

**THE HON RICHARD MARLES MP  
SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE  
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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT**

**TV INTERVIEW**

**SKY NEWS LIVE**

***RICHO***

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***SUBJECTS: Afghanistan; South China Sea; trade; North Korea; defence procurement***

**HOST:** Well, all that having been gotten off my chest, I want to welcome to the program - and I shall now take on a different demeanour – Richard Marles, the Shadow Minister for Defence. G'day mate, how are you?

**RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE:** Great to be with you, Graham. Lovely to hear you in full flight.

**HOST:** I was definitely in full flight then. When I get angry, I'm in full flight.

There is so much to talk about on the defence front these days. I think we forget that Afghanistan is the longest-running war that we've fought in, ever.

**MARLES:** That's right, and it remains a significant engagement. There are a couple of hundred Australians helping train a range of people in the Afghan national forces. It is a long-running engagement, but it's, I think, a sustainable one at the moment. We're making a difference. We're helping build a sense of nation and building national institutions in Afghanistan which are so important in terms of making sure that this country is denied as a place for training international terrorism, which it was in the late 90s and that's what led to September 11 and indeed we should never forget that a number of the Bali bombers were given training in Afghanistan-

**HOST:** -In Afghanistan, that's right.

**MARLES:** -so it's relevant to us.

**HOST:** But is it the case - because I look at it and I worry there's still attacks even in Kabul every week, almost - is it the case though that as soon as international troops, be they American or Australian, whatever, pull out that the government collapses? Is that what's going to happen?

**MARLES:** Government institutions in that country, there's a lot of work which needs to be done to establish the kind of stability that we would associate with government in a country like Australia, so if you're going to measure it against that who knows how long these things take, but what we do know is the reason that we were engaging in Afghanistan right back in the aftermath of September 11 was to make sure this country was denied as a base for international terrorism. It largely is, it is denied in that sense, and it's certainly not being used in the way it was.

I think the second question is in terms of what we're providing, is that sustainable for us to do over a long period of time and the answer right now is that it is. I don't think it's always been that way but I think right now our engagement is sustainable and we're making a positive difference and for that reason we should keep going.

I don't set expectations as high as saying that we will in the next few years create national institutions which are akin to our own, but we are making a difference and that fundamental reason for being there right back in 2001, we're fulfilling that mission.

**MARLES:** That was a reasonably comprehensive answer. I won't take it up or disagree with it but it just worries me. If there weren't so many attacks in Kabul, if they could actually control their capital, I'd feel a lot better about the whole thing, but that does not seem possible.

**HOST:** If we could move on, I think the big thing that people talk about with us right now is what's happening with China, and you've got the the US upping the pressure on China with a trade war, which I think is stupid and I think unwinnable from the US point of view, because when you're against a command economy it ain't easy to knock them down, especially when they've got plenty of money, and then you look at what's happening in the South China Sea, I just wonder is it in Australia's interest to engage in this argument? I know that Stephen Conroy certainly had the view that it was. I haven't asked you that question before, I don't believe: should we be up there with the Americans trying to wave a flag or or say something to the Chinese, or is it something you can let go through to the keeper?

**MARLES:** We have an interest in the South China Sea. That's clear. Most of our trade goes through the South China Sea. That's a big statement to make: most of our international trade goes through the South China Sea-

**HOST:** -That's because most of it's going to China.

**MARLES:** Sure, China is our largest trading partner but three of our five largest trading partners are at the other end of the South China Sea. It's China, but it's South Korea, it's Japan as well. All of our Japanese and South Korean trade goes through the South China Sea.

In a larger sense what underpins the ability to send our trade through the South China Sea is the global rules-based order. In this case it's the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea which provides the basis for the high seas and the ability to have freedom of navigation. That's where our national interest lies. Our national interest lies in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

There is no doubt that what China is seeking to do is challenge and shape the rules-based order that we've been used to and has been very fundamental to our prosperity since the Second World War. The building of the artificial islands has been found by the International Court of Arbitration to be in contravention of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea.

What's important here is not that we get in disputes which don't have anything to do with us. So you know we don't say our piece or we don't have an opinion on the various territorial disputes in the South China Sea, but when it comes to freedom of navigation that goes directly to our national interest and it's very important that we are asserting that because the alternative is to say that the rules-based order that has been so important to us - and not just us, it's actually been very important to Chinese economic prosperity - is now under change and that's a huge call. That's a huge call in terms of where we stand in the world.

**HOST:** But do you think that there's any way the Chinese are going to get angry enough with us to do anything about the extent of that trade if we are seen to be too close to the Americans?

