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WHY BIPARTISANSHIP ON SECURITY
MAKES AUSTRALIA LESS SAFE

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DR ANDREW CARR
DISCUSSION PAPER | AUGUST 2017

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Why bipartisanship on security makes Australia less safe

Discussion paper

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Summary

- Australia's politicians are expected to treat issues of national security and foreign and defence policy in a 'bipartisan' fashion. Doing so is believed to create good policy, ensure national unity and protect the military. Polling for this report by The Australia Institute shows 71% of Australians agree that 'bipartisanship is generally a good thing'.
- Yet bipartisanship has costs. It weakens the quality of national policy, reduces accountability, lowers public engagement, and risks estrangement between the military and civil leadership. As it currently operates, the demand for bipartisanship is putting Australia at risk.
- Australians recognise these costs; 48% agree that bipartisanship leads to less scrutiny of issues. Australians also give failing grades to several policies settings which have bipartisan support, including handling the US and China relationship, our role in the South China Sea dispute and ensuring stability in the South Pacific.
- In times of quiet these concerns could be dismissed, but these are not quiet times. The election of Donald J. Trump as US president demonstrates that the US neither seeks nor wants to maintain its 20th century leadership role. China and Russia are challenging elements of the established global order, while terrorism and climate change require fresh approaches and new thinking.
- Given the growing range of problems in Australia's security environment, politicians should treat security policy as they do economic or social policy and be willing to openly argue. Only by using the full capabilities of our adversarial and democratic political structure will Australia have both the flexibility and resilience needed to find our way in Asia's troubled security environment.

Introduction

Australia's politicians need to argue more.

The next two decades may be the most difficult and dangerous since the early Cold War years. Yet it is remarkable how little our political leaders talk about defence and security issues. While they never miss an opportunity to claim better economic principles or more effective social policies than their opponents, issues of defence and security receive a demeaning silence.

Instead of our political leaders telling us how they would address today's threats or why their preferred strategy is superior, they stress their cooperation and agreement. For example, on the morning of February 25, 2016, the Australian government released a new Defence White Paper. A few hours later, then Shadow Minister for Defence Stephen Conroy held a press conference to declare that although he had only just seen the 186-page document, 'Labor is committed to a bipartisan approach to national security and defence matters'. As such, the party would approach the document 'in the spirit of bipartisanship'.¹ Whether Australia's Opposition in the 44th Parliament agreed with the actual content for how to defend the country and spend the third largest area of government outlay was treated as less important than showing that the right 'spirit' was being taken.

Conroy's replacement as Shadow Defence Minister, Richard Marles, also insists on bipartisanship. In a major recent address, he stated that given the grave security challenges Australia faces, including uncertainty over US policy under Donald J. Trump and bitter sovereignty disputes along key trade routes, any partisan debate would be an indulgence. Instead, 'politicians of all persuasions need to come together, on a non-partisan basis, and try to think about this in a deep, historic and contemporary way'.² Even that is too much talk for some. In 2015, former Liberal MP and retired Army officer Andrew Nikolic stated in parliament that politicians should be silent: 'bipartisanship must continue... The nature of the new security order today is so critical as to make redundant the all-too-familiar and orthodox war of words'.³

¹ Stephen Conroy, David Feeney, and Gai Brodtmann, 'David Feeney – Transcript – Doorstop – Defence White Paper' (Canberra: Australian Labor Party), 25 February 2016.

² Richard Marles, 'Thoughtfulness in Defence: Avoiding Partisanship.' Address to the National Press Club, Canberra, 24 May 2017.

³ Andrew Nickolic, 'Statements on indulgence: Terrorist attacks around the world', CPD (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia), 1 December 2015.

Bipartisanship, or at least the appearance of it, is a fundamental part of how Australia's national security apparatus operates. When politicians take even small steps to offer contrasting views or challenge received wisdom, a phalanx of journalists, academics and ex-officials march out to condemn them and demand they 'keep politics out of it'. The pressure to remain within the national security consensus is intense.

This paper looks at where this sense of bipartisanship came from, how it operates and assesses its impact. While seemingly an innocuous idea — that our two major parties should seek agreement or cooperate in a spirit of unity — the reality today is far more corrosive. A default approach of bipartisanship restricts policy creativity and accountability, reduces public engagement with critical issues and saps national unity. This paper argues that given the growing instability of Australia's strategic environment, it is urgent that our political class fulfil their responsibility to openly debate what principles this country stands for, how we will act and what costs we will pay to protect other states and ourselves. By rejecting the potential to even disagree about the right way forward in these uncertain times, the demand for bipartisanship leaves us all less secure.

