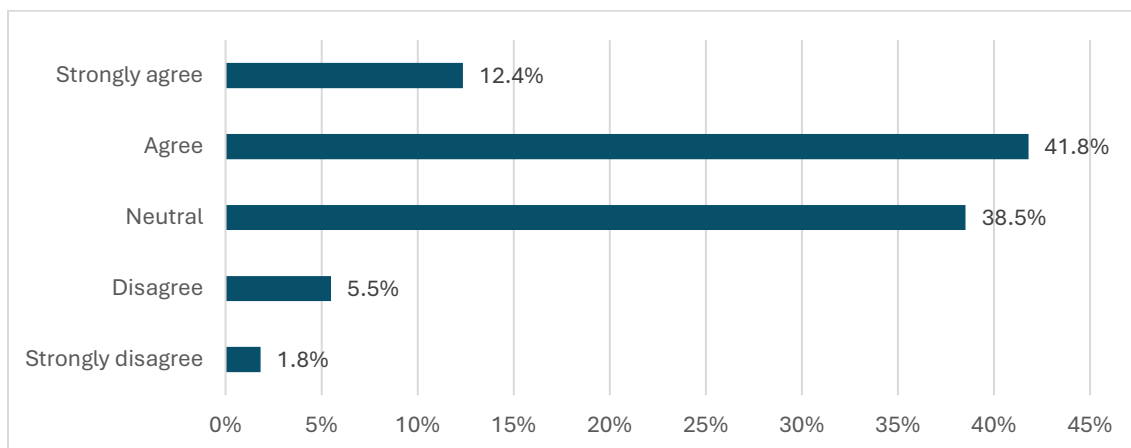
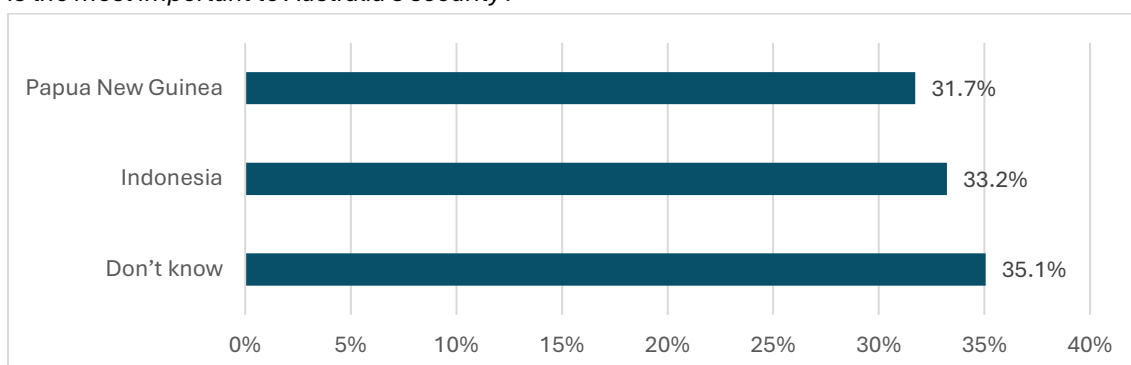


Figure 28: Papua New Guinea and Indonesia are Australia's two closest neighbours. Of the two, which is the most important to Australia's security?



Section 4 – Supporting Australia’s Veterans

Australia’s long military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan have made the treatment of veterans and how best to support them an important area of public discussion and political debate. A key part of this discourse in recent years has been concern about veteran mental health, especially the prevalence of suicide among ADF personnel and veterans. Following sustained advocacy by veterans and bereaved families, the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide was established in 2021, with its final recommendations delivered in 2024. The Commission’s findings, along with the responses of the Australian Government, the Department of Defence, and the

Department of Veterans’ Affairs, have received sustained media and public attention. In 2026, this focus was further reinforced by the Australian Government’s announcement of \$78 million in funding over four years to establish a new veteran and family wellbeing agency from July 2026, aimed at strengthening transition support and improving coordination of wellbeing services.²¹ The findings indicate confidence in government support for veterans coexists with limited policy awareness, suggesting that respondents’ answers about support for veterans is shaped more by sentiment than by knowledge of specific reforms.