**MARLES:** I think that we don't have a choice but to be very clear with the Chinese, but for that matter any country, about what our national interest is in any given matter and to assert it forcefully but respectfully and with dignity. That has to be the play in respect of China. If we make it clear to China or indeed any country that we are willing to subjugate what we see as being our national interests because of concerns elsewhere, well, then we're conceding the issue

at that moment. I think it is absolutely essential and I don't think it's about you know the United States or being close to them. Of course we are that, but I think it's actually just about, in a bilateral sense, between us and China, saying to China where we stand on that issue.

Now, I think it is possible to do that in a respectful and dignified way and I actually think China respect that.

**HOST:** Well there's two kinds of wars these days. There's the military kind, but there's also the trade kind, which of course is on for young and old at the present time. Is that going to harm Australia's interest if we get caught in the middle?

**MARLES:** Well I share your anxiety about a trade war between the US and China. You know, I'm not sure what the example is of a successful victor in a trade war. It's in our interest again, in respect of America, that we have an outward-looking, open America which is interested in trading with the world, and certainly when America and China are getting on well with each other the world feels like a much safer place sitting from where we sit. That's where our national interest lies in respect of America, and I think it was a pity that America pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. For those who make the argument about an American retreat from the world, and I don't necessarily subscribe to that, but their Exhibit A is the American withdrawal from the TPP.

We need to be encouraging America to be trading with the world, and I think that includes China.

**HOST:** Tell me, given that we've mentioned Korea, I just want to touch on one thing. It seems to me that the love affair between Trump and Kim Jong-un isn't actually producing much in the way of getting rid of their nukes.

**MARLES:** We need to be focused on the issue at hand when it comes to North Korea as an international community, and that is, as you've just said, denuclearizing that country. That's not just about nuclear testing. I understand the Kim Jong-un's commitment not to engage in any more nuclear testing, but of course if you've done enough tests you don't need to do anymore. The real question is whether or not North Korea is prepared to give up whatever nuclear capability they have managed to achieve. We have consistently, as an international community, underestimated the extent to which North Korea has been able to reach technological achievements in terms of a nuclear capability.

We must maintain the pressure as an international community, and at the heart of that has to be America. America has to be there making sure that the

pressure remains on North Korea so that we see that country denuclearize, because the consequences of them not is extremely profound for the world. I mean this is a country that will have walked away from the Non-Proliferation Treaty. If we are ever in a position where we are recognizing North Korea as a nuclear-enabled power that places an intolerable pressure on a whole range of countries in the region to walk down a similar path, and suddenly, at that moment, the cause of non-proliferation, the cause of limiting nuclear weapons, the nuclear arsenals of the world, is turned in the opposite direction. That has been a positive cause since the end of the Cold War. There's about 10 percent of the nuclear weapons in the world today that there were back in 1992, but North Korea walking down this path and that being accepted by the international community would represent turning all of that on its head, which is why it's so important that that's not allowed to occur.

**HOST:** But how do we check? I mean not it's not as if we're being allowed to wander around North Korea and and, you know, open up a cupboard here and see if anything is under it. I mean what do we do?

**MARLES:** Firstly I think that the pressure has to be maintained and to the credit of the Trump administration-

**HOST:** -By that do you mean sanctions? Is that what we're talking about?

**MARLES:** Yes, the sanctions regime that was put in place, and to the credit of the Trump regime during the course of last year and the early part of this year they did in fact manage to achieve a lot in gaining international participation in that sanctions regime, including from China, and there was real pressure being applied to North Korea. It's important that that continue, but if North Korea is genuine in saying that it has an aspiration to a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula then it has to be willing, and the pressure needs to be put on them, to allow proper inspections so that ultimately that can be verified.

I think these are all very good questions about where this process now goes after the Singapore summit, but what is clear to me is that as an international community we have to be focused on the end game here. It's not about the personality of Kim Jong-un. It's not about the significance or the TV shots in respect of the summit, as significant as they might be. It's ultimately about that country denuclearizing and it seems to me that doesn't happen unless pressure is maintained.

**HOST:** I understand that. It's just that I the more I watch the South Korean President going into North Korea, there's almost a love affair between the two of them. They hold hands. They cuddle. It's a bit of a worry to me. There seems

to be an amazing effort there.

**MARLES:** I understand the point that you're making, and, you know, it is important that we maintain the pressure. I also understand that dialogue is better than the kind of brinkmanship that we were seeing last year and early this year. It's got to be possible to have dialogue on the one hand, which I think President Moon is seeking to do, whilst maintaining pressure on the other. I think that's got to be the trick here in terms of the way the international community deals with North Korea going forward.

**HOST:** OK, now can I turn to the defence procurement which has always interested me since way back when I was a cabinet minister and you'd get a book of things that think to tell you which submarine or which destroyer you should pick, and of course you've got Buckley's of wading through 500 pages of technical stuff about which you understand nothing.