The origins and practice of bipartisanship

Australia's approach to foreign and defence policy from the 1980s onwards was defined by a bipartisan consensus about how to engage the world. This agreement between the major parties was the outcome of significant public and parliamentary debates in the 1960s and 1970s over the US alliance and our approach to Asia. In the face of major strategic change much like we face today—featuring unstable allies, regional power shifts and new and unconventional threats—Australia's democratic system thrashed its way to a new consensus. Greater independence was sought, the alliance re-affirmed and Asia embraced for both trade and migration.

These policies served Australia well over the intervening decades. Yet as the very foundation of these views has been shaken—with China's rise and America's relative decline—our politics has become ever more rigid in demanding continuity. Bipartisanship on how Australia approaches the world is no longer the *outcome* of debate, but a *process* that shapes and pre-empts debate. Rather than seek consensus for the best policies, consensus itself has become the goal.

As Peter Jennings, head of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, has described, there is 'a reassuringly high level of bipartisanship on Defence, which is no bad thing for policy continuity', though he adds the important caveat that 'being deep in the comfort zone doesn't push the envelope for critical thinking'.⁴ Surveying the elite consensus that Australia should spend two percent of its GDP on Defence, Professor Mark Beeson noted that 'perhaps the most remarkable feature of the Defence debate is that there isn't one. Despite the eye-watering sums involved [...] there's been next to no discussion of their actual necessity or the circumstances in which the planes, subs and other assets might actually be used'.⁵

But what happens to politicians who challenge this consensus? Take the case of Andrew Hastie, the member for Canning in Western Australia. Hastie is a decorated former SAS officer who ran for office in 2015 as the Liberal Party candidate. During his campaign Hastie spoke about his deployment in Afghanistan and said that while

⁴ Peter Jennings 'The Great Defence Debate: Come on Down!', *The Strategist*, Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 22 August 2013.

⁵ Mark Beeson, 'Australia's defence: should we go down the Kiwi road?', *The Strategist*, Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 10 December 2015.

deployed 'I didn't think that Labor had our backs'.⁶ Hastie attributed his choice to go into politics as an effort to address this lack of attention and help correct national policy. These comments drew immediate criticism from politicians on both sides, as well as the media. His views were described as an 'extraordinary attack' that was 'abandoning the usual bipartisan political approach to defence'.⁷

The leader of the Labor Party said he was offended by the claims and declared that 'when it comes to backing up our men and women in uniform, both parties have always maintained bipartisanship'.⁸ Despite Hastie's status as a former member of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) who was speaking about his personal experience serving the nation overseas and as a registered candidate for office there was no serious engagement from either side about the merits of his claims. Instead, Hastie said he felt the episode had been 'an attempt to try to gag me'.⁹

Party leaders face similar pressure to conform. Polling by The Australia Institute for this report shows that 69% of Australians think the parliament works better with bipartisanship and 61% believe it is good for foreign policy. In 2013 Bill Shorten was criticised for having undermined 'Australia's long-term unquestioned bipartisanship on intelligence', simply by suggesting Australia could follow the United States and apologise in the wake of foreign spying revelations.¹⁰ Current Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was similarly reprimanded during the 2016 election campaign for having fallen short of the foreign policy 'bipartisan bedrock policy and values the Liberal Party claims to hold dear' by merely engaging the Australian Greens party on preference deals.¹¹ Whether or not the politicians actually believe in bipartisanship, they know they are expected to believe it.

Advocates of the current approach put forward three arguments for the requirement for bipartisanship in Australia's foreign and defence policies. First, that it creates good *policy*. Second, that it is necessary for national *unity*. Third, that bipartisanship *protects* Australia's military from public abuse or political misuse. All three of these claims are questionable.

⁶ Calla Wahlquist, 'Canning Byelection: Military Service Remains Go-to Answer for Andrew Hastie', *The Guardian (Australian Edition)*, 17/09/2015.

⁷ Andrew Burrell, 'Labor MPs Put Diggers at Risk: Andrew Hastie', *The Australian*, 18 September 2015.

