

Labor



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**THE HON RICHARD MARLES MP  
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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT  
TELEVISION INTERVIEW  
SKY NEWS LIVE  
SUNDAY AGENDA  
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***SUBJECTS: North Korea; engagement with Asia; US relationship; same sex marriage survey***

**HOST:** This is *Sunday Agenda*. With me: Paul Kelly, and also joining us now the Shadow Defence Minister Richard Marles, live from Geelong. Lots to talk about, including Chris Bowen's pledge on behalf of Labor for greater engagement with Asia.

First though, to the developments over the last 24 hours and Rex Tillerson, the Secretary of State, making it clear during a visit to Beijing that the US is trying to open up some dialogue with Pyongyang. Is that a good thing, or is that rewarding the provocative and bad behaviour out of North Korea?

**RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE:** Oh no, I think it's important that we pursue every diplomatic and peaceful avenue, and on the one hand that does involve looking at all the sanctions that can possibly be put in place, but on the other it absolutely involves making sure that there is dialogue between all the parties involved, and I would expect that particularly through New York, the UN, there would be means of dialogue between the US and North Korea, but I think it is important that there be an ability to communicate at this moment.

**HOST:** At this point, though, Tillerson said that, or a State Department spokesperson, in fact, said explicitly North Korean officials have shown no indication that they're interested or ready for talks regarding de-nuclearisation.

**MARLES:** And therein lies the issue and the ongoing work that sanctions needs to play. I think there is still a fair way to go in terms of trying to shape North Korea's behaviour in the way in which we would want to do that, but it really is important that we are pursuing every peaceful means possible to do that, because, as General Mattis has pointed out and we've mentioned on many occasions, to go down any other road, and particularly the military road, would see a conflict unlike any that we've seen during most people's life time.

**HOST:** Just how concerned are you about events over the last several weeks, when we've seen from both sides, North Korea and the President of the United States, Donald Trump, an escalation in rhetoric and then an escalation in terms of military decision making? In a sense, it looks as though we might be on the path towards some sort of military conflict. How concerned are you about that? How do you rate the dangers of a military conflict?

**MARLES:** Well, Paul, I think that the chances of a military conflict are less likely rather than more. I still very much have that view, but you asked whether I'm concerned. I'm deeply concerned, but that's because even if there is a small chance of military conflict the consequences of it would be so grave and enormous that it would impact the region, ourselves, and the world for a long time to come. I don't think any observer looking at the kind of escalation that we've seen in rhetoric over the last month could be anything other than deeply concerned about it, so I'm certainly very worried in that regard. I do still think that the chance of actual conflict remains small, but that said I think it's at an unacceptably high level even with that because of the consequences involved.

**HOST:** We know there's been very little direct communication between the United States and North Korea. We've now got this latest move by the Americans which suggests they would like to set up some form of direct communication. How important is that?

**MARLES:** I think it is important. As I said earlier, it matters in moments like this that there is an ability for all parties to communicate with each other, and that would include communication between the US and North Korea. Now, I have assumed that through the UN, through various missions in New York, there is some capacity to talk, but it really is critical that that is the case.

That doesn't fly in the face of pursuing all the sanctions that need to be pursued. I think they are going to be the most important factor in shaping North Korea's behaviour in the way that we would want to shape it, and I think that's the other issue, Paul: to accept as a *fait accompli* a world in which North Korea has nuclear weapons, and that's outing aside any possibility of there being a conflict, creates a much more dangerous world that we would be living in, because a pressure on countries within the region to go down a nuclear path, countries like Japan or South Korea, or even a country like Vietnam. It means the cause of non-proliferation, which has been on a positive course since the end of the Cold War, is suddenly turned on its head, so quite apart from the immediacy of any conflict, the idea of an accepted nuclear-capable North Korea is a very bad idea indeed.

