

**THE HON RICHARD MARLES MP
SHADOW MINISTER DEFENCE
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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
RADIO INTERVIEW
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SUBJECT: Defence Force posture review

HOST: Victorian MP Richard Marles is the Opposition's spokesperson on Defence. Mr Marles, good morning. Why run a review into Defence Force posture? Surely Defence are well equipped themselves to decide the best place to base their personnel and equipment?

RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE: Well, Defence will obviously participate in this review. Adam, the last time the Government did a review, or Australia did a review, was back in 2012. The world looks very different now to what it did then, so I think it is time that we actually do have a look at how our people, our assets and the way we sustain them, how that is distributed around our country.

Since 2012 we've seen a rising and a more assertive China. I don't say that with judgment. I think China's a great power doing what great powers do, and there's a lot in the rise of China which is good for Australia. We've also got a new American president since 2012. What all of that means is that the balance of power within our region continues to evolve, and it's appropriate in that context that we have a look at where our troops and where our assets are based. I think there is also now, which I'm very pleased about, a bipartisan view that we need to be doing more in the Pacific.

All of this suggests that it's time for us to have another look at this. It's something we should be doing periodically. It's been a long time since we did it.

From the point of view of Darwin, in the past whenever there has been force posture review there has been an understandable tendency to look more north, and probably look more west. A large part of the footprint the defence footprint in Darwin today as a result of the force posture reviews in the past, and so this, I think, is good news for

Darwin.

HOST: You say we are facing the most challenging set of circumstances since World War II. What do you mean by that?

MARLES: It's a good question to ask, Adam, and it's a proposition worth testing, but I think it's true and I'm not the only person who's saying it. I think that with the rise of China and the place of America in the world our decisions are nowhere near as obvious as they've been in the past, in terms of how we navigate these strategic waters.

It's fair to say that the strategic circumstances that we find ourselves in are deteriorating. Whereas during the Cold War where obviously there was a much greater existential threat than there is now, it was, though, a pretty easy decision for Australia to make. We were clearly going to be on one side rather than the other. Even in the Vietnam War, and we don't face a war of that kind, but that was in essence a binary decision to participate or not.

Exactly how we navigate the path now in terms of our relationships with both China and the US, but also countries of ASEAN and countries like India, none of that is obvious. It is it's going to require really careful consideration. If we're going to do what we can to shape those circumstances - and lots of this is obviously beyond our power, we're not going out to determine them, but we can shape to a degree - we need to really find a greater degree of leadership in our own our international personality.

Force posture review, I think, is a really important part of all this. It's a good look at where we should be placing our Defence assets in the context of this current situation.

Again, coming back to Darwin, I think Darwin is such a huge asset for the nation. It's a fantastic place to live, but from a defence point of view to have a city the size of Darwin on our north coast represents an enormous asset for us. But a point that Luke Gosling continually makes to me is that that needs a commitment from governments. It's not something that can be taken for granted, and Luke and I have been concerned about a declining number of defence personnel in Darwin.

HOST: So are Defence making a mistake there, reducing the number of Defence in Darwin at the same time as boosting numbers in Queensland, or are you suggesting there's political interference there?

MARLES: I'm not suggesting political interference, but what I am saying is that governments make decisions, but governments also need to make a commitment to Darwin. I mean, we've got to be making sure that the decisions that government makes - and Defence is a large part of that equation, it's the single biggest federal government spend in Darwin - is done in a way which helps to continue to develop Darwin.

HOST: So you'll commit to boosting numbers in Darwin, troop numbers in Darwin if you win government?

MARLES: Well I don't want to pre-empt the outcome of the review, but I point to reviews in the past which have gone in that direction. Certainly, I make this point, that it is really important that we make a commitment to Darwin, because the asset for the defence of our nation that Darwin represents is very considerable, but that only works if we've got a thriving city with a growing population and defence has an obvious role to play in that.

HOST: Will you be the Defence Minister if Labor wins? You've been highly critical of the number of defence ministers in the last half a decade. Can voters be assured we won't see the same thing under Labor if they are successful on May 18?

MARLES: You can absolutely be assured of that. There's been a consistency in Labor's approach in relation to this. Obviously it's a matter for Bill Shorten, but I'm certainly expecting that and I look forward to the opportunities that come with, and the challenges that are presented, in the area of defence and very much hope to be able to play a role in that.

What we've seen on the part of the Coalition is we're up to five defence ministers in the last six years. The Government goes to this election offering a fifth Defence Minister in the last six years. That's almost a rate of one a year.

Now, the really serious circumstances which I've been describing and the challenges that we face, you can't meet them and you can't have consistent decision making if you're continually turning over the person who is meant to be making those decisions.

It goes to this government more generally. It is a broken government: three Prime Ministers, three Treasurers, we're now on to our fifth Defence Minister.

HOST: Richard Marles, I do have to go. Thank you so much for your time this morning. Appreciate it.

MARLES: It's a pleasure.

HOST: There's Richard Marles. He's the Defence ALP spokesperson.

ENDS

Authorised by Noah Carroll, ALP, Canberra.