⁸ Jared Owens, 'Andrew Hastie Using Military as Political Football, Shorten Says', *The Australian*, 18 September 2015.

⁹ Burrell, 'Labor MPs Put Diggers at Risk: Andrew Hastie'.

¹⁰ Dennis Shanahan and Sid Maher, 'Bipartisan or Playing Politics? Labor's Mixed Messages on Crisis', *The Australian*, 22 November 2013.

¹¹ Greg Sheridan, 'Federal Election 2016: Faustian deal will damage Lib Brand', 18 May 2016, *The Australian*.

Good policy?

When defence and security legislation appears before the parliament, bipartisanship enables speedy passage with minimum debate. The Howard government put up new anti-terrorism legislation every 6.7 weeks on average after the 2001 terrorist attacks, with virtually all bills passing quickly with support from the Labor Party.¹² Defence issues are similarly rushed through the parliament or, sometimes, not even addressed. The ADF was fighting in Afghanistan for eight years before the Australian government committed to regularly updating parliament on the conflict. It took a minor party, the Australian Greens, to force the first major parliamentary debate on the war in 2010.

The parliamentary committee system, designed to review and assess legislation, is also affected by the desire for cooperation. As one study found: 'consensus, rather than dissent and rigorous questioning, is the normal modus operandi. As a result, difficult questions about the rights and wrongs of certain foreign policy decisions are not always asked'.¹³ Another scholar has shown that bipartisanship on anti-terrorism laws often 'produced legislation that can be unnecessary and even counter-productive. Some [laws] are so poorly drafted and conceived as to be unworkable.'¹⁴ Not only are the politicians not debating, but the focus on consensus limits the role of our other institutions. Allan Gyngell, former head of the Office of National Assessment and the Lowy Institute for International Policy has noted that the think tank sector has not driven policy reform in the security arena as it has for social and economic policy. Part of the explanation he says is 'the intrinsic bipartisanship of Australian foreign policy'.¹⁵ Defence and security policies are thus inadequately scrutinised and often locked into place for the long term.

These costs to good policy are increasingly obvious to the general public. Polling by The Australia Institute finds that many Australians give failing grades to several policy issues that have clear bipartisan support. While the government is seen as competent

¹² George Williams, 'A Decade of Australian Anti-Terror Laws', *Melbourne University Law Review* 35, no. 3 (2011).

¹³ Kate Burton, 'Scrutiny or Secrecy? Committee Oversight of Foreign and National Security Policy in the Australian Parliament', Parliamentary Library Department of Parliamentary Services (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2004). p.xi.

¹⁴ George Williams, 'Anti-Terror Laws Need Proper Scrutiny', 06 October 2014, *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

¹⁵ Allan Gyngell, 'The Rumble of Think Tanks: National Security and Public Contestability in Australia', in Dan Marston and Tamara Leahy (eds.) *War, Strategy and History*, Canberra, ANU Press, 2016, pp.265-283, p.282.

at responding to natural disasters and preventing terrorist attacks, policies for long term challenges such as China's rise, cyber-security and stability in the South Pacific are all seen as unsuccessful and needing reform.

The fundamental assumption of bipartisanship is that elites are better at making strategic decisions, or can do so independently of politics. However, this is doubtful. We no longer believe in master economic planners, so why should we put our faith in master strategists, who not only need to coordinate foreign and defence policies, but integrate economics, technology and geography as well? Nor can decision making ever be free from politics. Studies of authoritarian societies show that even leaders who don't need to worry about polls or re-election always factor in domestic political calculations when deciding strategic issues.¹⁶ Bipartisanship does not keep politics out, it simply hides it from the public.

¹⁶ Bruce Bueno De Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press 2005); Natasha Hamilton-Hart, *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions: Southeast Asia and American Power*, Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2012).

National unity

The second argument for bipartisanship is that it enables national *unity*. We sometimes hear the argument that we need bipartisanship so politics will ‘stop at the water’s edge’. That is, we debate internally but show a united front to outsiders. This might have been viable in 1812 when it was advocated by the US statesman Daniel Webster, but it makes little sense in a world of instant global media communication. Governments in Moscow or Beijing now have access to the exact same news sources and social media that Australian citizens in Melbourne and Brisbane have.

