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SUBJECT: Australian engagement in the Pacific

HOST: The Australian opposition is warning that the country risks losing influence to world powers like China, because it has failed to live up to its leadership role in the Pacific.

Labor's defence spokesman, Richard Marles, will tell an audience at the Lowy Institute in Sydney tonight that the Pacific is Australia's biggest national security blindspot.

MARLES: We need to do more and it needs to be much more of a mainstream part of our national security and our foreign policy as opposed to it kind of being a niche area or an important area but it's something of a niche area in terms of Australia's world view and I would very much like to see that change where the Pacific becomes as central a feature of what we think about what we strategise about as any of the other key relationships we have such as the United States and China.

HOST: Are we therefore talking about wider Australian military deployment in the Pacific in one form or another or something broader than that?

MARLES: Well I think it's not so much the military deployment. In some ways I think having a better strategy around the Pacific might help avoid some of the issues that we've seen in the past. Australia has had significant deployments in the Pacific, in Solomon Islands, in Bougainville going back a couple of decades, so that that has occurred previously, but I think what I would like to see is potentially greater cooperation between Australia's Defence Force and the defence forces of the Pacific. Now, again, there is significant cooperation right now., but whereas I think there might be a tendency to feel that that cooperation is a symbol of a job done, for me it is much more a guide to how much more cooperation could occur, bearing in mind that the greater cooperation that we have between our defence forces and the defence forces of the Pacific the more that's in Australia's national interest.

HOST: And would be part of this purpose, this strategy, be to send a message to other countries particularly China which has an increasing influence in the region not militarily but in other ways: for example, Prime Minister Peter O'Neill of Papua New Guinea putting out a news release saying new infrastructure projects of China will change lives. Is that what it's all about is all about as well, jockeying for position?

MARLES: I don't think it's specifically about China, but it is to obviously make the point that countries in the Pacific have choices. We can't assume or presume that Australia is the partner of choice in an ongoing way. I mean, we don't get to determine an exclusive relationship with the countries of the Pacific. We need to earn it. It is making clear that it is a more contested space than it's perhaps been in the past and that's fine, but we need to learn our spot in there as well. It requires us to pay attention to think about it and to provide suggestions about ways forward for the Pacific.

HOST: You've talked about a future government under Bill Shorten, should Labor be elected next year, giving a specific pledge to boost stability and one of the things you talk about is greater assistance to countries with the provision of government services and institutions. I mean is that actually what the Pacific needs. I mean isn't it more about Pacific country standing on their own two feet rather than with Australian assistance?

MARLES: Well I think one of the stories of small island states around the world is an aggregation of government service delivery. The example I use in the speech is that if you think about the provision of a public university, which is a very large government endeavour, for many of the countries of the Pacific it's completely impractical to do that on their own, but when countries work together and they aggregate those services we do have the University of the South Pacific, which is a multinational public university. Now it stands as an example of the way in which government service delivery can be shared and this is not unique to the Pacific. You see this kind of activity occurring in the Caribbean in the Indian Ocean, and one of the points I'm making is that there is a whole scope for us, for Australia, to engage in that kind of supportive government service delivery for countries in the Pacific. Now, that needs to be done in a way where it's empowering of those countries, where it's completely on the terms of those countries want. If countries don't want that then that should never occur. It's a matter of their choice. But already we do provide some government service delivery to a number of countries in the Pacific and I think we can do more.

HOST: You say that we're country that has the most to have the biggest impact. Many people might reflect on that statement. Look at what's happening on Manus Island at the moment and saying well, who cares about those guys.

MARLES: Well I think Manus has a particular story. In respect of Manus and what's happening there, that's the subject obviously of an agreement that's existed between Australia and PNG in the past and the future obviously needs to be sorted through, but I think, you know, there's a whole range of other examples where we can work very closely with the Pacific and I think intelligent deployment of government service delivery where it's absolutely on terms where those Pacific countries want it can lead to an enormous benefit.