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What are the National Security Implications of WA's Westport Project ?

Introduction

In April 2025, The Australian newspaper reported that “A West Australian Labor MP (*Mr McGinn*) secretly warned senior politicians in Washington that one of his own government’s flagship projects could present a security risk to the AUKUS project.”¹ The project referred in the article was Westport, the State Government of Western Australia’s (WA) \$7.2 billion project to relocate the State’s container terminal from its current position in Fremantle to around 20 kilometres due south in Kwinana.² In response to the report in The Australian, WA Premier Roger Cook dismissed concerns raised by Mr McGinn’s regarding the Westport project and its proximity to an AUKUS base ... he said Mr McGinn was wrong.³

The article also referenced a paper prepared by the Maritime Union of Australia’s (MUA) WA branch and distributed at the US meetings by Mr McGinn. The paper outlines what the union says are the potential dangers posed to US and AUKUS nuclear submarines as a result of the Westport Project. The paper is at Annex A.

One thing the authors of this report have learned from their decades of service in the Australian Defence Force, is that security issues often arise from a failure of communication and coordination, rather than neglect or incompetence. We therefore decided to review the claims of Mr McGinn and the MUA to see if they warranted closer investigation and, if the claims are valid, to determine if we are seeing a case of opportunistic ignorance on the part of some Federal and State legislators.

The Risks and Vulnerabilities

The core theme of Mr McGinn’s claims, and the MUA paper, is that the proposed site for Westport will result in elevated interaction between foreign commercial vessels and AUKUS submarines with the bottleneck of one point of entry and exit through the shipping channel through which both nuclear submarines and commercial shipping will transit (*Figure1*). Both Mr McGinn and the MUA paper ask if the risks have been evaluated, given that when the Westport project was first announced, AUKUS did not exist.

¹ The Australian, 2 April 2025 - *Labor MP’s secret US mission to warn of subs ‘security risks’*

² Construction works on the new port are scheduled to start in the next 1 - 3 years and the port is not expected to be fully operational until the late 2030s at the earliest.

³ The West Australian, 3 April 2025 - *Premier Roger Cook has no concerns over Labor MP Kyle McGinn lobbying Washington over Westport project.*

