



**THE HON RICHARD MARLES MP
SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE
MEMBER FOR CORIO**

**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
TV INTERVIEW
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SUBJECTS: China; Geelong Cats

HOST: Well joining me now is Shadow Defence Minister Richard Marles from our Melbourne studio. Richard, thanks for your time and beginning on this, how concerning are these reports and the self-confessed from Malcolm Turnbull tension with China?

RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE: Well, I think it is concerning. I mean this is clearly one of the most important bilateral relationships that we have and I absolutely think it's critical that Australia makes its voice heard in the context of that relationship, where there are national interests concerns that we put them forward, and we do that robustly. I've been somebody who has expressed that over a long period of time.

What worries me is less about that. I don't think it's about the foreign interference laws or even positions that we take in relation to the South China Sea. I think China expects all of that.

What worries me is the ease with which our Government gets dragged into the domestic political fray and engages in gratuitous comment about our relationship with China along the way. I mean, you look at what happened last year in the lead up to the Bennelong by election, the kind of rhetoric that we heard from our government then in respect of Sam Dastyari and others. It wasn't above the political fray. I think that would have annoyed China.

Strategic policy, foreign policy, national security policy just has to be above the partisan, domestic political day-to-day play, and unfortunately I think often this Government is unable to do that.

HOST: Do you really think a few ministers yelling out 'Shanghai Sam' has precipitated this level of anger from China?

MARLES: I reckon it's more that, to be honest, than any of the other positions that we're taking, because positions that we take in relation to the South China Sea, in relation to the foreign intervention laws, they go to substantive policy. Adults in the

room understand you're going to have positions of difference in respect of that. As long as they're articulated with dignity and respect, foreign relations can continue in an appropriate way.

All of that that we heard last year, it was gratuitous. It didn't have to be said and it wasn't about our relationship with China. In fact, our relationship with China became the casualty of a domestic political spat, and at that point there is a justifiable reason why another country would feel anxious and unhappy about the way in which the relationship was being carried out here by senior members of Government.

HOST: just on the substance of it, for example, the foreign interference laws, Labor has obviously outlined some issues you have with protections for whistleblowers, for journalists, but the substance of the foreign interference, you do still back that all the way?

MARLES: Sure, and we think it's very important that within our democracy that it's Australians and Australians only who are participating in our elections. That is why, for example, we've been consistently arguing against foreign donations in respect of Australian elections. That is a position that we've consistently maintained and we continue to support, and I think it's important that we make that argument to the world at large but we do it in a dignified and respectful way. I think countries around the world, including China, will understand it if we do it in that sense.

HOST: Has Labor sought a briefing at all from the Government on what's happening here, what the details of who's being blocked, why?

MARLES: Oh look, I'm not aware of whether that's occurred yet. We haven't, through my area. I'm sure in time we will learn the details of that.

It is absolutely critical that the Government gets this back on an even keel, because whatever your view is in relation to how we deal with China there is no doubting the fact that this is as important a relationship as we have. We've been a huge beneficiary of the rise in the Chinese economy. It is our largest trading partner. Getting a free trade agreement with China, for example, has been a bilateral aspiration for a long time. As Trade Minister I visited Beijing to seek to get that. This is a fundamentally important relationship to our national interest and it needs to be-

HOST: No-one's disputing that, but if China's issue here is actually on the substance, us speaking out against this possible military base in Vanuatu, what we say about the South China Sea, the foreign interference laws, if their issue is the substance do we still need to hold firm even if this does create this apparent ministerial blockade?

MARLES: Well, firstly I'm not sure that that is what has caused the blockade at all, but the answer to your question is of course we have to hold firm in all issues in respect of our national interests, be that story earlier in the week in relation to Vanuatu, be it in relation to the South China Sea, be it in relation to foreign intervention laws. Of course, we have to argue our national interests and we need to do that in a strong and robust way and I have been a proponent for that from day one - but you can do it in a transparent, in an open, in a dignified way, which is what I have sought to do.

You know, when I've had pretty robust things to say about China in respect of the South China Sea I've made sure that I've spoken directly to the Chinese ambassador to Australia about that and the spirit in which I've done that, I think, has been received positively. You know, the tone of the relationship, the extent to which you extend respect and dignity in terms of how you go about things is really important because it does ultimately say a lot about what ultimately your intent is and your sincerity is

What worried me greatly was the kind of things that were being said at the end of last year in the lead up to the Bennelong by election, because it was so gratuitous. I mean it had nothing to do with our bilateral relationship and yet the Government allowed it to be a casualty.