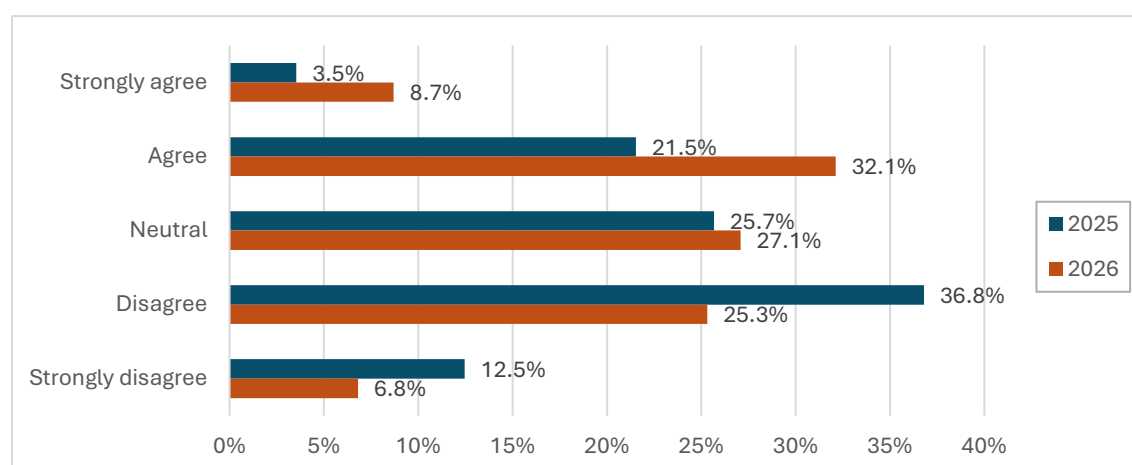
4.1 Understanding of veterans and veterans’ issues

Support for veterans was high among survey respondents, but knowledge of veteran issues was uneven. Over half of respondents (53%) reported personally knowing someone who had served in the military. This varied markedly by age, with older Australians significantly more likely to know a veteran—69% of those aged 65–74 years and 81% of those aged 75 or over—compared with 45% of respondents aged 18–24 years.

Compared with the 2025 results, the findings indicate an increased belief that the

Australian public understands the veteran experience. Respondents were divided in their views, but the greatest proportion broadly agreed that Australians had a good understanding of the experiences of veterans (40.8%), while 32.1% disagreed and 27.1% expressed neutral views (Figure 29). The proportion who agreed represents a significant increase from the 2025 survey, which found that nearly half of the respondents (49%) did not believe the Australian public had a strong grasp of the veteran experience.

Figure 29: I believe that Australians have a good understanding of the experiences of veterans.



4.2 Support for veterans

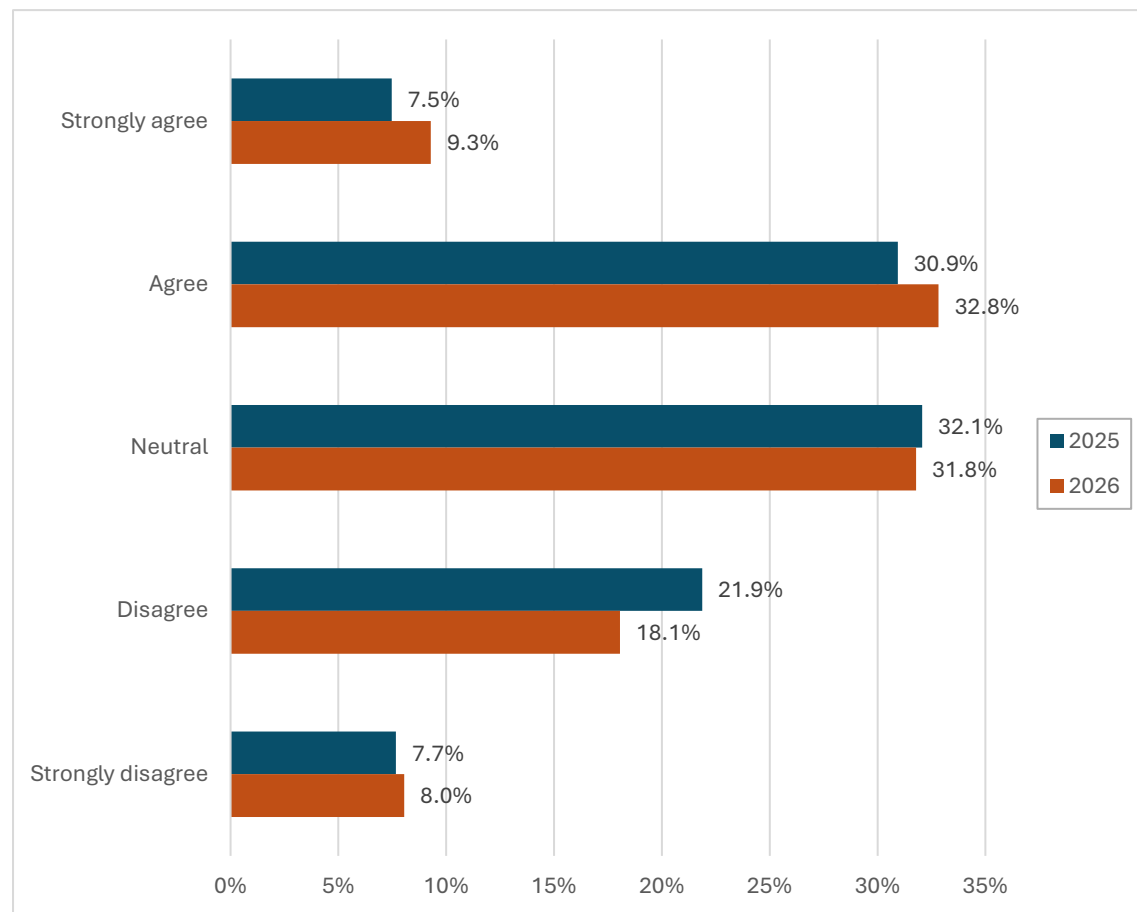
The level and type of support the Australian Government should provide for veterans has been the subject of increasing public discussion in recent years, particularly following the findings of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide in 2024.