**MARLES:** There is a lot of technical stuff.

**HOST:** Nothing. I understood nothing and I don't think anyone else around the Cabinet table understood it, either, not unless you understand everything there is to say about about rocket propulsion and everything else and systems and things. It's obviously way beyond us.

But the first question is, looking at the submarines, I noticed that Admiral Briggs said this week that really unless you've got nuclear submarines you're not in the game. I think I could summarise his comments reasonably by saying that, and it seems to me there's got to be a lot of a lot of strength in that. It can't be the case that these conventional submarines, up against the nuclear submarines, can win, can they?

**MARLES:** Nuclear-propelled submarines for Australia is not on the table and I think the simple way of putting that or explaining that is that every country who runs a nuclear-propelled submarine has a domestic nuclear industry. If you were talking about Australia walking down that path we'd be the only country in the world seeking to do it without a domestic nuclear industry, nuclear power industry, and that's relevant because the technology involved in maintaining it and keeping it going requires a particular expertise which we just don't have in this country because we don't have a domestic industry. That's really at the heart of the issue around the question of whether there should be nuclear propelled subs.

It is right, though, that we need to have long-range submarines. The Collins has a very significant long-range capability and what we're seeking to procure from

the French is a long-range submarine. It's right that they would be the longest-range conventional submarines in the world, but we've been pretty successful at making that work and the Collins is a highly capable submarine, which when it performs in exercises like RIMPAC against our neighbors does so very admirably, so that the submarine capability remains highly relevant and a lot can be achieved from conventional submarines.

**HOST:** I was there when the Collins class was being built. There was a lot of criticism. Are you confident that this new lot of French-inspired submarines are going to do the job?

**MARLES:** What we know about Naval and what we know about France is that they make great submarines. Like you - and in a sense I haven't even had the benefit of looking at any technical documents, being in opposition there's a huge knowledge gap between opposition and government when it comes to this issue, so I'm in no position to judge what was the most capable submarine that was presented to this Government, but we do absolutely know that Naval are a great company who have been making submarines for a long period of time and that the French are highly capable in this area. I've been to Cherbourg and seen the Naval facility there which is where Australians are now engaged in the designing of the Future Submarine.

They're an impressive outfit, and I'd also go further and say that the dividend that will come in the bilateral relationship with France is really significant and shouldn't be underestimated. This transforms our bilateral relationship with France. This is the most expensive thing we will have ever bought as a nation. It's the single biggest defence export that France has ever been involved in. It's not surprising, then, that since this decision has been made we've seen the first bilateral visit by French president to Australia.

Now to have that relationship with a fellow G20 country, with a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a country with whom we have a very large border in the Pacific, a country whose population is actually the closest overseas population to where you and I are sitting now, in terms of Noumea, we've got a lot to be doing with France and I think this is a great dividend that will come from this procurement.

**HOST:** There are two things I'd say about that. The first is that when the French President came here I was a bit annoyed the way he wanted to lecture us on climate change when his own country had gone nowhere near keeping up their own commitments under the Paris Agreement. That was all a bit rich.

Secondly and most importantly what you should understand is when you

become a minister you still won't have a clue about all of those technical arrangements because it is so complex, and you know I actually tried to get into this once when I'd try to stick up for Newcastle as against Melbourne, and all I can remember is that when they come in to brief you it is so impossible to understand that the truth is the bureaucracy, the defence bureaucracy, controls this decision. Doesn't matter whether the Labour Party is in government or the Coalition: in the end no cabinet can consider itself competent to make the judgment that's required here. I think overall, if one looks at history, the defence bureaucracy has done a pretty good job. I'm not going to sit here and have a crack at them, but don't ever kid yourself that that you understand. Mate, you won't. Unless you go back to school and decide you're going to take a course in electrical engineering or something - which I doubt, I think you're a busy bloke. I don't think you've got the time.

**MARLES:** That true. One of the things I do, Graham, which is not a heralded part of my CV is I'm the co-chair of the Parliamentary Friends of Science. I've been that for about six years now. I'm a big one for scientists being better and technicians being better at communication, just as you've said. So, you may well be right, ultimately, but I'm certainly going to be seeking that they try and give some plain English explanation to the technical aspects of these things are, and without doing too much an obligation on those of us involved in public policy to understand the basics of the science.

**HOST:** I failed dismally in that respect, so I hope you're much more successful. Look, I want to thank you very much for your time, Richard. That's been a terrific the last 15 minutes. I've really enjoyed it and I hope we can talk to you again soon.

**MARLES:** Thank you. Look forward to it, Graham.

**HOST:** Good on you, Richard Marles. He's impressive isn't he?

***ENDS***

Authorised by Noah Carroll, ALP, Canberra.