

**THE HON RICHARD MARLES MP
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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
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SUBJECTS: China; Pacific nations

HOST: So what does the Federal Opposition think about China shirt-fronting our Navy in this way and the way that the Government is handling it? Richard Marles is the Shadow Defence Minister. He joins me on the line now. Thanks for joining us, Richard.

RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE: Good afternoon, Chris. How are you?

HOST: Not too bad at all. Now, the South China Sea, we know there's a lot of political friction around the area with China constructing those islands and trying to fortify certain parts of the South China Sea, but it's absolutely vital for Australia, of course, because so much of our exports and a large share of our imports travel through that area. Of course Australian Navy vessels should be able to sail through the South China Sea unchallenged.

MARLES: And that's exactly right. This is a huge national interest for us because it's in fact the majority of our trade goes through the South China Sea, which is a startling figure when you think about it and you realise how important this part of the oceans are in terms of an artery for Australia's trade. We are a trading nation. That's a large part of our economic prosperity.

Look, the Prime Minister was right in the way he described it in that clip that you just played. We have every right to engage in the freedom of navigation on the high seas in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Not only do we have a right to do that, it's a right that we should exercise, and I'm glad the Government is doing that, and what that means is that our vessels in turn have every right to be where they were.

HOST: Now, I haven't had a briefing on this. You may well have had a briefing from the Government on this and there may be stuff you know that you can't share with us, but there is a possibility is there not here that our Navy vessels might have

deliberately sailed quite close to some of those Chinese installations, and I'm not criticizing them if they did that. That would be a good thing. It would have been a strategic effort to ensure that we were demonstrating our rights in the area.

MARLES: Look, I don't know the details of exactly what has occurred here and I've asked my office to seek a briefing on this incident so that I can know. I think what's important to say about the islands that you described in your introduction: they are the construction of artificial islands on reefs - existing reefs, but they are artificial islands. There was a Court of Arbitration decision about this, an International Court of Arbitration decision which looked at that in the context of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea to which China is a party and found that these were not consistent with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Now that decision has meaning, and that is the law, if you like, that we abide by. It's critically important that as a nation that is a trading nation, but more than that, as a nation which seeks to build a global rules-based order, that we do what we can to assert those laws. That's why a freedom of navigation exercise in pursuit of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea is actually very much in our national interest.

HOST: But while that decision has meaning, as you say, in the end it's only effective if someone will enforce it. Now, of course Australia's not going to enforce it, but you do have a situation where people can see, you have seen the photographs and the video footage. They have turned these little reefs, these little rocky outcrops in the middle of the sea, into full-blown islands, where they're building landing strips, runways, fortifications, ports, they've turned them into significant military outposts and unless the United States or somebody else really stands up to China they are going to be there permanently regardless of what international law says.

MARLES: Well, again you're right that there's a certain establishing of the facts on the ground, as they described this sort of behaviour, which has the potential to change the game. One reef which is not yet built up, Scarborough Shoal, I think is pretty critical in terms of the whether or not China can ultimately build the capability that perhaps they might want to.

I think it's really important that the international community, the United States, of course, but the international community makes it clear that a global rules-based order is what has built prosperity in the world, in East Asian time zone, in East Asia, that China has very much been a beneficiary of that, and what that means is that as nations we need to abide by it. I think this is showing an assertive side to the way China is now acting, and that unquestionably gives rise to very significant challenges for us in terms of our foreign policy and our strategic policy going forward.

HOST: Richard Marles, you and Labor must also be concerned about China's increasing efforts to build influence in the South Pacific diplomatically, through trade and aid, and through their military posture. I'm presuming that you're a bit concerned about that. You'd also be concerned about what they're doing in our own country, when it comes to influencing their expatriates living there or their dual citizens studying or working here. Are you the one with the Government on this, when it comes to standing up to China on these issues?

MARLES: The answer to that question is largely. I think academic freedom in a university is really fundamental, and equally I think it's very important that our election processes are able to occur free of influence from foreign countries, so we have been very strong in our support for removing foreign donations from our political landscape.

HOST: Yeah it's important stuff, but the Government's run into trouble with China because it stood up to this stuff over the recent months, and your foreign policy spokesperson, your colleague, Penny Wong, has been essentially blaming Australia for the problems in the relationship, saying that the relationship has been handled in a clumsy way and that's why we're having trouble with China. Don't we need to see Labor and the Government united on this, standing up the China, not blaming problems in the relationship on us but rather on China's assertiveness?

MARLES: Well, you don't get any debate from me about the significance of China's assertiveness in what that presents for our country going forward. I am very mindful of that and am of the view that we need to be very forward-leaning in terms of how we deal with it.

HOST: Good. You should have a word to Penny Wong, then.

MARLES: No, but let me go further so that Penny is not misunderstood here. I do think that a whole lot of the commentary that we heard from the Government at the end of last year, particularly in the lead up to the Bennelong by election, ended up being pretty gratuitous and I don't think was helpful in the context of our relationship with China.

HOST: Come on, you had a senator, Sam Dastyari, quit not just his job but he did quit the Senate because he'd been caught out basically arguing for China, so you could hardly throw mud at the other side. You need a united front here.

MARLES: Well, no, let me make this point, Chris: you've just described what occurred in completely neutral terms, and that's fair enough. And if the Government had used the language you just used then, no issue, but-

HOST: -Kenny for foreign minister.

MARLES: What we heard was really flagrant language used by the Government back in November and December which I think was gratuitous, and I think was clumsy in the context of a really difficult relationship that we need to manage very carefully.

Let me go a bit further in terms of an area that I know you've been to and have some passion for like me, and that's the Pacific. I think China's behaviour in the Pacific is what I would expect, and to be honest if you look at the countries of the Pacific, you know, we don't have a right to have an exclusive relationship with them and it doesn't surprise me they look to build relationships elsewhere. I think if we look at our own front yard and our own behaviour it's actually us that needs to change the way in which we engage in the Pacific. If we want to change the sort of political terms of trade that are going on there-

HOST: -I agree. I think Australia should be doing more in the Pacific. I wouldn't disagree with that.

MARLES: We should do much more, and so there is criticism of the Government in that, because the relationship that we have with China, however we seek to pursue that, does involve some management of it on the part of Australia, and it's important that we're able to have a discussion about how we're handling it, and that's irrespective of the way in which we judge China to be behaving. We've got a complete agreement about that, but it's important that we handle it in the right way, and-

HOST: -We're gonna have to wrap it up. Sorry, Richard Marles, to cut you off, but I agree with you. We should be doing more on the Pacific and we've got to have a debate about these issues. Thanks so much for your time.

MARLES: Pleasure, Chris.

HOST: That's Richard Marles, the Shadow Defence Minister, the Labor Party's Defence spokesperson.

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