Survey responses indicate that opinion is divided on whether current government support is sufficient. Overall, 42.1% of respondents broadly agreed that the Government provides strong support for veterans, while 26.1% disagreed and 31.7% felt neutral (Figure 30). Views varied notably by age, with younger respondents aged 18–44 more likely to agree that government support is strong (40%), compared with only 25.5% of those aged 45 or over. Respondents

aged 65 or over were also more likely to disagree (32%), potentially reflecting experiences shaped by legacy policies from earlier eras.

Despite more respondents agreeing that the Government provides strong support for veterans, awareness of the Government's response to the Defence and Veteran Suicide Royal Commission's 122 recommendations was low. As Figure 31 shows, more than half of respondents (53.2%) reported being unaware of the Government's response to the recommendations handed down in September 2024. Only 14% said they were aware of how the Government was responding, while a further 32.8% indicated they were somewhat aware.

Figure 30: I believe that the Australian Government provides strong support for ADF veterans.



One of the key recommendations of the Royal Commission was the establishment of an independent body to focus on veteran and family issues. Although survey respondents were largely unaware of the Royal Commission's recommendations, they overwhelmingly supported the Government's funding for and establishment of a new veteran and family wellbeing agency to provide transition support and coordinate wellbeing services. Overall, 77.6% of respondents broadly supported the

establishment of this agency, with 20.1% expressing neutral views and only 2.2% opposing it (Figure 32). Support varied by age, with respondents aged 65–74 most likely to strongly support the agency (46%), while those aged 18–24 years were most likely to report neutral views (29%). The overall response mirrored the 2025 survey, in which 81% of respondents broadly agreed with the recommendation to establish an independent agency, with the strongest support coming from older generations.

Figure 31: Based on its findings, the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide made 122 recommendations to the Australian Government to address suicide and suicidality among serving and ex-serving ADF members. Are you aware of the Australian Government's response to these recommendations?