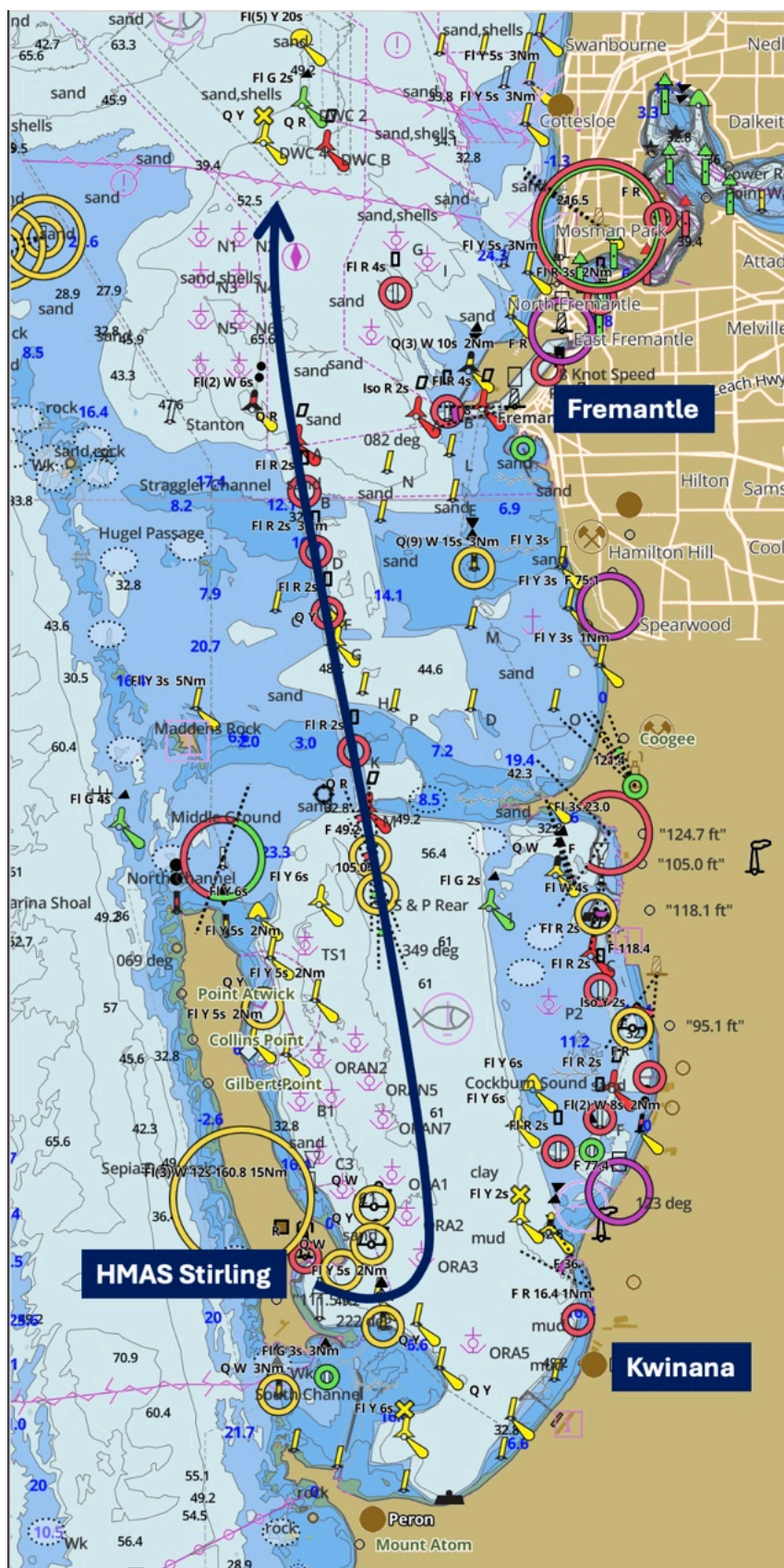


FIGURE 1 – COCKBURN SOUND AND HMAS STIRLING

CHART SOURCE - [HTTPS://FISHING-APP.GPSNAUTICALCHARTS.COM/](https://fishing-app.gpsnauticalcharts.com/)

So, what are the risks and vulnerabilities for naval operations in Cockburn sound?

HMAS Stirling/Fleet Base West and its berths and wharfage, including ammunition and resupply from the RAN's western weapons facility and store, is located on Western Australia's Garden Island. Garden Island WA forms the western side of Cockburn Sound while the WA mainland immediately south of Fremantle Harbour/Swan River entrance mainland forms the eastern shore of Cockburn Sound. Located on the eastern shore of the Sound are the industrial centres of Kwinana, Henderson and Cockburn where significant commercial infrastructure includes ship maintenance and repair facilities (including the Australian Submarine Corporation maintenance facility), fuel and grain storage.

Access to HMAS Stirling is via a Causeway connecting the base to the mainland at the southern end of Cockburn Sound in WA. The only access to Cockburn Sound is the one single channel entrance flanked by narrow and shallow waters at its northern end and accessed by transit through the Gage Roads waters: the southern end of Cockburn Sound is not navigable by other than small recreational watercraft. Table 1 is the average monthly shipping data gathered between 2018 and 2023 and shows a significant number of commercial shipping movements in the area.

When the Westport project is completed, the projected movements of shipping through the channel running north / south through the sound, and in the vicinity of HMAS Stirling, will more than double as a large number of ships will no longer berth at the existing facility in Fremantle Harbour as the new facility is set to work at Kwinana. There are often commercial vessels moored at various locations in Gage Roads and throughout Cockburn sound, awaiting access to docks (a 2025 example is shown at Annex B.)

TABLE 1. AVERAGE MONTHLY SHIPPING DATA (2018-2023)

Cargo Type	Avg Monthly Ship Visits (2018–2023)	Avg Annual Ship Visits	Annual Cargo Volume (if applicable)
Container Ships	30	360	809,709 TEU
Dry Bulk Carriers	31	372	~14.6 Mt
Liquid Bulk Tankers	10	120	~7.4 Mt
Vehicle Carriers (Ro-Ro)	15	180	100,907 vehicles
General Cargo / Break-bulk	3	36	~1.0 Mt

Note: Projected shipping data for 2040 anticipates minimal change in the total number of ships, but an increase to **1.3-1.4 million TEU** carried by larger container ships. The plans for Westport have RoRo's and break bulk (which also currently berth at the inner harbour), as well as the container ships, moving from the Fremantle inner harbour down to Westport, docking in Kwinana, some 6 km from HMAS Stirling across the Sound. Moored commercial vessels could be much closer than 6km, as illustrated in Annex B.