**HOST:** Let's look at the pledge this week by Chris Bowen on behalf of the Labor Party for a greater engagement with Asia. Was this, this latest iteration of something we've heard many times over recent decades, is this driven in part by the unpredictability and, well, the uncertainty of the Trump Administration?

**MARLES:** I wouldn't put it in those terms. I think, first of all, it's driven by the fact this is core Labor policy. I mean, it's part of our DNA. You can really go back to the Chifley Government and its relationship with Indonesia to see a stream of thought within Labor about a greater engagement in our region and in Asia. You saw that

with Whitlam. You obviously saw that with Hawke and Keating, and you saw it under Gillard and Rudd with the Asian Century White Paper, and what we want to do, looking to office and being an alternative government, is to say from the outset that we would be a government which would seek to engage much more greatly with Asia than what we're seeing with the current Conservative government, in the tradition of Labor governments of the past, and we would be critical of the extent to which this government has engaged with Asia and we want to do it much more.

**HOST:** In that sense, and Paul touched on this in his editorial comments at the start, we've heard this before and if you look at, we've heard all of this before, and the problem is, Mr Marles, is that nothing's really changed. If you look at investment flows, we as a nation still invest more in New Zealand than we do in Japan, India, ASEAN nations combined.

**MARLES:** That would be true in terms of investment, and it's right to raise that and I think a greater flow of investment would be worthwhile and supported, and indeed as trade minister I was much more supportive of liberalising investment arrangements for Chinese investment into Australia, for example. So, I think that is an important aspect to look at, but it's also true that our economy has become much more greatly integrated with the economies of Asia over the last few decades and that's been in no small part due to the activities of Labor governments and we want to be a Labor government in that tradition.

**HOST:** It seems to me, though, Richard Marles, there's a bit of a paradox, here, because in a sense we're moving away from Asia in terms of some of Labor's promised domestic economic policies. I'm talking now about corporate tax rates. If you look at the difference between Australia's corporate tax rate and the corporate tax rate of many Asian countries; if you look at economic flexibility, trade union powers and so on: to what extent do we actually need to cut the Australian corporate tax rate in order to get the better economic integration with Asia that Labor's talking about?

**MARLES:** You can look at a whole range of policies like that, and what we're really saying is that we want to have a framework which looks at how we can better integrate with Asia. I mean, tax regimes, I'm not going to go into the specifics of tax regimes going forward, but obviously the way in which we set up our tax situation has a bearing in terms of our relationship with the world and with our region, but what matters here is that we are very much focussed on having an economy which understands that our future is going to be the rising middle class in Asia, particularly in China, but also in countries like India, and closer to home in Indonesia, and making sure that we are as best placed as possible to engage with that phenomenon and to harness the economic benefit that can come from it is really important, as well as understanding that growing our political relationship with the region is critically important as well, and that's been an iterative process over a very long period of time, but it needs to continue and we would be a government which would seek to do that.

**HOST:** Just pursuing this issue, when we saw the debate in the parliament about the Australia-China FTA there was a roadblock for several months here with the Labor

Party expressing all sorts of concerns and reservations about that FTA, so what does this tell us about Labor's commitment to engagement with Asia?

**MARLES:** Issues such as this are always going to be looked at in depth, but at the end of the day we supported the China FTA, and indeed we actively engaged in negotiating the China FTA when we were in office. I did so as the trade minister myself. We have been a complete supporter of the China FTA.

I mean, you're going to have debate around issues and it's important that you do, but it's important to look at where we land on these issues as we landed very much in support of that. It's been a very important tool, and will be an important tool going forward in terms of growing our economic relationship with China, but one that we supported on office and more recently in opposition.

**HOST:** It's obviously the huge economic partner right now, Beijing. The security partner is the US, and I know you are and have been a strong supporter of the alliance for many years, but what do you think when you see the President of the United States, with so many other issues, whether it be natural disasters in Puerto Rico or the security arrangements and crisis on the Korean Peninsula, that he's picking a with the NFL and NBA players like LeBron James and so on? What do you think of his priorities right now?

