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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
RADIO INTERVIEW
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SUBJECTS: China in the Pacific; Syria; Fake Black Lives Matter Facebook page

HOST: The Australian Government is warning Vanuatu against any moves to allow a greater Chinese military presence in the Pacific nation. Vanuatu has denied it is in discussions with Beijing. Richard Marles is the Shadow Minister for Defence. Richard Marles, welcome to the program.

RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE: Thanks, Patricia. Nice to be here.

HOST: Vanuatu's Foreign Minister has rejected reports that Beijing has begun discussions about building a military base on the island. Do you believe him?

MARLES: Well I think that's good news. Certainly, were this to come to fruition that would be a very challenging moment for Australia, to have a Chinese base is proximate to Australia as Vanuatu.

HOST: OK, so you consider it good news, but are you still concerned about the potential for this? Do you think that there's some gray in this story?

MARLES: Look, I'm absolutely concerned about the potential, because for a long time I've been articulating that Australia needs to have a proactive vision and a plan for the Pacific. Our countries, our neighbours, in the region have choices. That we are the country the partner of choice is by no means something we can take for granted. I think it is natural, that we are the natural choice, but it's not one we can take for granted. If we don't have a vision for the region, if we don't show leadership - and I don't think we do - then at some point or another we can expect countries to exercise the choices that they have.

HOST: So what is the role here now for Australia? Should Australia begin talks with Vanuatu to apply pressure on Vanuatu not to pursue this, potentially?

MARLES: I certainly don't think it's about lecturing Vanuatu. I actually think it's about building the relationship.

Nor do I actually think this is a transactional situation here. I think what we actually have to do is let the countries of the region, including Vanuatu, know that we care, that we value them, that we mean to play a role in the region, and that we have a vision for it and that we want to work with in achieving that.

Now, we don't do that. What characterises policy in the Pacific, and has done so for a number of decades now, is really that of a holding pattern. There have been some notable exceptions to this - what we did in the Solomon Islands, Bougainville, East Timor - but by and large while we have a presence in terms of aid, in terms of our diplomatic footprint, what we don't articulate is a vision for the region. I think often countries of the region look to Australia and scratch their heads and wonder why we don't pay more attention and why we don't care more.

MARLES: So you think Australia is responsible for this potential build up?

HOST: At the end of the day I think we have to look to that which we can control and that's our own policy, and we need to look at that and say have we been getting it right.

For a long time now I've been saying that I think our failure to provide leadership in the Pacific represents the biggest hole in Australian strategic policy, in terms of national security policy, that we have. Whatever transpires here in terms of a base or no base in Vanuatu, this needs to serve as a wakeup call in terms of Australian policymakers putting the Pacific front and centre in terms of how we see the world. Right now it's not that. We see it as important but as a kind of niche area and it's not the main game, but it needs to be because it's not just about the Pacific.

What this story makes clear is that our relationship with the Pacific goes to the very heart of our relationship with the United States, goes to the heart of our relationship with China, and if we get the Pacific wrong we get our standing in the world right.

HOST: So what would you do in government, in terms of the Pacific? I know you've got some policies outlined, but is this about giving what Vanuatu more aid more money? Is that really what it boils down to?

MARLES: No, I don't think it is about that. I think it is important that we have appropriate aid. I certainly don't think it's a good thing to be cutting aid, which is what this Government's doing, but I think it's more than a question of aid. Fundamentally what it requires is a demonstration to the countries of the region that we have an interest and that we care.

I think, for example, there are lots of things that we can do in terms of shared government service delivery, because one of the aspects of life as a small island state is that the provision of government services is actually quite difficult thing to do. You've got economies which tend not to be diverse, in very geographically distant places, and making that all work is quite hard, but there are things that we can do without much additional cost to Australia. There are lots of opportunities there. We need to start exploring them.

HOST: Malcolm Turnbull is warning Vanuatu against any moves to allow greater Chinese military presence in the Pacific nation. Is that the right thing to do? Has the Prime Minister struck the right tone?

MARLES: I think the Prime Minister is striking a tone which has been struck for a long time now, and ultimately I think is not the right tone. I think we need to do more than say 'we already do a heap in the Pacific and countries of the region should be grateful.'

It is true that we do have a presence in the Pacific, but not for a moment could anyone seriously argue that the Pacific is the number one priority in terms of our foreign policy and our national security policy. I'm arguing that it needs to be right up there, and indeed I made that argument at the Lowy Institute last year.

I don't think anything in the Prime Minister's tone today suggests that that's the priority here for the Pacific. Indeed, he talked about how good it is that we react in the Pacific when there are disasters. Now, it is good that we react and it's important that we do, but we do need to do more than reaction. We need to do that, but we need to have a proactive vision for the region. What is it?

There's a whole lot of things that we could be doing which are much more than what this Government's doing, but to be fair much more than the governments of both persuasions have done over a number of decades now.

HOST: Now to the UN Security Council meeting on chemical weapons attack in Syria: would you support retaliation on the Assad regime similar to what we saw last year when the US launched airstrikes?

MARLES: Firstly it's important to ascertain the facts, and so what I absolutely, and we would, support is the investigation that was being sought from the UN Security Council.

I would say this, that it is important in the international community that when you draw lines they have meaning. Now, in the bigger sense a line was drawn on chemical weapons in the aftermath of the First World War, when we saw a negotiation of a treaty banning chemical weapons, but even in the context of this civil war in Syria it's been made clear to the Syrian regime that there would be consequences associated with that regime using chemical weapons. They've had a history of doing that. They did that last year and there was a consequence which followed as a result of that through the American missile strikes. We supported them. That was the right action.

I think now if it's established that the Syrian regime has been a party or has conducted these chemical weapons strikes, then I think there ultimately has to be a consequence associated with that.

HOST: What part should Australia play in all of this?

MARLES: I think it's important that we add our voice to the international community in relation to this, that we stand with those countries who seek to bring to an end the

use of chemical weapons, and that stand in abhorrence to the use when they continue to be done. I think our voice matters.

HOST: There's one thing to add your voice, but there's another thing to actually be involved in a military strategic level. Would you support Australia's involvement?

MARLES: It's hard to answer that question without having all the facts in front of me, but it would seem unlikely to me that that's how this will play out, but I don't have those facts in front of me.

I think our voice does matter. It matters as a significant country, but it matters as a country which has also played a part in the Middle East in recent times, and we continue to do that in terms of the work that we're doing in Iraq today. So, how we react and what we say as a nation in response to this does matter, and it's important that we stand on the side of the absolute abolition and prevention of the use of chemical weapons.

HOST: On a completely unrelated note, what do you make of claims of a high-ranking Australian union official being stood down over a fake Black Lives Matter Facebook page that collected hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations?

MARLES: Oh, look, I've seen reports of it, but to be honest, Patricia, I don't know the details of that at all. It's obviously important anyone in society is operating in accordance with the law, and the authorities will play their part in relation to this I'm sure.

HOST: Richard Marles, thanks for your time.

MARLES: It's a pleasure, Patricia.

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