In 2025 we have witnessed the growth of containerised weapon systems. Both Israel and Ukraine employed drones launched from shipping containers and trucks as a tactic in their respective conflicts, demonstrating a shift towards covert and asymmetric drone warfare. Ukraine's "Operation Spiderweb" involved smuggling drones into Russia inside shipping containers and launching them remotely to attack Russian airfields. Similarly, Israel has used covert methods to smuggle drone components into Iran, establishing drone launch sites within the country. Both cases demonstrate the increasing use of

covert drone operations, smuggled into enemy territory and then launched, inflicting significant damage on the enemy's high-value targets.

The ability to launch weapons, such as drones, from within a target nation's territory poses a significant challenge for that nation's defence systems. The ability to launch weapons in the *middle* of a target nation's military operations makes defence against these threats even harder. An adversary could, for example, deploy weapon systems from shipping containers, carried by foreign flagged commercial vessels in the vicinity of a military base or where naval vessels are transiting in a narrow channel with little or no navigable sea room or depth to manoeuvre safely. This scenario creates a particular concern for future naval operations in Cockburn Sound and is worthy of serious review and assessment.

It is worth noting that there are currently only fifteen Australian Flagged commercial vessels of 2000 tons or above. Therefore, almost all commercial shipping movements in Cockburn sound are, and will continue to be, conducted by foreign flagged vessels. Any opacity in the Commonwealth's visibility of foreign shipping or arriving freight prior to entry into any restricted waters should be managed as a national security issue.

In addition to the risk to naval vessels and facilities, a blockage of the channel itself, either by accident or adversary action, poses a significant problem, as evidenced by the Ever Given blocking of the Suez Canal in 2021. A single large vessel grounding in the channel, whether due to mechanical failure, navigation error, weather conditions, or deliberate sabotage, could obstruct shipping for an extended period. Development of a second channel could offset much of the risk arising from an accidental blockage; however, it may not be a solution to intentional blockage which could be effected in both channels concurrently.

If the channel was blocked, naval vessels would not be able to leave or enter HMAS Stirling, all refined fuel deliveries to Perth would be halted and, in the future following the completion of the Westport project, container traffic would be blocked as well. The impact on both military operations and the civilian population of Perth would be significant. Given that WA is 100% fuel import dependent, a port blockage could lead to fuel shortages, affecting transport, logistics, emergency services, and power generation.⁴

⁴ Fuel stock holding levels are not publicly listed for specific sites; fuel storage metrics are reported by importers and aggregated at national/state level. The Australian federal government mandates the Minimum Stockholding Obligation (MSO), requiring importers to maintain petrol, diesel, and jet fuel reserves in terms of days of supply, which vary between 20 and 32 days, depending on fuel type. Large scale transport of fuel by rail or road from eastern states to WA is not possible.

How long could it take to clear a channel if a container ship ran aground? An example is that of the MV Rena in New Zealand on the Astrolabe Reef in October 2011. The MV Rena, carrying 1,368 containers, ran aground and eventually became New Zealand's worst maritime environmental disaster. Salvage crews first removed oil; the first container was lifted off on 16 November 2011, roughly six weeks after the MV Rena ran aground. The operation to offload containers took at least six to seven weeks, with ongoing environmental recovery for several months.⁵

National Security Implications

The risks arising from the significant increase in shipping in the channel as a result of the planned move of container operations from Fremantle to Kwinana, need to be assessed and mitigated where possible. Defences against drones and other advanced weapons systems are being developed. However, it is an iterative race between attacker and defender. The offensive operations in Russia and Iran have surprised many observers.

We assume Defence has conducted risk analyses of the Cockburn Sound and the proposed move of container ships to Kwinana. There are understandable commercial pressures from the WA Government to make the move. Whilst this would factor into any decision to place limitations on commercial shipping traffic in the Sound, national security issues must take priority.

