

Port risks to AUKUS submarines can be managed: minister

By [PAUL GARVEY](#)



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8:30pm August 11, 2025

Defence Personnel Minister Matt Keogh has shrugged off the latest security concerns raised over the West Australian government's plans to relocate the state's container port to the doorstep of HMAS Stirling naval base, arguing the proximity of foreign freight vessels to the navy's key assets will be nothing new.

On Monday former commanding officer of HMAS Stirling Vince Di Pietro and former deputy chief of the air force John Blackburn [warned that the WA government's Westport project could leave HMAS Stirling](#), the Henderson maintenance and shipbuilding yards and Australian, US and British nuclear-powered submarines exposed to increased risks.

The number of commercial vessels sharing Cockburn Sound with the submarines [based out of HMAS Stirling](#) will more than double under the Westport plan.

Commodore Di Pietro and Air Vice-Marshal Blackburn warned that the submarines could be vulnerable to attack from the sorts of containerised weapon systems recently used by Ukrainian and Israeli forces, while the only shipping lane out of the area could be blocked by commercial vessels accidentally or deliberately.

Responding to the warnings, Mr Keogh said while he would not go into the detail of Defence's security and risk assessments, Australia had a long history of managing the risks of having military and civil vessels close to one another.

"Fleet Base East in Sydney is in the middle of Sydney Harbour and it has an interface with commercial and civilian shipping, including ferry lines that actually use the base

right there,” he said. “So it’s not like we’re unused to having to deal with these sorts of interfaces on a very regular basis.”

He said the plans for Westport were already well-known before the AUKUS deal was announced.

“Westport’s been on the books for a long time and it certainly predates AUKUS and certainly predates our engagement with AUKUS and the development of the optimum pathway going forward to consider AUKUS,” Mr Keogh said.

WA Premier Roger Cook said the Westport plans had long included a scheme for a new second channel through Cockburn Sound. That northernmost portion of that new channel, however, overlaps with the existing channel, meaning there still will be only one entry and exit point for large vessels.

Mr Cook said his government would ensure appropriate programs and allowances were in place. “We continue to work with all the stakeholders to ensure that Westport, the Henderson precinct, HMAS Stirling and other uses of Cockburn Sound can all work together to ensure that it’s safe and it’s sustainable,” he said.

The warnings by Commodore Di Pietro and Air Vice-Marshal Blackburn were seized on by the Maritime Union of Australia’s WA branch, which [has been opposed to Westport](#) on the grounds that it will be fully automated.

MUA [WA branch secretary Will Tracey](#) said the security risks reinforced the case to at least delay the construction of Westport by another decade.

“The approach thus far has been bullish and rushed with a critical lack of investigation into the risk the outer harbour is posing to Australia’s major defence pact,” Mr Tracey said.

He said there was enough capacity left at the existing Fremantle port to push back Westport, which also would avoid the works overlapping with major construction efforts at HMAS Stirling and Henderson.

“Anyone with a working knowledge of Fremantle Port understands that the freight task numbers Westport has been producing are inflated and don’t reflect the actual

shipping volumes. This takes away the urgency associated with Westport and allows the time to rationally assess the AUKUS security concerns in the cold hard light of day.”

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Paul Garvey is an award-winning journalist with more than two decades' experience in newsrooms around Australia and the world. He is currently the senior reporter in The Australian's WA bureau, covering politics, courts, billionaires and everything in between. He has previously written for The Wall Street Journal in New York, The Australian Financial Review in Melbourne, and for The Australian from Hong Kong before returning to his native Perth. He was the WA Journalist of the Year in 2024 and is a two-time winner of The Beck Prize for political journalism.

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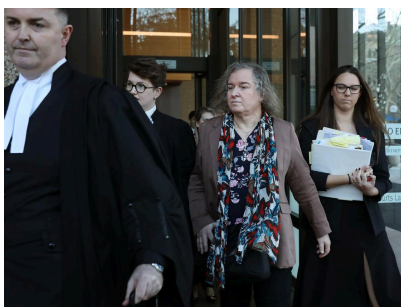
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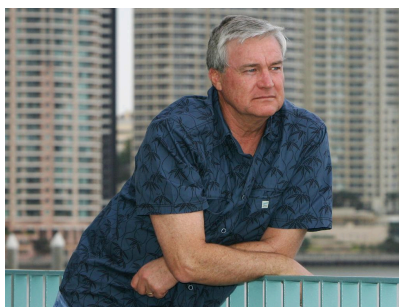
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