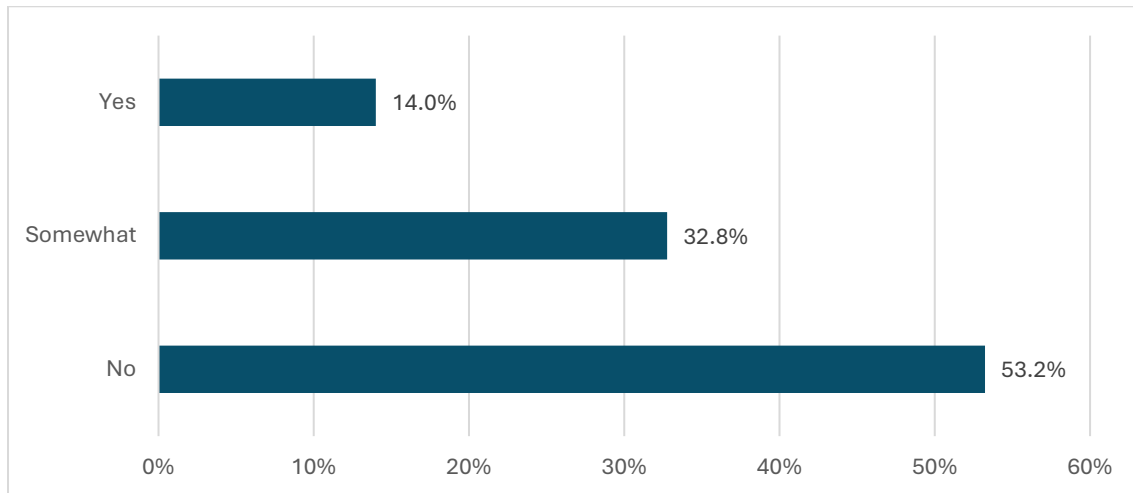
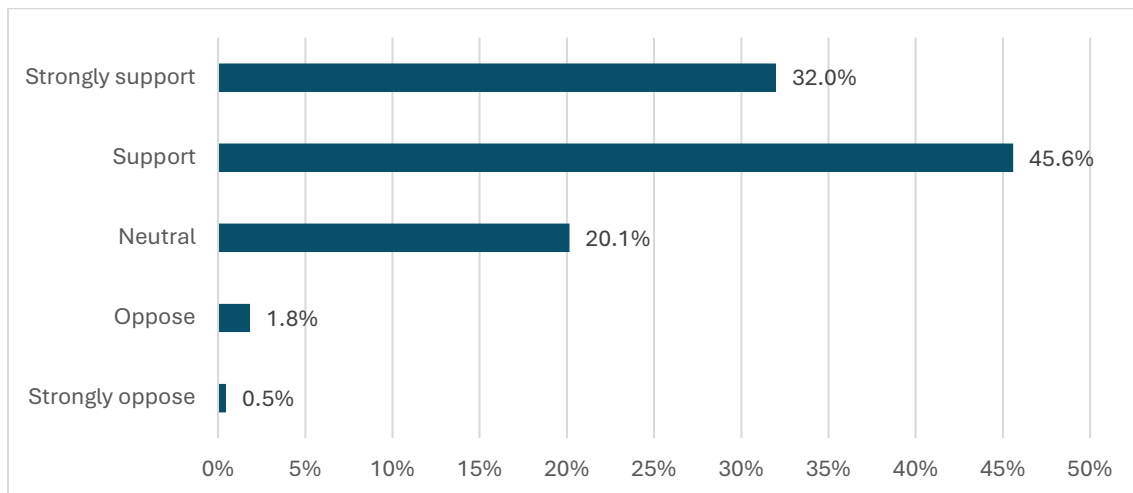


Figure 32: The Australian Government has announced \$78 million in funding over four years for a new veteran and family wellbeing agency to be established in July 2026 to provide transition support and coordinate wellbeing services. Do you support the establishment of the new veteran and family wellbeing agency?