In the case of Cockburn Sound, the rotational basing of nuclear submarines of three nations provides an obvious future opportunity for an adversary to disrupt operations at a relatively low cost. If we examine publicly available information of how other nations secure and protect their nuclear submarine bases and sea access routes, and compare that with the current and projected situation in Cockburn Sound, the contrast is stark. We do not consider that the risk is a low probability event; it needs to be addressed.

As the responsible Minister, the Minister for Defence may be well served by seeking formal assurance from both Defence leadership and of relevant Federal and State Government Departments as to the depth and rigour of risk assessments conducted in the intervening period from the proposed Westport and announcement and formation of the AUKUS Alliance. The Minister for Defence will likely be asked to reassure the US Government and the Australian public that the risks to their submarines and our AUKUS submarines is understood and mitigated, and not disregarded by the simplistic statement by a likely unaware WA Premier that concerns are “wrong.” The Minister may care to ask:

- What risk assessments have been conducted regarding the relocation of Fremantle Port to Kwinana?
- What expert consultation has been undertaken with national security, defence, and intelligence agencies regarding the port relocation's risks?
- Has a threat assessment been conducted on the risk of weaponized merchant ships operating near HMAS Stirling and the new port?

⁵ https://www.maritimenz.govt.nz/public/environmental-protection/responding-to-spills/spill-response-case-studies/mv-rena/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

- Has the Australian Defence Force provided an assessment of potential security implications for submarine operations in the area?
- Has the government examined case studies of other ports that have faced similar security challenges?
- What security measures will be implemented to monitor and manage the increased presence of foreign-flagged merchant ships near critical infrastructure?
- Will there be restrictions on which nations' vessels can operate in proximity to HMAS Stirling?
- How will merchant vessels be screened prior to entry into Cockburn Sound for potential security threats, including cyber vulnerabilities and espionage risks?
- What coordination exists between WA authorities and the Australian Defence Force to mitigate potential risks from foreign shipping near HMAS Stirling?
- What maritime surveillance and patrol capabilities will be deployed to detect and deter potential threats?

Specific questions for the WA Government could include:

- What contingency plans are in place if a vessel accidentally or deliberately blocks the new shipping channel?
- Has an independent security and supply chain risk analysis been conducted, and if so, can it be made public?
- What modelling has been done to assess the potential economic impact of a channel blockage on Perth and WA supply chains?
- How long would it take to clear a blocked channel, and what salvage and emergency response capabilities are being planned?
- What are the alternative routes for essential imports (fuel, food, medical supplies) if the Kwinana channel is blocked?
- What role will rail and road networks play in supply chain resilience, and will additional infrastructure be built to handle alternative freight routes?
- Will WA increase its emergency maritime response fleet, including salvage vessels, tugboats, and rapid-response equipment?
- How will port security infrastructure be enhanced to detect and respond to suspicious vessel movements or potential security breaches?
- Will emergency response teams be equipped to deal with chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) threats at the port?

Having raised these concerns in the case of WA ports, there could be similar concerns with other Defence and critical infrastructure installations near ports. The Port of Darwin has been subject to much debate over recent years regarding the Chinese company lease of the Port facility. The specific concerns regarding weapons covertly carried by commercial shipping, are likely to be applicable to the Garden Island Navy Base in Sydney Harbour, the RAAF Base Williamstown near Newcastle Port, the RAN explosive weapons facility at the Port of Eden, Defence installations at Townsville, Defence installations at Darwin and Defence and Joint Facilities at Exmouth. The LNG plants along the NW coast of Australia could also be included in a risk assessment, given the potential economic / energy impacts should they be attacked.

What next ?

Clearly there are serious questions that need to be addressed with respect to the risks and vulnerabilities for both Defence and the WA population resulting from the collocation of a nuclear submarine base, import ports, a narrow channel and large numbers of foreign flagged commercial ships. These risks and vulnerabilities also impinge on the plans for AUKUS, given the stark contrast in how the US bases its nuclear submarines and how Australia intends to host / base US and Australian nuclear submarines.

Simply stating that the concerns raised with respect to the Cockburn Sound by a local politician and the MUA are “wrong” seems somewhat foolhardy. Perhaps a case of “opportunistic ignorance?” These questions need to be addressed by the Australian Federal and the WA State Governments ... *preferably before the US Government realises the true scale of the risks.*

Authors:

Air Vice-Marshal John Blackburn AO RAAF (Retd), MDefStud, MStratStud is the Chair of the Institute for Integrated Economic Research – Australia. He retired from the Royal Australian Air Force in 2008 as the Deputy Chief of the Air Force, following a career as an F/A-18 fighter pilot, test pilot and strategic planner. For the past four years he has led a National Resilience Project that has highlighted a lack of resilience in Australia in addressing the pandemic, climate change impacts, the ongoing energy transition, and growing regional security threats.

