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The Coalition says Labor is a weak horse' for ignoring Ukraine chopper plea

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The Coalition has accused the government of weakness for not giving [Ukraine](#) the retired fleet of MRH-90 [Taipan helicopters](#) to assist the war effort against Russia, with Opposition defence spokesman Andrew Hastie warning Australia was making a “big mistake.”

Director of Strategic Analysis Australia, Peter Jennings, also called for an investigation into why Australia was dismantling the helicopters instead of donating them, accusing the government of losing interest in [the conflict](#).

Mr Hastie told The Australian that “the risk profile for operations in war where you are fighting for national survival is entirely different to a peacetime army”

“We should be giving as much support as we can to the Ukrainians. If we are applying [peace time standards to a war](#) where people are fighting for their survival, we are making a big mistake,” he said. “Why couldn't we provide [the Taipans](#)? The government needs to explain why they haven't done so. The government should be pushing as much kit as possible Ukraine's way.”

“Our adversaries are testing every member of the free world to establish whether they are a strong horse or a weak horse. This makes us look like a weak horse.”

The Australian revealed on Thursday that Kyiv's official request to the Albanese government for the helicopters made clear they would "save Ukrainian lives" and prevent the wounded from "dying unnecessarily" on the frontline by providing a much needed medevac capability.

The December 17 request to Defence Minister Richard Marles made by Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov, chief of the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine, said that "the odds of surviving a critical injury in war are substantially increased with helicopter medevacs."

"We do not have helicopters that can rapidly deploy and evacuate our wounded," he said. General Budanov also revealed that he had established a taskforce to "research and understand the reasons why Australia retired the MRH-90 Taipans" and that Ukraine, as a result, now understood the "challenges Australia faced".

The government has not yet provided a formal response to the Ukrainian request. However, Defence Industry Minister Pat Conroy told ABC radio on Thursday morning that the government began the disposal strategy for the aircraft in September – "some months before any request was received."

The Taipans were [permanently grounded last year](#) after an MRH-90 helicopter plunged into the ocean off the Whitsunday Islands on July 28, killing four Australians during the Talisman Sabre joint military exercises with the US.

Mr Conroy said that none of the helicopters were in "flying condition" and that getting them ready to fly "would require a huge investment in taxpayers' funds, time and resources to do that."

"We have no idea whether these aircraft are safe to fly. Anyone who suggests that these aircraft have been cleared is lying, and they are making, quite frankly, really offensive suggestions," he said.

Mr Conroy said the government also worked with Airbus, the manufacturer of the helicopter, to establish "whether there was any existing users that were interested in the air frames, and there were none."

"We then contracted NATO Helicopter Industries to do a global scan of the market to see if anyone was interested in buying the air frames who was a new customer. There was zero interest in buying the air frames," Mr Conroy said.

“Therefore, the best value for taxpayers was to disassemble the aircraft and to begin selling the spare parts. Because the other option would have been to pay hundreds of millions of dollars to Airbus Australia to maintain these aircraft in a flying condition when there was no prospect that they would be flying again for the Australian Army.”

The Taipans were designed and built by NH Industries – a consortium of European companies involving Airbus Helicopters, Leonardo Helicopters, and Fokker – and were based on the NH90 Troop Transport Helicopter variant.

But Mr Jennings said that hundreds of the aircraft were in service in Europe including in Germany, France and the Netherlands — all countries which he argued could have provided logistical support to Ukraine to help them to use the helicopters.

“The fact we’ve trashed this opportunity is just criminal,” Mr Jennings said. “It desperately needs some sort of investigation ... No-one’s really serious about this beyond rhetoric. That’s where the government is on Ukraine. That’s where they are on the Red Sea.”

Mr Jennings said that Ukraine could have used the Taipan helicopters “very successfully”.

“We have a tendency to view Ukrainians as being simple people. But it’s worth remembering Ukraine was actually the centre of weapons development in the Soviet Union,” he said.

“I think a key mistake was that the government sort of surrendered the initiative on supporting Ukraine to the Defence Department ... They are interested only in their own corporate well being.”

Mr Hastie said he thought there was “a lack of leadership with the Albanese government and they have no appetite for risk.”

“It’s not for the government to worry about Russian missiles shooting Ukrainian helicopters out of the sky. If they are willing to wear the risk, that’s for them to do so.”

Anthony Albanese said the government was taking “advice from the Department of Defence on these matters” and defended Australia’s contribution to the war effort.

“We’ve been substantial contributors to support for Ukraine,” he said. “And indeed, just this week there’ll be further Australian Defence Force personnel leaving for the United Kingdom, providing support for that training effort in Ukraine.”

Mr Conroy said the helicopter air frames would be disposed of in an environmentally safe manner and spare parts “sold to existing users of other variants of this helicopter.”

“The reason that’s the case is these aircraft have a very chequered history,” he said. “There’s massive backlogs in getting spare parts, and when you get spare parts they’re very expensive.” Mr Conroy said Australia was not the only user of these aircraft that are retiring them. “Sweden is retiring theirs, Belgium is retiring theirs, Germany – the biggest user of these helicopters – is constantly complaining about availability,” he said.

“There was no interest in buying the air frames, therefore, the best value for money for the taxpayers was to sell the spare parts and dispose of the air frames.”

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Joe Kelly is the National Affairs Editor. He joined The Australian in 2008 and since 2010 has worked in the parliamentary press gallery, most recently as Canberra Bureau chief... [Read more](#)



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