Bipartisanship will not fool the leadership of China into believing Australia has a clear idea about how to proceed in the South China Sea. But it is restricting the ability of our political leaders to devise, develop and debate an approach that could sustain broad Australian public support. Nor can we expect our political parties to compel the necessary support. The combined membership of the Australian Labor Party, the Liberal Party and The Nationals is less than one percent of the population.¹⁷

Unity is also difficult when the public feels ignored and kept in the dark. Thanks to the silence bipartisanship generates, security issues receive less attention than other policy areas. A recent Defence inquiry found that while the ADF has served overseas almost continually since 1999, many in the community ‘did not feel they received enough information or explanation about the ADF and defence policy’.¹⁸ Nearly 70% of the Australian public feel ignored by the political system on these issues.¹⁹ This threatens the long-term resilience of key policies. As Michael J. Green and Andrew Shearer, two officials with long careers in the United States and Australian governments, have written, the central challenge facing the ANZUS alliance in 2017 is not China or North Korea, but ‘the need to renew the Australian public’s understanding of the essentiality of our alliance’.²⁰

The effects of bipartisanship’s hollow promise of unity are therefore clear to see. Australia’s longest military effort, Operation Slipper in Afghanistan, ran from 2001 to 2014. Despite consistent bipartisan support during this period, public opinion turned

¹⁷ Andrew Leigh, *Disconnected* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010). p.61.

¹⁸ Peter Jennings et al., ‘Guarding against Uncertainty: Australian Attitudes to Defence: Report on Community Consultations’, Department of Defence (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2015). p.5.

¹⁹ Fergus Hanson, ‘Australia and the World: Public Opinion and Foreign Policy’ (Sydney: The Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2010). p.9.

²⁰ Michael J. Green and Andrew Shearer, ‘Turnbull-Trump: The alliance needed a new start, and got one’, *The Interpreter* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 06 May 2017).

against the Afghan conflict after seven years of fighting and has remained negative.²¹ As analysts in Australia and the United States have shown, public support in wartime is tied to confidence in the strategy pursued, rather than the number of casualties or length of the war.²² Yet rather than earning this public unity through explaining and advocating national policy, bipartisanship as it currently operates in Australia has taken it for granted.

²¹ Fergus Hanson, *Australia and the World: Public Opinion and Foreign Policy* (Sydney: The Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2008). p.11.

²² Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, and Jason Reifler, 'Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq', *International Security* 30, no. 3 (2006); Charles Miller, 'Re-Examining the Australian Public's Attitude to Military Casualties: Post-Heroic or Defeat Phobic?', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 5 (2014).

Protecting Australia's military

The final argument for bipartisanship is that elite cooperation is required to protect those in uniform. The folkloric image of the Vietnam War years, with unwilling diggers overseas and angry crowds at home, has left a deep fear of division and debate in the minds of many in our political and military establishments.

Unfortunately, bipartisanship's record here is equally suspect. As the former SAS officer Andrew Hastie complained, 'The biggest thing that was missing for six years under Labor was serious intellectual engagement with soldiers on the ground about how to best prosecute the war in Afghanistan'.²³ Hastie's motive here may be partisan given his status as a Liberal Party MP, but there's enough truth in it for the line to sting. Even if public support is broad, good strategy requires constantly evaluating the tasks and resources provided to our forces and regular public explanations for their sacrifices. As the former Chief of Army Peter Leahy put it: 'Without an informed public debate we are unlikely to adjust the way we are fighting the war. This is bad strategy.'²⁴ Yet, as another former soldier has shown, there has been more political and public attention on commemorating wars fought 100 years ago than discussing the ones the ADF is currently involved in.²⁵

Bipartisanship promises steady oversight and support but this has not eventuated either. Kevin Rudd's 2009 Defence White Paper outlined significant new resources for the Australian Defence Force. Just 10 days after its launch, the funding was scrapped.²⁶ The Gillard government did the reverse. It made multi-billion dollar cuts to Defence in its first years before being forced by the opposition to peg defence spending to two percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The Coalition's record here is only a little better. It promoted the two percent target but has never provided any strategic rationale or connection to the cost of military equipment to justify this neat, round target.²⁷

²³ Burrell, 'Labor MPs Put Diggers at Risk: Andrew Hastie'.

²⁴ Peter Leahy, 'Afghan Silence Leaves Soldiers Stranded', in Sam Roggeveen, ed., *The Interpreter*, (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2010).

²⁵ James Brown. *ANZAC's Long Shadow: The Cost of Our National Obsession* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2014).