Commodore Vince Di Pietro AM CSC RAN (Retd), MA (Strategic Studies), FRSN, FRAeS, FAICD is a Fellow of the Institute for Integrated Economic Research – Australia. He retired from the Royal Australian Navy in 2016 as Commander Fleet Air Arm. In previous senior appointments he has served as Naval Attache to the United States, and accountable for Navy Infrastructure Planning as Director General Navy Capability Plans and Engagement. He was formerly Commanding Officer HMAS Stirling which included responsibility for Nuclear Powered Warship visits to HMAS Stirling, Superintendent of Naval Waters in WA, and a member of the WA Govt Cockburn Sound Environmental Management Council. After retiring from Navy, he has been Chief Executive of Lockheed Martin ANZ, and on retirement from that role in 2019 has been the Local Recovery Coordinator post the Currowan Bushfire in the Shoalhaven and the Project designer and Chair of the multi award winning Recovery into Resilience Project – a jointly funded initiative by the Federal and State Government of NSW.

About the IIER-A:

The Institute for Integrated Economic Research (IIER) - Australia was founded in 2018. It conducts and supports research in order to contribute to an improved understanding of how Australians can plan for, and navigate, the significant transitions over forthcoming decades whilst maintaining the stability and security of our society. The Institute's reports on Australia's National Resilience are here: <https://www.jbcs.co/iieraaustralia-projects>

Annex A

WESTPORT: A RISK TO AUKUS?



A Maritime Union of Australia paper on the potential security risk of Westport's construction in Western Australia



Concerns surrounding Westport and its interplay with AUKUS

The relocation of Western Australia's main container terminal fundamentally changes the security environment for the tripartite security agreement between Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, formally known as AUKUS.

The Western Australian State Government's proposal to relocate the port to around 20 kilometres (13 miles) south of its current positioning would bring foreign shipping traffic dangerously close to critical military assets, such as Garden Island (HMAS Stirling Naval Base) and the Henderson Shipyard, the proposed construction site for future nuclear submarines. Both of these locations are currently shared with the United States military.

This introduces new risks of weaponised merchant vessels, espionage, cyber threats, and sabotage that cannot be addressed without additional comprehensive maritime security upgrades (if at all). Australian governments at a State and Federal level must carefully evaluate these risks before committing to the port relocation or be prepared to significantly enhance naval security around Garden Island to mitigate the new threats posed by high-density commercial shipping.

What is Westport?

Westport is the State Government of Western Australia's \$7.2 billion (US\$4.6 billion) project to relocate the State's container terminal from its current position in Fremantle to around 20 kilometres due south in Kwinana.

The project's port facility is still the design and planning stage with the business case only being announced late in 2024, with further detailed planning stages to come. Construction works on the new port are scheduled to start in the next 1 - 3 years and the port is not expected to be fully operational until the late 2030s at the earliest.

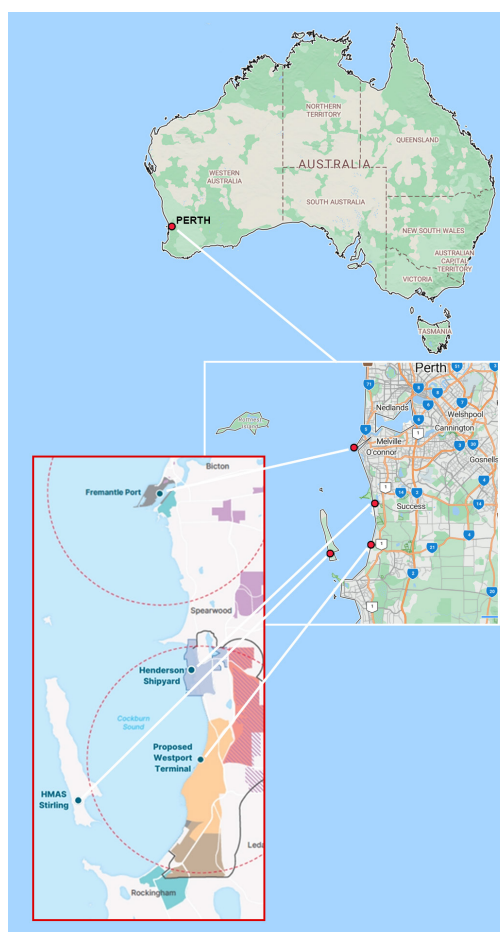
In addition to the port facilities, there will be required construction of a shipping channel, and an offshore breakwater as well as required upgrades to supporting road and rail.

