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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
RADIO INTERVIEW
RN DRIVE WITH PATRICIA KARVELAS
FRIDAY, 7 APRIL 2017**

SUBJECTS: US air strikes in Syria

PATRICIA KARVELAS: Richard Marles is the Shadow Minister for Defence, Richard Marles thanks for joining us on the program.

RICHARD MARLES: Good evening Patricia, how are you?

KARVELAS: Good. Where does this bipartisanship end? Do you support further deployment of Australian resources into this conflict?

MARLES: Well, I think bipartisanship is important if we can achieve it, and we have today. What we saw happen earlier in the week was an outrage and it's reputedly been attributed to the Assad Regime and it can't go without a response. So, we do support the response the Americans have engaged in. We've got to remember that chemical warfare has really been outlawed since the aftermath of the First World War, so this is a breach of the laws of war and it's therefore a war crime and this is an appropriate response. I think it's also important, in answer to your question, that we take everything a step at a time. Responses to these sort of events are complicated, there's a lot of balls in the air, it's important that those holding public office don't speculate but rather react to the facts and the briefings that they get. We've sought a briefing from the Government, we haven't had that yet, but we hope to have that very shortly, and we obviously need to assess that information and the basis of the conversations that the Government's had with the US.

KARVELAS: Should we review the unconditional support we've previously given the US in the past? I mean should we stay out of any escalating...an escalation in our activities here?

MARLES: Well, I don't think it's right to describe support as unconditional in the sense that the engagement that Australia has in all the conflicts in which we participate is done in a very considered way and on the basis of our own national interest. Certainly, from the point of view of Labor and the Opposition, we want to

consider very carefully every step that's taken when it comes to Australia's engagement and that would be the case if there was any alteration to Australia's engagement. Working with our allies and partners is clearly a critical factor in all of that, but you know, on our terms we need to be thinking through as a nation why we engage in conflicts and how that suits our – and works in with – our national interest and we need to keep doing that in respect of anything that occurs in the Middle East now.

KARVELAS: Does it concern you, the speed with which the US changed its position on Syria? Because previously the Administration seemed uninterested in involving itself in this kind of military response.

MARLES: Well, again, I think it's important that we react to how this has been described and the intent that America has given for the action that it took today. Action which is addressed at dealing with the use of chemical weapons is appropriate. Bringing to an end the use of chemical weapons in this particular conflict would unquestionably be a good thing; as I said earlier it is a breach of the laws of war, it is a war crime. And, you can only, I mean anyone who has looked at the images on TV over the last few days can only be moved by what they've seen, it is an appalling sight –

KARVELAS: Oh look, there's no doubt that there is, but it's not the first time this has happened. These are just images that made their way into the media which clearly galvanised a pretty strong international reaction, and there's a reason for that, they're absolutely devastating and appalling, but it's not new. So shouldn't this have happened earlier? Because Obama promised to take action like this in 2013, but he didn't. Your ALP colleague, MP Michael Danby, said and I quote: "failure to act has worse consequences than acting". Has Trump done what Obama should have done?

MARLES: Well, again, I come back to this I think, without commenting on the past, that the reaction of this kind to the use of chemical weapons, we think is appropriate. I guess I'd make this point, when you draw a line, you've got to give it significance and that appears to be what has occurred today, that's why we have stated our support for this, and there is...anything that can be done to remove the use of chemical weapons in any context and certainly in the context of this conflict, is a good thing.

KARVELAS: Do you agree with your colleague Michael Danby though, that there was a blunder by the Obama Administration not to take action in 2013?

MARLES: Look I don't think it's useful to go down the path of reviewing that, we're dealing with the situation that we've got right now. I think it is important to say that when you draw a line, you've got to give it meaning and what we've got now is a reaction to what was an outrage committed earlier in the week, and it's a proportionate and appropriate reaction, and the clip that you played of the Prime Minister articulated that, and we agree with that, and having made that position plain now, it's important that it's maintained.

KARVELAS: What about the weaponry used here? The tomahawk cruise missile, what kind of message does that send to the Assad Regime?

MARLES: Oh well, again I think that this was a...I mean I'm basing this on public reports, I don't have any inside information on all of this of course, but it would appear as though this was a targeted attack at the source of where the chemical attacks earlier in the week had been launched, and in that sense it therefore does have a degree of proportionality about it. This is aimed at dealing with the base from which the chemical attacks took place and I assume the weapons that have been used have been done so in a way of bringing about that objective as efficiently as possible.

KARVELAS: The strike was launched in the middle of a state visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping. What do you make of the timing?

MARLES: Well, I mean, you can't determine the timing of these issues, and you're right, that is very important summit that is going on between President Xi and Trump at the moment in Florida. But ultimately what determined the timing here was the timing earlier in the week of the chemical weapons' attack that took place, so, you know, if there is to be a response, it needs to be proximate to that time. I think we've just got to see it in that context, the articulation of the rationale behind these attacks makes clear sense from the Trump Administration. At the end of the day, chemical weapons – the use of them – is a war crime, and it is appropriate that action is taken to respond to that. I think if you flip it, for these attacks to have gone and there not having been a response to them, I think would have been an enormous concern.

KARVELAS: The strike proves President Trump's resolve for action no doubt, how concerned are you that this resolve could extend to our region, to the South China Sea or North Korea, which has obviously also been in the headlines in the last couple of weeks?

MARLES: Well I think they're separate issues, and again, it's important that we take every issue on its own terms and clearly the discussions that are going on in Florida between Presidents Xi and Trump in relation to East Asia are going to be really important there. But the articulation of why, what occurred today, having occurred, was based on a reaction to the use of chemical weapons, that makes sense. There are a whole range of separate issues with respect of North Korea and South China Sea. I think in relation to North Korea, the fact that China and the US are talking is obviously a good thing. I mean, they are perhaps the two most important countries in our world view and the world feels like a safer place when those two countries are talking with each other, and I think it's hard to see a meaningful resolution of the situation in North Korea without American and Chinese cooperation, so we can only hope that this summit advances that.

KARVELAS: Can I just ask you, just before I let you go, a kind of deeper question about this? Why is the use of chemical weapons different from bombing a hospital or an apartment building which is obviously very devastating for the people who become victims in attacks like that?

MARLES: Well, in the aftermath of the First World War, the international community worked very hard to create conventions to deal with the use of this weapon and there are – I mean in terms of the deeper question – there are a range of laws of war which exist, which try and put some parameters around human conflict. Anything which civilises – if we can use that word – that conflict is obviously a good thing. Now, no one seeks to have conflict, it is much better that disputes are worked out through negotiation and discussion, but I think that there is a global agreement about seeking to ban the use of chemical weapons is unquestionably a good thing on its own terms, and it's very important that that standard be maintained.

KARVELAS: Richard Marles many thanks for joining me on this Friday evening.

MARLES: It's a pleasure Patricia, thank you.

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