

**THE HON RICHARD MARLES MP  
SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE  
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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT  
TV INTERVIEW  
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***SUBJECTS: China in the Pacific***

**HOST:** With me now the Shadow Defence Minister, Richard Marles. Thanks for your time. Something you're focused on personally a lot, that is Australia's influence in the Pacific, it looks like that's been undercut quite significantly by China, at least in Vanuatu.

**RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE:** Well, obviously what's been reported over the last few days is deeply concerning. There is some heartening news that Vanuatu's Foreign Minister is saying that this is not on the cards, but the very fact that this is being discussed, that it's on the agenda, I actually think ultimately speaks to a long-term failure in Australian foreign and strategic policy in the Pacific.

We should be leaders within the Pacific. It should be front and centre in terms of our world view, and it's not.

**HOST:** When you look at the prospect of a military base, if that were to eventuate, that would be the failure of strategic policy wouldn't it, for our country, which has had the Pacific and keeping it free from any non-ally power, that's been the focus for decades.

**MARLES:** Totally right, and we need to look at our own front door here and look at the way in which we are behaving before we start looking elsewhere.

China is going to do what China is going to do, and countries in the Pacific have choices and we can hardly complain if they exercise them, but at the end of the day the natural partner of choice for the countries of the Pacific is Australia - but we can't take it for granted. We actually have to earn that right, and we do that by making the Pacific a place which is front and centre in the way we see the world; a place that we care about deeply; and a place that we articulate about which a vision and we're not doing that at the moment. A holding pattern policy within the Pacific, which is really

how you would characterize what's going on at the moment, is simply not good enough.

**HOST:** So what do you want to see, then? What would you be arguing around the Cabinet table if Bill Shorten wins the next election? Obviously aid, the aid budget can't be cut again as were started by the Gillard Government a couple of years ago when it froze the trajectory of increase. Previously Kevin Rudd had promised a target of 0.5 of GNI for foreign aid. Julia Gillard froze that. You would not want to see that sort of thing eventuate if you win office.

**MARLES:** Aid is important, to be sure, and our diplomatic footprint is important and our military cooperation is important, and in some respects you can you can take a look at that and say that it's very significant, certainly compared to other countries and compared to China. I mean, it's still way ahead of China, but that actually ultimately isn't enough, all of that combined.

It's more than simply having a presence. It's actually thinking about it and having a vision for the region, looking at how it's going. I mean, this is one of the least-developed parts of the world. By the late 2020s it's anticipated that it will in fact overtake Africa as the least developed part of the world, and yet it's a place where the world expects Australia to play a role.

For good or ill right now we will be judged internationally by what happens in the Pacific. The Pacific is completely central to our international reputation and things aren't actually going that flash there.

So, what is our strategy for moving things from now to a different place, and a holding pattern isn't going to do that. It actually needs a proactive strategy.

Now, I've articulated that I think there's lots of opportunities in terms of the sharing of government services. As an example, we manage the airspace over Nauru right now. We do that at very little cost. It's a huge benefit to Nauru. Without much wit we can think of a whole lot of ways in which we can do things like that across the Pacific, including in countries like Vanuatu.

I think we should be looking at ways in which we can increase the military cooperation with those countries that have a military, and that's PNG, Fiji and Tonga.

There's a whole raft of policies that we can pursue, but what underpins all of that is a decision that we actually care, and that's the fundamental decision that we need to make.

**HOST:** Well, part of it as well is surely continuing to maintain the dialogue with China, because there is also the possibility that China, because the question is what does China want in that part of the world? Is it for that military footing, or could it be for other reasons, for humanitarian reasons?

**MARLES:** I think China is asserting itself globally and within the region, and I think we should see this as a part of that. Now, that presents a whole lot of challenges to

Australia and it's obviously how we manage our relationship with China is at the heart of our foreign and strategic policy.

The point is the Pacific is not immune from this. The Pacific is the place where we're expected to lead by the world, by the United States, and we have to start seeing the Pacific as not simply this kind of niche area, maybe important but niche area of foreign policy which exists in its own terms.

I mean, it does exist on its own terms, but it is absolutely central, as we've learned over the last few days, to our relationship with China. It's central to our relationship with the United States, and actually getting the Pacific right is it is an absolutely fundamental building block in the way in which we do relate to China, the way in which we do relate to the United States.

**HOST:** Yep, and the sea approach to our eastern seaboard as we well know, nothing between Australia and the Pacific.

Thank you so much Richard Marles - something you've been focused on for a long time, as I mentioned the start of our chat. We'll talk to you soon.

***ENDS***

***Authorised by Noah Carroll ALP Canberra***