Fremantle recorded more than 850,000 TEU movements in 2024 and this is projected to triple in 50 years' time.

How does Westport impact AUKUS?

With Westport's planned construction start and completion times aligning closely with the major developments surrounding AUKUS. These two major construction projects being in such close proximity to each other could result in impacted delivery deadlines due to competition around both building materials and skilled labour.

Construction of the port at the prospective site with the government's forecasted vessel movements would result in a high volume of foreign commercial ships moving within close proximity of the both the naval base HMAS Stirling which will house the AUKUS submarines, and the planned maintenance facilities based at Henderson Shipyard.



HMAS Stirling & Henderson Shipyard: How It Interacts With AUKUS

The Henderson Shipyard is being transformed into a Commonwealth-owned Defence Precinct to support Australia's naval shipbuilding and sustainment needs. It will focus on constructing general-purpose frigates and Army landing craft, while also providing depot-level maintenance and contingency docking for nuclear-powered submarines.

HMAS Stirling, located at Garden Island, will undergo AU\$8 billion in upgrades to support the Hunter-class frigates and nuclear-powered submarines.

It will host the Submarine Rotational Force-West (SRF-West) from 2027, accommodating up to four US and one UK nuclear-powered submarine.

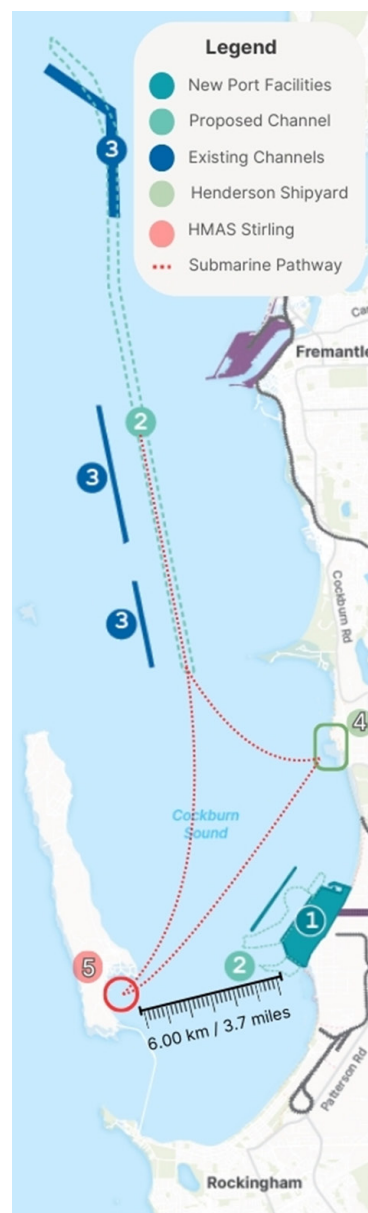
Infrastructure improvements include 400 meters of additional berth space, ensuring readiness for future Australian nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS.

As part of AUKUS, Australia will acquire at least three Virginia-class submarines from the USA and co-develop next-generation SSN-AUKUS submarines with the UK.

Increased vessel traffic: Increased risk

The proposed site for Westport intersects with the route AUKUS submarines will take when going for routine maintenance and entering/exiting the naval base. This could potentially allow visiting vessels to covertly obtain the whereabouts and sensitive information surrounding Virginia-class and SSN-AUKUS submarines.

This elevated interaction between foreign commercial vessels and AUKUS submarines is intensified with the bottleneck of one point of entry and exit.



“ASIO has identified foreign services seeking to target AUKUS to position themselves to collect on the capabilities, how Australia intends to use them, and to undermine the confidence of our allies.
Mike Burgess - Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) director general
19 February 2025



Annex B

Commercial ships in close proximity to HMAS Stirling

Google Maps Imagery 2025

