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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
TV INTERVIEW
SKY NEWS LIVE - SPEERS
TUESDAY, 10 APRIL 2018**

SUBJECTS: China in the Pacific; Syria;

HOST: Richard Marles is the Shadow Defence Minister and joins me now from Geelong. Thanks for your time this afternoon. How worried are you at what China is doing in Vanuatu?

RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE: Well, it's obviously a concern and were it to come to pass it really would be a very significant change to our national security architecture, but I think what is most concerning to me, and something I've been articulating for some time now, is that this is really to me a symptom of the fact that as a country we are not presenting to the Pacific with the kind of leadership that we should. We don't have or articulate a strategy or a vision for the Pacific.

First and foremost that's an issue for the the countries of the Pacific, but it's also an issue in terms of our standing with the United States, and it's an issue in terms of how we present to China.

HOST: And I note you have been saying this for a while, that we need a clearer vision for our role in the Pacific and for the Pacific more generally, and that's fair enough, but what would that mean in practice if China is throwing millions and millions of dollars at Vanuatu and Vanuatu is saying 'Thanks very much. We'll accept all of that infrastructure spending.' What can Australia do about that?

MARLES: Well, the countries of the region have choices and we can't blame them for exercising those choices, but really we start a long way ahead. We we should be, and indeed are, the natural partner of choice for the countries of the Pacific, but it's not something that we can take for granted. At the end of the day it's a privilege that we have to earn and what we need to demonstrate is that we actually care. I would say that the policy of the Government in relation to the Pacific, and if I'm being honest it's not just this government, it's really been policy over a number of decades, is really characterised by a sense of maintaining a holding pattern.

Even the Prime Minister in his press conference immediately referred to reacting to disasters. That's a really important thing for us to do and we should continue to do it, but it is reactive.

What is the proactive vision, that we as the country within the region that country that the countries of the region look to, what is the proactive vision that we actually have for the Pacific? We're not articulating that in the absence of doing that you can expect them to look elsewhere.

HOST: And as I say, nothing wrong with vision, but just coming back to what it means in practice. If China says 'we'll build you a new prime ministerial residence', and the Prime Minister of Vanuatu's says 'great', what should Australia do? Should we say 'oh, hang on, we'll build you a better one?' I mean, what should Australia do?

MARLES: No. No. To reduce this to a sort of simple equation of what we need to do is build a residence and you'll get a military base, that's obviously not how this works. We do need to have-

HOST: -But practically, what do we do when China is spending all this money on infrastructure in Vanuatu? What does your vision entail? What should Australia do?

MARLES: Well I think there's a huge opportunity for us to engaging in a sharing of government services, for example, where with little margin effort from the point of view of the way in which we deploy services we can do a whole lot for countries of the region. That's actually about tuning into what are the real challenges of being a small island nation, that often the functions of government are actually quite hard to carry out. You've got very small economies that tend to be very much, well, they're not diverse by nature of the way in which these countries operate, and they're operating in a very geographically distant space. Providing services in that sense can make a real difference and it doesn't cost us much more at all. That's a much bigger deal than whether you build a building here or a building there.

HOST: Absolutely, whether it's health, education services, Social Security Services, that easily Australia could accommodate if they were agreeable. Are you saying the quid pro quo would then be they say no to China when it comes with its cheque book?

MARLES: I don't think it's as transactional as that. I actually think it is about building genuine relationships, and to be honest that's how I think foreign policy works and how I think the countries of the region want it to work. It's why we're a long way ahead, because we are the natural country with which these countries would want to work, so we don't need to do it on a transactional basis, but we do actually need to demonstrate that we care, that the Pacific is front and center in terms of our world view and our priorities.

Now, right now you struggle to say that that's the case, and one of the things that I've found frustrating is that people see the Pacific as kind of an important but niche area in terms of our foreign policy. The Pacific matters on its own terms, but the Pacific is about our relationship with the United States and the Pacific is about our relationship with China, and what we're seeing on the front page of the Fairfax papers today

patently bears that out. It's why it's so important for us to be there in terms of our presence in the Pacific, but more than that: demonstrating that we actually have a view about the way forward for the countries of the Pacific that we're willing to articulate that and work that up with them.

HOST: Yeah and it's fairly obvious that if it did come to a full Chinese military base in Vanuatu that would be of great concern to Australia. It would be a great concern of the US as well. To that end, should Australia be making it pretty clear in Vanuatu today that, you know, we want to be your best friend. We don't want you to have a Chinese military base there in the South Pacific. Should it be made that blunt to Vanuatu?

MARLES: Let's be really clear: lecturing to the countries of the Pacific is not going to get us anywhere, and we've seen this Government engage in that kind of action over the last 12 months and all it does is breed resentment.

I come back to this point: to be the partner of choice, that is something we need to earn. The countries of the Pacific look to Australia and I think often scratch their heads about why it is that we don't care more in respect of their circumstances and their fortunes and aren't doing more.

I make this point David: there are 10 countries in the world which see their principal relationship as not being with China or the US or anyone else, but with Australia. And yet I challenge anyone to walk down the corridors of Parliament or for that matter the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and ask who those 10 countries are. Vanuatu is one of them.

If we are not demonstrating that the fact that they see us as the most important country has some bearing on the way in which we regard them you can't blame them for looking elsewhere. It's a trust that we actually need to earn. We don't earn it through lecturing. We earn it through being very present and actually talking to them about their future and working with them.

HOST: Can I turn to Syria? Would you support some sort of retaliation after this latest chemical weapons attack on civilians there?

MARLES: Well, firstly it's important that we have all the facts, so the starting point is I'd be supporting an investigation to ascertain those facts.

What I clearly can say is this: the use of chemical weapons is abhorrent. This regime has a history in respect of that. Chemical weapons have been outlawed by the international community after the First World War. The strikes that we did see from America in response to the use of chemical weapons last year was something we supported. If it's clear that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons, that has to have a consequence.

HOST: Establishing the facts, though, as you say, the proper investigation seems to be struggling get off the blocks because the UN Security Council hasn't yet been able to reach agreement on even setting up a mechanism to investigate this. We'll see what happens, a follow up meeting, I think, tomorrow. But how long can this

situation go on, where we have people dying to clearly chemical weapons attacks killing civilians, Russia suggesting it's all fake news, that this is being staged by rebels - I mean, that's untenable, isn't it?

MARLES: Well, I think it is untenable and the position that Russia takes in terms of using its veto on the UN Security Council around a resolution to have an investigation as to what occurred is absurd.

I mean, this is a civil war that's been going on for seven years now. Half a million people have lost their lives. Half the population of Syria has been displaced. It is it is a humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions. It is defining the humanitarian need in the world today as much as any issue that exists, or any crisis that exist, and the use of chemical weapons in the context of it is utterly abhorrent. It is important that when, as an international community, we draw a line there is some meaning in that. Now you know lines were drawn in the aftermath of the First World War in relation to chemical weapons, but more recently in the context of the Syrian civil war lines were drawn in making it very clear to Syria that there would be consequences in them using chemical weapons. It's important that if it's established that that's the case that consequences then ensue.

HOST: Richard Marles, Shadow Defence Minister, thanks so much for joining us this afternoon.

MARLES: It's a pleasure David.

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