²⁶ Mark Thomson, 'Defence Funding and Planning: Promises and Secrets', *Security Challenges* 5, no. 2 (2009). p.93.

²⁷ See Andrew Carr and Peter Dean, 'The Funding Illusion: The 2% of GDP Furphy in Australia's Defence Debate', *Security Challenges* 9, no. 4 (2013) for a history and analysis of the debate.

Australia is now onto its 11th Defence Minister since the Howard government won office in 1996. There have been just five Treasurers in that time. And while the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has had greater stability in its minister, it also has to work within a budget that has almost halved as a share of GDP since 1998. Australia's diplomatic budget has slightly recovered in recent years, though it remains among the smallest in the OECD.²⁸ This is hardly a position of strength as we enter what may be the most difficult and demanding set of strategic circumstances Australia has faced in several decades.

²⁸ Alex Oliver and Andrew Shearer, *Diplomatic Disrepair: Rebuilding Australia's International Policy Infrastructure* (Sydney: The Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2011).

Is there another way?

We don't know how well Australia's current policy settings will work in the new security environment in part because bipartisanship restricts our ability to know. It weakens the very mechanisms that enable democracies to understand and improve their policy choices. It keeps decisions and information hidden from the public, reducing their willingness to pay the costs security sometimes requires. In turn, without the right tools in hand or genuine domestic support at their back, bipartisan silence can never be the foundation those in uniform need to do their jobs and risk their lives on our behalf.

A return to partisan arguments over foreign and defence policies has obvious costs. At times, parties will put their own interests before the nation's. Politicians will champion for defence industry to be built in their electorate. Explicit debates over the merits and failures of our allies and partners could hurt these relationships. But these outcomes are preferable to our current unstudied silence and occasional product differentiation at election time. We already have many of the downsides of populism, but none of the benefits of using the parliament to ensure accountability and articulate genuine differences.

While partisan debate about defence policy is rare, two recent examples show it can lead to better policy. In 2012-13 Liberal Party criticism of the cuts to the defence budget, complete with hyperbolic comparisons to the eve of World War II, led to the first real discussion of defence funding in more than a decade and an agreed commitment to higher spending by both parties. Similarly, in 2014-15, the Labor Party's demands to build the future submarine fleet in Australia enabled a brief public debate about the costs and benefits of offshore purchases and what kinds of submarines Australia needed. Internal pressure by marginal seat holders within the Coalition also led to an improved tender process, which gave Australia leverage and forced international bidders to compete and offer better value for money. Not every partisan debate helps, but these examples show it does not automatically make policy worse. If it did, democracies would not have survived as long or as successfully as they have.

Yet the history of the 20th century is inexplicable unless we shift from thinking of democratic debate as being an impediment to national security, to recognising it as a necessity. The divided, argumentative nature of democracies tests policy ideas for weaknesses before they are implemented. Similarly, when mistakes are inevitably made, partisan debate helps identify these errors and encourage change. Leaders who

don't adjust can be held accountable and replaced at elections rather than continuing ineffective strategies. Democracies can therefore 'weed out unfounded, mendacious, or self-serving foreign policy arguments' in ways that insular or restrictive systems struggle to.²⁹ When the public is allowed a genuine say, their impact is like a thermostat that helps fine tune policy settings.³⁰ Niccolò Machiavelli, famous for his hard-headed approach to politics, recognised this as early as the 16th century. He argued that the contested nature of open societies enabled them to quickly adapt to changes in warfare and thus have 'greater vitality and more enduring success' than princely regimes.³¹

In the absence of political debate, the Australian national security community has created its own mechanisms to debate ideas. In 2001 the Howard Government set up the Australian Strategic Policy Institute to provide 'contestable advice' in the defence field.³² In 2015 the Department of Defence accepted the recommendation of the First Principles Review to set up a contestability unit.³³ There is also a growing use of war games, scenarios, simulations and 'Red Teaming' by the military and public service in recognition of the need to contest and corroborate advice for government.

Dissatisfaction with how Australia pursues its security in the 21st century has led to numerous suggestions for structural reforms to our system of government. These include giving parliament authorisation over the use of force,³⁴ creating vast new security bureaucracies,³⁵ national security legislation monitors (introduced in 2010), and greater judicial oversight of intelligence operations.³⁶ All of these ideas have some logic to them. But before we take potentially radical steps to change how our system works, it is worthwhile first allowing our adversarial, democratic structures to operate as they were designed to. Indeed, many of these proposals, such as giving parliament

²⁹ Chaim Kaufman, 'Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War', *International Security* 29, no. 1 (2004). p.5.