**MARLES:** I think it's got to be our interest to try and make sure that the United States is as engaged in East Asia as it can possibly be, so wherever and whatever Donald Trump ends up commenting about we've got to be very clear about our interests and our interests in the context of the alliance and what we want to see from the alliance.

Now, I think Donald Trump's coming to power has seen us have a look at the alliance, almost from a first principles basis, but in doing that, and I've said this on many occasions, I actually think the alliance is as relevant to us today as it's ever been, and it has made me, in a sense, a stronger advocate for the alliance than perhaps I've been because of the importance of it, and that requires us to be urging America to be as present as it can possibly be in East Asia and we've got to continue to do that.

**HOST:** Is it a matter of just seeing out Trump? Is that how you see it?

**MARLES:** It's more than that. I mean, I don't think we can just abandon the next three or four years. We need to be working with this regime in the US and we need to be doing it as constructively as we can, and to be fair to the current administration they've taken a number of steps which have been very positive in relation to Australia, and you look at the visits of the Vice President, AUSMIN, the visit of Senator John McCain: there's been a very clear statement from the American administration and indeed from the American polity more broadly about its commitment to the alliance, its commitment to Australia, and we've got to make sure that we leverage that to see that America maintains its presence in East Asia and right now I feel pretty confident that that's going to occur.

**HOST:** Is anti-Trump sentiment on the part of the Australian public a problem in terms of alliance management?

**MARLES:** It's obviously relevant. I think to say it doesn't matter doesn't bear scrutiny. It's relevant, but I come back to what I said earlier: what I actually think it has done is asked within the Australian debate about the alliance from a first principles basis, and when you do that you end up coming back to a position which says that the American relationship and alliance is as relevant now as it's ever been.

You look at what is going on with North Korea, and that is driven by North Korea, not anyone else, and it reminds us of how important it is to have a secure, rules-based order. The country which has underpinned that more than any other since the Second World War has been the United States, and we've gained an enormous amount of prosperity out of that by virtue of having a stable region which has enabled us to trade. That means America is relevant – and we share values, values of democracy, of course, but values such as the rule of law here, but also in seeking to establish a rule of law globally. So, we remain very much in tune with what the American nation's about and our alliance is highly relevant and needed, particularly when you look at what's occurring within our own region.

**HOST:** Just focussing now on President Trump, do you think that the President himself has got a coherent, strategic vision of the United States' role in Asia?

**MARLES:** I do think there remains a very strong commitment by the United States to Asia, and in all the discussion I've had with the American system, and I'll be visiting America in the next couple of weeks to confirm this, the commitment to this region, not just to Australia but to East Asia, does appear to me to be manifest, and that's very much the case with this administration in play, so without necessarily answering the question in respect of the President individually, I think the American nation's presence here in East Asia is still very manifest and the sorts of positions and strategies that they've had over a very long time feel to me to be just as in place now as they've ever been.

**HOST:** Finally, Richard Marles, before we let you go, I mentioned earlier in the program that sources close to the campaigns in the same sex marriage survey have told me that participation, according to their tracking, is close to if not north of 50 percent. Are you encouraged by that?

**MARLES:** I'm encouraged by that. I would hope that people have their say.

I've been a supporter of marriage equality for a very long time now and I'm very hopeful that this survey will come back with a positive response and if it does I think that will be a very significant moment for our country, but I don't for a second take it for granted, and if you do support marriage equality you do actually need to fill in this form and you need to be encouraging your friends to do the same, and I don't think that it's- you know, I'm hopeful, I'm confident, but I don't think it is a *fait accompli*, and I think the contest is still very much at issue, and it's within the realms of possibility that there is a no vote and so if you support marriage equality it's very important that you go out there and fill out that survey.

**HOST:** Richard Marles, we're out of time. We'll talk to you soon.

***ENDS***