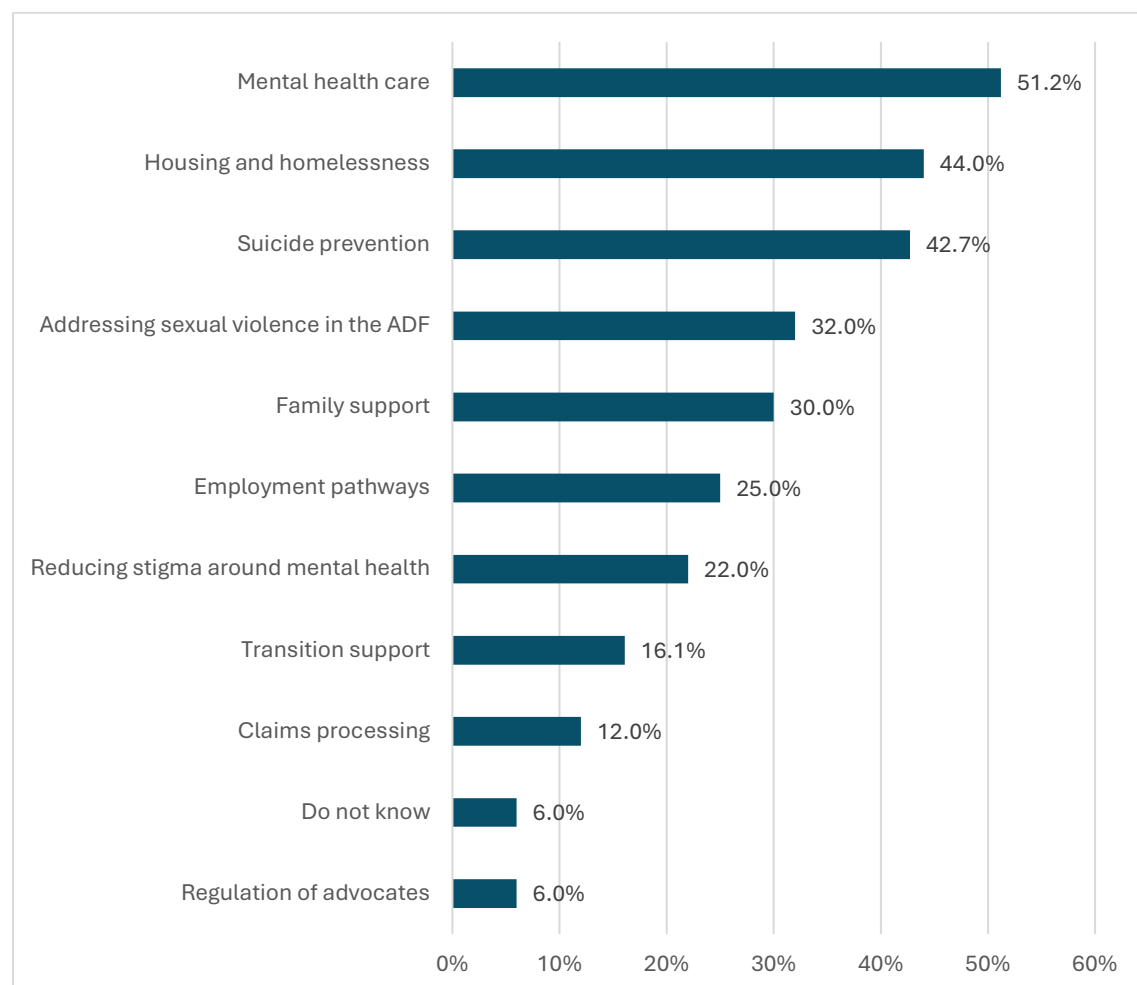


When asked to identify the top three areas of veteran support requiring the most urgent government attention, over half of respondents (51.2%) prioritised mental health care. Housing and homelessness were identified as the second most urgent area, with 44% of respondents selecting it as a priority, followed closely by suicide prevention (42.7%). Other areas of concern included addressing sexual violence in the ADF (32.4%), employment pathways (24.7%), and reducing stigma around mental health (22.1%). The lowest priority areas identified were regulation of advocates (6%), claims processing (12.3%), and transition support (16%) (Figure 33).

The top three priority areas varied across cohorts. Most respondents aged 18–34

identified housing and homelessness as the most pressing issue (47.5%). Respondents aged 35–54 and 65–74 shared a similar priority, with mental health care identified as the leading area of concern (53%), while those aged 55–64 were even more likely to prioritise mental health care (58%). Respondents aged 75 years or over prioritised suicide prevention (62%). Although priorities shifted significantly across age groups, the survey indicates that mental health issues are seen as most deserving of urgent government attention, consistently ranking higher than more bureaucratic issues, such as regulation of advocates, claims processing, and transition support.

Figure 33: Which areas do you believe require the most urgent government attention?