³⁰ Christopher Wlezien, 'The Public as Thermostat: Dynamics of Preferences for Spending', *American Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 4 (1995).

³¹ Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*, Third edition ed. (London: Routledge, 2001). p.96.

³² Robert O'Neill, 'ASPI at 15: a first Chairman's perspective', *The Strategist* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute), 22 August 2016.

³³ David Peever, *First Principles Review* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia), p.25.

³⁴ Rick Morton and Rosie Lewis, 'Tony Abbott at Risk of Repeating Iraq War Mistake: Andrew Wilkie', *The Australian*, 25 August 2014.

³⁵ Brown, James. *Firing Line: Australia's Path to War*. Quarterly Essay #62 (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2016); David Hurst, 'Create Homeland Security Department to coordinate agencies, suggests report', *The Guardian*, 23 February 2015.

³⁶ John Faulkner, 'Surveillance, Intelligence and Accountability: An Australian Story' (Sydney: Commonwealth of Australia, 2014).

more power, won't work while the requirement for bipartisanship enforces discipline. Rather than having officials with the formal title of 'Leader of the Opposition' claim that 'keeping our people safe is above politics', it is precisely more politics which we need.³⁷

³⁷ Bill Shorten quoted in Sabra Lane, 'PM Warns of More Security, Less Freedom, Ahead of Anti-Terror Laws Debate', *Australian Broadcasting Commission*, 22 September 2014.

Conclusion

Australia's world changed on 11/9/2001. It may have changed again on 9/11/2016. The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States threatens many longstanding assumptions about American leadership, values and reliability. While there are strong arguments for retaining the alliance, this is precisely the moment for Australia's leaders to publicly discuss why and how the alliance matters and persuade the public to their case. There is a pressing need to think through exactly what kind of alliance is valuable to us, in what way Australia is valuable to the US, and what alternatives we could turn to if part or all of the alliance framework is changed. As Green and Shearer have warned, the same old practices and dismissals will not be sufficient to protect this cornerstone of our security. Real public engagement and debate is fundamental to its continuation.

Closer to home and along with a growing list of challenges from territorial disputes to unstable states and terrorism, the strategic and political order of our region is shifting. Finding an enduring and secure place for Australia will require laying out and testing our core assumptions about how we achieve our nation's security and influence. It also requires rebuilding the foundations of public unity around the role we as a country can and should play in Asia's new order. Reflexive, unquestioning bipartisanship cannot do this. Only agreement as an outcome of genuine national debate can provide the mix of firmness and flexibility we will need.

Ironically, the hardest step for improving Australia's security may be to encourage what seems most natural to our politicians. Let them argue. Let them debate. Let them take sides and differ. Make them test their assumptions and engage the public. We in the public, media and academia have a responsibility too: to accept disagreements as natural and indeed helpful for dealing with these uncertain times. Only through a return to a fundamentally democratic approach to our security can we have confidence that we as a country have the best possible ideas and practices for navigating the changes and challenges of this turbulent century.

Appendix: Polling brief

Between 16 and 28 September 2016, The Australia Institute conducted a national opinion poll of 1,442 people through Research Now, with nationally representative samples by gender, age and state or territory. The survey asked:

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about 'bipartisanship' (i.e. when a policy is supported by both the major parties or the practice of both parties cooperating in a spirit of unity)? ...

The statements were presented in a randomised order. All respondents were required to select a response for each statement.

Respondents were then asked

How successfully do you think Australia is addressing each of the following foreign and defence policy challenges?

All respondents had to choose a rating from 1 to 10 for each issue, with 1 being “failing to address” and 10 being “very successfully addressing”.

KEY RESULTS

Bipartisanship

71% agreed that bipartisanship is generally a good thing. 69% agreed that parliament works better when parties take a bipartisan approach.

61% agreed that bipartisanship is good for foreign policy outcomes. Only 11% disagreed.

By contrast, 55% disagreed that bipartisanship is bad for domestic policy. Respondents were a little more likely to think bipartisanship was good for foreign policy than for domestic policy, but in both cases a majority thought it lead to good policy outcomes.

