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SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE  
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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT  
RADIO INTERVIEW  
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***SUBJECTS: Pacific Islands Forum***

**HOST:** Richard Marles is the Shadow Minister for Defence and was the Parliamentary Secretary for the Pacific in the Rudd Government and joins us now. Richard Marles, welcome.

**RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE:** Good evening, Patricia. How are you?

**HOST:** I'm good. China's growing influence in the Pacific has very much been the backdrop to this meeting. Is this a good time to be reassessing security?

**MARLES:** Well, I think it's core business for the Pacific Islands Forum to be thinking about regional security, so I think it's completely routine, in a sense, or natural, in a sense, that the Pacific would be thinking about this.

From an Australian point of view, it's important that we should be using the opportunity of the Pacific Islands Forum to make clear our commitment and our intent to support and help the countries of the Pacific, and in that sense earn the right to be the natural partner of choice for the Pacific. That's why actually this Pacific Islands Forum is so important, I think, in terms of the moment in time in which it comes.

But it also means the decision by our Prime Minister not to attend - this is a leaders meeting, so the leaders of all these countries will be there and traditionally but for very exceptional circumstances Australian Prime Ministers have gone - I think the failure of Scott Morrison to go to the Pacific Islands Forum says anything about the lack of commitment that he's showing to the region.

**HOST:** Well, we have exceptional circumstances, don't we?

**MARLES:** Why? I don't think so. I think that it's critically important that for a new prime minister coming into the chair that he is demonstrating to the region how

significant it is. The Pacific should be central in terms of our world view, both in terms of our foreign policy but also obviously our sense of national security. I think given the way you introduced this segment means that it is completely apposite at this moment in time for the Prime Minister of Australia to be attending a Pacific Islands Forum.

**HOST:** Forum leaders want the agreement updated to reflect changing concepts of threats to security. That's basically China, isn't it?

**MARLES:** Well, I doubt that it's seen solely in terms of that. I think there are-

**HOST:** -Solely, but it's pretty much the main issue here, isn't it?

**MARLES:** Well I'm not sure that that would be right, in terms of the way in which regional security is defined by the Pacific Islands Forum. I think what countries of the Pacific want to know is that their security is assured in general terms, and it's in that context that Australia needs to be making sure that we are the partner of choice. It's not something that we get by right. It's in a sense a privilege that we need to earn and we earn that by demonstrating that we actually care about the Pacific and we see it as front and centre in terms of our strategic policy, and one of the principal ways in which we demonstrate that is by our leaders attending a leaders meeting.

**HOST:** Do you expect the terms of the agreement to change significantly?

**MARLES:** Oh look, I don't think it will change significantly, but you know, regional security has been an ongoing discussion, one which Australia and New Zealand has been very central to in the Pacific, so I don't expect radical change there, but I do come back to the point that being the partner of choice is something that is not a right that we have. It's a privilege that we earn and we do that by demonstrating our commitment.

**HOST:** If you're just tuning in, Richard Marles, the Shadow Defence Minister, is my guest and this is *RN Drive*. Our number, if you want to get texting, is 0-4-1-8-2-2-6-5-7-6, and of course we are talking about the Pacific Islands Forum.

The United States is one of the signatories to the agreement and a member of the forum, but the President, Donald Trump, isn't going. Are you concerned about what message that sends regionally?

**MARLES:** Well, the United States has participated in post-forum dialogues. It's not actually a member of the Pacific Islands Forum. It is a critical partner, though, of course, in terms of regional security, but to be fair a US President I don't think has ever attended the Pacific Islands Forum. Back in 2012 we had the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, attend the Pacific Islands Forum and that was a very significant moment in the history of the forum, but I think American engagement, and they were always represented at some level in the Pacific Islands Forum post-forum dialogue, I think it's really important that America continues to play a role and that we seek to engage America as a partner within the Pacific, but again, you know, that requires our leadership and it's really important that we seek to demonstrate that, but having our own leader not attend a Leaders Forum does not demonstrate leadership.