HOST: And just on this apparently proposed military base on Vanuatu, how concerning is this?

MARLES: Well, I think it's deeply concerning. I mean, it is concerning, the idea that China would have a military base in that proximity to Australia, obviously. It is heartening that the Vanuatu Foreign Minister has said that in fact this is not occurring, but you know what I take from all of this is not so much a judgment about China or a sense Vanuatu has behaved in a way which is untoward. I don't see any of that.

What I think is that this is a wakeup call for the failure of Australian foreign and strategic policy and not paying enough attention to the Pacific and not playing the leadership role that we need to in the Pacific, and that is the way in which it is absolutely imperative that we respond to the news of this week. It has become a wake up call for us in terms of our role in the Pacific, because as I've long-

HOST: -Could it be too late, though, Richard Marles, because I know you've spoken of this with my colleague David Speers earlier in the week, but China has such deep pockets on this we can't really compete. Is there really any way to stop this if China want it to happen and they shower Vanuatu with riches?

MARLES: I absolutely think there is. I don't think it's too late, but you know we don't have time to wait around either.

The truth is that Australia would be seen by the countries of the Pacific as their natural partner of choice, but that doesn't mean we get that privilege for granted. It means we have to earn it, and I think, to be honest, the countries of the Pacific, and I've been to all of them, I know them well, are crying out for Australia to demonstrate some leadership in the region and to make a statement that we actually care, that this is more than just a holding pattern policy when it comes to the Pacific.

You know it's not enough to see the Pacific in terms of this kind of important but niche area of foreign and strategic policy off on the side. This goes, and there's a story this week makes it really clear, this goes to our relationship with China, it goes to our relationship with the United States. It is as front and center as those most critical relationships and that's the priority that we must place upon it.

This is the wake up call that we need to hear in respect of that, but if we do make it that priority there is absolutely time to get this place that it should and it would be welcomed by Pacific countries.

HOST: Just finally on this, should we look, as Peter Jennings said earlier this hour, to dock our own ship, perhaps, there - something from our naval fleet on Vanuatu?

MARLES: You know, there are gestures that can be done and they have their importance, but I'd also want to make caution in this respect: I actually don't think this is transactional. I think it needs to be seen in a deeper sense than that. I don't think it is about deep pockets. I think ultimately it is about us playing the part the world expects us to play, that the countries of the Pacific expect us to play, and demonstrating that intent. You know, if we did there would be a chorus of cheers from the Pacific about that, so it's not about a visit or a particular donation or a particular aid program: it is actually about a whole-hearted, full-throated decision that the Pacific matters; that we care; and we're going to demonstrate that to the region.

HOST: Just to follow up, though, what about basing a ship there, as Peter Jennings suggested?

MARLES: I think we can work out those those details as we go forward. I certainly do think that part of the story of building our relationship with the Pacific is an increased military-to-military relationship, and I argued that in a speech I gave at the Lowy Institute last year. Defence has a role to play but it's bigger than that, is the point I'm making. Yes, it is about a statement in respect of Defence, but it's much bigger than that, and it's about aid, of course, but it's bigger than that as well.

HOST: Very quickly, Geelong: now, it was supposed to be the Holy Trinity, Gary Ablett, of course, Joel Sellwood and Paddy Dangerfield, but so far they're struggling a bit. What do you make it out of that? I think you've got a Geelong tie on today?

MARLES: Well, it's not quite. I should have worn the Geelong tie. I often do wear it, as you know, Tom, and particularly at this time on a Friday when normally I'd be talking to Christopher.

Look, you know, I've been to a couple of those games. I've got to say it gives joy to my heart to see Gary Ablett running around in the hoops and gathering possession after possession. I think there's a little bit of work to kind of harmonize that trio, but it will happen, notwithstanding the hamstrings. I'm sure that by the end of the season you will see the Holy Trinity, throw in Mitch Duncan and you get the Awesome Foursome, and I'm still feeling pretty good about how we look in September.

HOST: I reckon there's still a bit short of the mighty B Lions Fab Four in the early 2000s, but I would say that. Richard Marles, thanks for your time today.

MARLES: Pleasure, Tom.

ENDS

Authorised by Noah Carroll ALP Canberra