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Cairns plots course for more warships

SHADOW FOREIGN AFFAIRS MINISTER VISITS TO DISCUSS FAR NORTH'S STRATEGIC ROLE IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

AUSTRALIA'S strategic realignment in defence in response to China's influence in the Asia Pacific could pave the way for lucrative naval investment in Cairns, with more warships being targeted.

Ramping up spending on Australia's most northern naval base, home to the HMAS Cairns, along with the addition of two more military vessels was a key message directed to Shadow Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong by Far North delegates on Thursday.

Advance Cairns chief Paul Sparshott said the further expansion of the military base would create a wealth of highly skilled jobs and help diversify the region's economy to better deal with "future global shocks".

Moving the defence ships from Sydney was also tabled to Senator Wong, who toured the Cairns shipyard and the Great Barrier Reef

Marine Training College before discussing the city's strategic importance in the Asia Pacific.

It follows Prime Minister Scott Morrison's announcement in May of a \$155m commitment at the Cairns base to support the new Arafura Class Offshore Patrol Vessels.

"We want a bigger base here in Cairns with more vessels and additional investment in infrastructure to support this," Mr Sparshott said.

"Penny totally gets where we are coming from, she's a very smart lady, and she realises there is a repositioning towards the north in a strategic defence sense.

"Since Covid hit there has been a clear strategic shift in defence and how to re-engage with our Pacific neighbours.

"We are the most northerly naval base and it is already attracting significant investment given our location and what is happening around the world."

It's believed lucrative aircraft surveillance and maintenance contracts could help further shift the economy's reliance on tourism.

Senator Wong's visit comes as China appears to be building a naval base and airfield in Cambodia.

Satellite imagery from Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative shows construction at the southeast Asian country's biggest naval site at Ream in what analysts say reflects Chinese President Xi Jinping's expansion into the region.

Senator Wong said her visit to the tropics was important, hearing directly from local manufacturers and industry groups about the work being done to diversify the economy.

"The marine maintenance sector including the local shipyards and port are clearly important to the local community and economy and I've heard about their challenges and future plans," she said.

"The marine training college is an impressive facility and their collaboration with industry is critical to Cairns continuing to build its capability and cementing its role as a hub in the north and the Pacific more broadly."

Cairns Airport boss Richard Barker was also in attendance at the roundtable with Senator Wong, where it was revealed Cairns was currently the fourth biggest airport in Australia.

The airport and marine precinct were the "key pillars" in the economy's bounce back from the pandemic, according to Mr Sparshott.

"They are probably our biggest opportunities," he said.

"What is good about defence spending is it underpins the nation's economy, and then private businesses can leverage off that."

Labor candidate for Leichhardt, Elida Faith, said skilling young people was a "key piece of the puzzle" in expanding local maritime capacity.

"If we don't invest in skills and apprenticeships, we will miss out on opportunities in the marine sector," she said.

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