People who agreed bipartisanship is a good thing but did not agree it lead to good policy outcomes presumably think it is good for non-policy outcomes, perhaps the tenor of debate and a preference for civil political process.

43% said bipartisanship for both foreign policy and domestic policy is good. 12% agreed it is bad for domestic policy but good for foreign policy. Only 5% said it was bad for both.

47% disagreed that bipartisanship stifles debate, while 31% agreed. At the same time, 48% agreed there is less scrutiny of issues that have bipartisan support. 21% agreed bipartisanship leads to less scrutiny but disagreed it stifles debate. 23% agreed with both; 21% disagreed with both.

57% agreed that there is less bipartisanship than there used to be, compared with 13% disagreeing.

Favourable attitudes to bipartisanship were more likely among

- men compared to women (women were more likely to say they did not know)
- older respondents
- Coalition voters, compared to Labor, Greens and Other voters, who tended to respond similarly

Foreign policy challenges

Presented with a range of foreign policy challenges, respondents were asked to rate Australia's efforts to tackle them.

The average rating for each challenge, from 1 to 10, was between 4.5 and 5.7.

Respondents were much more likely to say the government was failing than very successfully addressing.

Respondents were most likely to say Australia was addressing well:

- *Potential epidemics such as the Ebola or Zika virus*
- *Home-grown terrorism in Australia*
- *Terrorist attacks on Australians overseas*

Respondents were most likely to say Australia was failing at:

- *Doing Australia's fair share of reducing greenhouse gas pollution*
- *Maritime disputes between China and its neighbours in Asian territorial seas*
- *A breakdown of law and order in Papua New Guinea*

DETAILED RESULTS

Attitudes about bipartisanship (response rates - %)

	Total Agree	Total Disagree	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know/ Not sure
<i>Bipartisanship is bad for domestic policy, like health and education</i>	19	55	4	15	37	18	26
<i>Bipartisanship stifles debate</i>	31	47	5	26	37	10	23
<i>There is less scrutiny of issues that have bipartisan support</i>	48	27	10	38	22	5	25
<i>There is less bipartisanship in politics than there used to be</i>	57	13	19	38	11	3	29
<i>Bipartisanship is good for foreign policy</i>	61	11	18	43	9	2	28
<i>Parliament works better when both major parties take a bipartisan approach</i>	69	12	21	48	10	2	19
<i>Bipartisanship is generally a good thing</i>	71	8	18	53	7	1	20
<i>Bipartisanship only works when both parties act in good faith</i>	78	5	29	49	4	1	17

Attitudes towards bipartisanship in foreign and domestic policy (% of total responses)

	Bad for domestic policy		
Good for foreign policy	Total disagree	Total agree	Don't know/ Not sure
Total agree	43%	12%	5%
Total disagree	5%	5%	1%
Don't know/ Not sure	6%	2%	19%

Attitudes towards impact of bipartisanship on debate (% of total responses)

	There is less scrutiny of issues with bipartisan support		
Stifles debate	Total agree	Total disagree	Don't know/Not sure
Total agree	23%	5%	3%
Total disagree	21%	21%	4%
Don't know/ Not sure	4%	1%	18%

Attitudes to Australian government success on foreign policy issues

	Average Rating	Failing to address			Response rates (%)			Very successfully addressing			
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>Potential epidemics such as the Ebola or Zika virus</i>	5.7	6	4	7	7	23	14	15	14	6	4
<i>Home-grown terrorism in Australia</i>	5.6	9	5	8	8	15	13	16	16	7	4
<i>Terrorist attacks on Australians overseas</i>	5.4	8	5	9	9	24	13	14	12	4	3
<i>A cyber-attack on Australian critical infrastructure</i>	5.0	10	6	10	11	25	13	12	7	3	3
<i>Military conflict between the United States and China in Asia</i>	4.9	8	5	9	10	33	14	10	6	2	2
<i>The emergence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria</i>	4.9	12	7	10	10	23	12	12	9	2	3
<i>Doing Australia's fair share of reducing greenhouse gas pollution</i>	4.8	15	7	12	8	20	11	11	9	3	4
<i>Maritime disputes between China and its neighbours in Asian territorial seas</i>	4.8	10	5	11	12	31	12	10	5	2	2
<i>A breakdown of law and order in Papua New Guinea</i>	4.5	11	8	10	13	31	12	7	4	2	2