**HOST:** Your colleague, Shadow Foreign Affairs Minister Peter- Peter! Goodness gracious. Penny Wong!

I've obviously been spending too much time thinking about Peter Dutton in the last two weeks. I think our audience might-

**MARLES:** -Can I say they're very, very different people.

**HOST:** They are, but when I see a 'P' there's only certain leaders I've I've been talking about for a long time.

-has been critical of Australia's reduction in foreign aid spending in the Pacific. So, given that critique, how much are you prepared to increase that by if you win government?

**MARLES:** Well it's not for me to say now a number that we will increase it by, but Penny is absolutely correct in making that criticism-

**HOST:** -Can we expect a significant uptick in spending here, given the kind of rhetoric you've been using over the last few years in relation to foreign aid?

**MARLES:** I think what you can absolutely expect is both a greater commitment to development assistance generally and a greater commitment in the Pacific. Now, you know, the precise measure of that I'm hardly going to say right now, but we are absolutely committed to that, and one thing where, you know, we've been very critical of the way in which the Government has gone about this.

It's important both in terms of what you end up not spending money on if you cut it, but also the message you send. This is what concerns me, because the consistent message when you're looking at cutting overseas aid, when you're looking at what the Government says in respect of climate change and the utter failure of leadership to tell the story, the Pacific story, in respect of climate change, countries like Kiribati and Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands, which are really on the front line of climate change, failing to tell that story, and then, you know, the very first act in respect of the Pacific of the new Prime Minister is to not attend the Leaders Meeting: this is not a good start.

You know, at this moment in time, when the Government is trying to say that it has a priority on the Pacific, I think we hear the words. We do not see the actions.

**HOST:** You've no doubt seen the reports that TVNZ's Pacific correspondent was detained after she tried to interview a refugee. Her accreditation to cover the forum has been revoked. Are you concerned by this?

**MARLES:** Obviously it would be far better, I think, if there was able to have a free media covering – indeed, operating - in the countries of the Pacific, and I would have much preferred that Nauru ultimately allow media into their country and allow it to operate in the way free medias operate. Ultimately this is a matter for Nauru-

**HOST:** -But good friends give each other advice when something like this happens, don't they?

**MARLES:** Sure, and this point has been made, and indeed I think the Government's made it. Certainly, Senator Wong has made this point in her public statements.

I also do understand, though, the sensitivity that a number of countries in the Pacific, including Nauru, have about the way they are covered in the Australian media, and I'm now not talking about the asylum seeker situation in Nauru but more generally. You know, these are remarkable countries and Nauru is a remarkable country with remarkable people who have great stories to tell but are rarely told. I think of Sean Dorney, who was an ABC correspondent who is really the exemplar of reporting from the Pacific and telling the stories of the Pacific in a very empathetic way to the Australian public. We haven't seen enough of that in recent times.

Now, to be fair, you know, the ABC has kept the flame alive here. It's been the one media outlet which has maintained a correspondent in Port Moresby and Eric Tlozek of late has done a great job in reporting from PNG, but I do get that countries of the Pacific feel that their story is not being told in Australia and it should be told more.

**HOST:** Why are the Chinese there as observers of the Pacific Islands Forum? I mean, they're not members.

**MARLES:** Well, China has always attended the Pacific Islands Forum as an observer, as have countries from around the world. It's actually a big regional gathering and it highlights this point: we don't get the right to have an exclusive relationship with the nations of the Pacific. They have every right to talk to whichever countries they want, and I get that there is understandable pride and desire to see countries of the world take an interest in them and attend the Pacific Islands Forum. China has long done that. Throughout the time I was attending the Pacific Islands Forum China was there.

It's why it doesn't work to wave our finger at the Pacific and demand that not have relationships with other countries. They're going to, and of course they can.

Actually what we need to be doing is demonstrating that the Pacific is core business for us and to earn our right to be the natural partner of choice, if that's what we want to be, and we absolutely should. Despite the rhetoric of the Coalition Government they want to be that, it is simply rhetoric which is not being matched by action.

**HOST:** Richard Marles, thank you so much for your time.

**MARLES:** Pleasure, Patricia.

**HOST:** And that's the Shadow Defence Minister Richard Marles.

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