Notes

- ¹ Rory Medcalf, Tim Wilford, Sally Bulkeley, Andrew Ramsay, *No Worries? Australian Attitudes to National Security, Risk and Resilience*; community consultations survey and focus group research report, National Security College, March 2026; Charles Lyons-Jones, *Lowy Institute Poll 2026*.
- ² Scott Morrison, 'Address - Launch of the 2020 Defence Strategic Update', PM Transcripts, <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-42881>, (accessed 30 June 2026)
- ³ The term 'broadly agree' is used to group together those who 'agree' and those who 'strongly agree'. Similarly, 'broadly disagree' encompasses those who 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'.
- ⁴ Department of Defence, "Afghanistan Inquiry", *Department of Defence*, <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/afghanistan-inquiry>.
- ⁵ One former member had been charged at the time the data for this survey was collected, and another has been charged since. Sean Rubinsztein-Dunlop, "Former SAS soldier Oliver Schulz committed to stand trial for war crimes charge of murder", ABC News, 20 August 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-08-20/former-sas-trooper-to-stand-trial-for-war-crime-charge-of-murder/105675766>; "Victoria Cross recipient Ben Roberts-Smith charged with war crimes, taken into custody", ABC News, 7 April 2026, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-04-07/ben-roberts-smith-war-crimes-allegations-arrest/106537668>.
- ⁶ Marc Ablong and Justin Bassi, 'When the world changes, so must our defence: Australian spending should exceed 2 percent', *ASPI The Strategist*, 11 March 2026, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/when-the-world-changes-so-must-our-defence-australian-spending-should-exceed-2-percent/>, (accessed 18 June 2026); Jakes Evans, 'US demands Australia lifts defence spending by \$40b a year "as soon as possible"', ABC News, 2 June 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-06-02/us-australia-defence-spend-billions-hegseth-china/105364740>, (accessed 18 June 2026).
- ⁷ Ryan Neelam, *Lowy Institute Poll 2025*, 19–20; Medcalf et al., *No Worries? Australian Attitudes to National Security, Risk and Resilience*, 30–1.
- ⁸ Commonwealth Government, *Integrated Investment Program*, (Canberra, 2026), 13.
- ⁹ Australian National Audit Office, *Department of Defence's Procurement of Hunter Class Frigates*, (Canberra, 2023); Tom Lowrey, 'Defence must get better at managing big, expensive projects, chief says', ABC News, 19 July 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-07-19/defence-chief-says-must-get-better-big-projects/105546632>, (accessed 18 June 2026).
- ¹⁰ Department of Veterans' Affairs, 'Independent Inquiry into Military Sexual Violence in the Australian Defence Force', <https://www.dvsc.gov.au/inquiries/MSV>; The Hon Matt Keogh, 'Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide', 4 September 2025, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/speeches/2025-09-04/royal-commission-into-defence-veteran-suicide>
- ¹¹ Richard Dunley, Tristan Moss, Nicole Townsend, Miranda Booth, Rhys Crawley, Margaret Hutchison and Tom Richardson, *Public Attitudes towards the Australian Defence Force: Final Report*, June 2025.
- ¹² Department of Defence, 'Operations', <https://www.defence.gov.au/defence-activities/operations> (accessed, 20 April 2026)
- ¹³ Dunley et al., *Public Attitudes towards the Australian Defence Force*, 9.
- ¹⁴ Defence Annual Report 2024-25, 6.
- ¹⁵ Lyons-Jones, *Lowy Institute Poll 2026*, 19.
- ¹⁶ Latika Bourke, 'Australia will need national service too, says prominent retired major general Mick Ryan', *The Nightly*, 27 May 2024, <https://thenightly.com.au/australia/australia-will-need-national-service-too-says-prominent-retired-major-general-mick-ryan-c-14806799>.
- ¹⁷ Commonwealth Government, *National Defence: Defence Strategic Review*, (Canberra, 2023), 41–2.
- ¹⁸ Ryan Neelam, *The Lowy Institute Poll 2023*, 15; Lyons-Jones, *Lowy Institute Poll 2026*, 10.
- ¹⁹ It has been a long-standing Australian government policy that no foreign bases are allowed on Australian soil. Thus, American and other foreign presence is either located at joint facilities or is part of what are referred to as "rotational forces". Whilst we acknowledge this distinction, for the sake of clarity in the survey we are using common meaning of the terms "base" and "basing".

-
- ²⁰ Medcalf et al., *No Worries? Australian Attitudes to National Security, Risk and Resilience*, 32.
- ²¹ Department of Veterans' Affairs, 'New wellbeing agency to open 1 July 2026', 8 April 2026, <https://www.dva.gov.au/about-us/inquiries-and-reviews/our-work-in-response-to-the-royal-commission-into-defence-and-veteran-suicide/taskforce-on-wellbeing-agency-and-peak-body/new-wellbeing-agency-to-open-1-july-2026>, (accessed 30 June 2026)

Contact Us

UNSW Canberra

✉ hass.cbr@unsw.edu.au

☎ +61 5114 5275

Buildings 28 – 29

Northcott Drive, Canberra ACT 2600



CRICOS Provider Code: 00098G | ABN: 57 195 873 179

© Copyright of The University of New South Wales Canberra 2026.