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HOST: With me now the Shadow Defence Minister, Richard Marles. Mr Marles, thanks for your time. I've just been told the Prime Minister's conversation with the President went for 30 minutes, obviously dominated by the crisis on the Korean Peninsula. I know that your Party, as well, is very much focussed on this, your leader heading to Tokyo and Seoul over coming weeks.

RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE: Yeah, that's right, and I think that's going to be an important visit by Bill Shorten, accompanied by Penny Wong, and what it is going to say to both Japan and South Korea is that we're obviously standing in solidarity with them, that there is very much a bi-partisan view in this country about supporting Japan and South Korea.

HOST: Now, in relation to North Korea itself, there's a lot of focus on China. Are we seeing a situation where the rogue nation is now just simply out of control, that not even China could exert enough pressure to stop this dictator?

MARLES: Well, I think there is still pressure that can be exerted and sanctions are in place, and we need to remember whilst it feels that we've been talking about sanctions for some time, it's really only this week that they've come into effect. It's only a couple of weeks ago that China put in place those new sanctions after the UN Security Council resolution, so this doesn't have an impact over a couple of news cycles. It's going to take some time and we need to allow that to play out.

I also think that we need to continue the conversation about what other pressure, other diplomatic pressure and sanctions pressure, can be applied to North Korea. I remain hopeful that their behaviour can be shaped by that. Certainly, China has an important role to play, and it's encouraging that they're starting to play that role.

HOST: And what do you want, as an Opposition, to gain from this visit by the alternative prime minister in Mr Shorten and the Shadow Foreign Minister, Penny Wong? What are they hoping to achieve in these talks in Tokyo and Seoul?

MARLES: I think there is one very clear mission with this visit, and that is to let the countries of Japan and South Korea know that policy in this country, in Australia, is utterly bipartisan when it comes to supporting them in dealing with the very significant threat which is currently being posed by North Korea, and that the Australia polity is at one in relation to that. I think it's an important message for the alternative prime minister to be giving to those countries.

HOST: It's a huge risk right now. You'd concede that, wouldn't you, in the sense that there's volatility on both sides of the equation here? If we saw these developments last year under a different president with a track record that is known not just to us but allies in the region like Japan and South Korea, that our equation would be very, very different to right now under President Trump, when he's used the sort of rhetoric that he has.

MARLES: I think it is a very dangerous moment that the world is facing in terms of what it occurring with North Korea. Let's not forget that we can have comments about President Trump, but ultimately the blame and fault here lies with North Korea. I mean, they are the ones who are engaging in the provocative action. They're the ones who are breaching international conventions, breaching the UN Security Council resolutions, so there's no doubt as to where the blame lies here.

I think it is important that all players globally act in as predictable a way as they can so that the message that are given to North Korea are very, very clear. I've said previously I'm not a particular fan of diplomacy by tweet, but at the end of the day we need to be working as one, as a global community, to put all the pressure that we can on North Korea to start shaping their behaviour in a different way.

HOST: You say that there's only the blame on the North Korean side. Most in our nation, around the world, would agree with you – not the Russian leader, Vladimir Putin, though. He's saying that the US and its allies should scale down military activities in the region, describing war games by the South Korean and US militaries as unhelpful and provocative.

MARLES: It's hard to make out that claim. A lot of the activity that we've seen has been routine, the sort of activity that's occurred in previous years, and I also find it hard to be critical of a country like South Korea in preparing itself for defence in circumstances where its neighbour is acting in the way that they are.

The provocation here, the escalation of this issue, the country doing the nuclear tests and the intercontinental ballistic missile tests, is North Korea. They are the ones who have ramped this right up, and you can't blame South Korea for acting in a way which seeks to defend itself. I certainly am not going to apportion that blame to them.

That said, I think it's really important that all players here are walking down a path of trying to find a diplomatic outcome because, as General Mattis has said, a conflict on the Korean Peninsula would be of a kind that most people alive today have not seen

before, and it would be a horrendous prospect and you don't go that place lightly. We need to be very energetic in finding diplomatic outcomes here.

HOST: Should the US and South Korea, though, think about winding back the military exercises, given how this dictator's been reacting? Is it time for them to at least try that as a scenario here?

MARLES: You can't blame countries for seeking to defend themselves. They are not the aggressors here, and one needs to be careful about what signals would be sent in doing that.

What I think matters is that we are very clear about where the wrong lies - it is with North Korea – and then that we are as active as we can be in finding diplomatic solutions here. Now, trying to engage China has been done, is a critical step, and China is responding and we need to acknowledge and commend China for what they have done to this point in time, whilst at the same time making the point that China can do more, and trying to help China walk down that path. That's where resolution to this lies.

HOST: 'Labor cash stacks' – front page of the Herald Sun today. Quite an explosive report this by Alex White and Matt Johnston that suggests that ALP whistleblowers have revealed roting of taxpayers' funds siphoned from MPs printing budgets to pay for Party memberships. These are explosive claims. Do you know anything about them?

MARLES: I don't. I've obviously read the report in today's paper, so that's what I know, and they describe very serious allegations of very serious abuse, but I'm not aware of this occurring. I guess the point I'd make is that there are robust processes within the Labor Party to deal with abuses of this kind, and if there is an allegation out there that a Victorian parliamentary entitlement has been abuses then I think those who have that information need to put that in front of the Victorian parliament.

HOST: Mr Marles, appreciate your time as always. Thanks for that.

MARLES: Thanks, Kieran.

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