

**THE HON RICHARD MARLES MP
SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE
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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
RADIO INTERVIEW
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SUBJECTS: China in Vanuatu

HOST: Fairfax papers report a Chinese military base could be established there, the Chinese have sounded out Vanuatu about that. This is our doorstep. Richard Marles, the Shadow Defence Minister, knows the area well, was Parliamentary Secretary for the Pacific Islands under the Rudd Government. Richard Marles, good morning.

RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE: Good morning, Neil. How are you?

HOST: I'm well, thank you. Should we be worried about this?

MARLES: Yeah, we should be worried about this. I mean, I have a note of caution about let's see whether this all unfolds as has been predicted in Fairfax papers, but the point here is that the countries in the region have choices. There's no doubt that China is active, but much more concerning from my point of view is we really have a holding pattern policy in the Pacific. We don't have a vision for the Pacific. That's a criticism of this Government, but in truth it is a criticism of governments over decades and it's not specific to this government.

We need to do much better than that. It's not enough for us to be just going through the motions. We actually have to have a vision for this part of the world, and-

HOST: -So why is it a problem? Why should it worry if you go on holiday and see Chinese ships and Chinese soldiers, apart from that?

MARLES: I think it is a concern that China would have, if it played out this way, would have a military base so close to Australia, but actually a much bigger question in my mind is what it says about us. I mean, this is the part of the world where we're expected to play a leading, perhaps THE leading, role, and we're not just expected to play up by the rest of the world but we're expected to by the countries themselves, by countries like Vanuatu.

Were this to happen it would be the most profound demonstration that we're not playing that role. What does that say about who we are as a country and what we're doing to help and assist our neighbours, but more than that, to take our place in the world. I think it would be a very damaging thing for Australia globally were this to play out in that way.

HOST: OK, well, you could be Foreign Minister in not much more than a year. What would you do?

MARLES: Well, I'm not sure I'd be the Foreign Minister. I think as Defence, in the area of defence-

HOST: -Oh, of course.

MARLES: -I think what is really important is that we actually do more than simply have a presence and go through the motions, and to be fair we do that now, but we actually have a vision that we start articulating. I did a speech last year at the Lowy Institute where I said that we need a much more proactive sense of how we see the Pacific and its future.

HOST: But the bottom line is should we, and it probably won't be resolved if you do win government, by the time you win government, should we stop it happening? Should we do everything we can to stop China establishing a base in Vanuatu?

MARLES: What we should be doing is making sure that we are the country who is the partner of choice for Vanuatu, and in order to do that we have to earn that. The country that cares the most wins here, and that has to inevitably be us, and in part it's about aid but it's actually much more than that. It's really about trying to understand the difficulties with being a small island nation and playing our part in helping that. I think there's a whole realm of opportunities in terms of sharing government services and assisting countries in the challenges they face there.

More than anything else, we actually have to demonstrate that we care, and right now I think countries of the Pacific look to Australia and scratch their heads and wonder why it is that we don't pay them more attention; why it is that we don't talk about them, think about them; why it is that it's only at a moment like this that we talk about it publicly, and I think that's the most significant thing we can do.

HOST: Thank you very much for your time. Richard Marles, Shadow Defence Minister, parliamentary secretary for the area in the Rudd Government.

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