

**THE HON RICHARD MARLES MP
DEPUTY LEADER OF THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY
SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE
MEMBER FOR CORIO**

**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
RADIO INTERVIEW
ABC RADIO - RN DRIVE
MONDAY, 5 AUGUST 2019**

Subjects: AUSMIN; US Missiles; Iran; Strait of Hormuz; Fuel Security

JONATHAN GREEN: Richard Marles is the Shadow Defence Minister, Deputy Leader of the Australian Labor Party joins us now. Richard, welcome.

RICHARD MARLES, DEPUTY LEADER OF THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY: G'day Jonathan. How are you?

GREEN: Potentially fighting words from Mike Pompeo, 'sell your soul for a pile of soybeans.'

MARLES: Well I think the Secretary of State is a colourful man. But what those words reflect is that is that there is strategic competition between the great powers in our region. And it forms part of the challenging strategic circumstances that Australia has to deal with at the moment. Really they are as challenging as any we've faced since the Second World War. It's very important that in that context we step up in terms of the leadership side of our international personality, so that we are shaping these circumstances as best as we possibly can.

GREEN: Why would we not step up to the extent of allowing US missiles to our north, in Darwin?

MARLES: Well this was not a request that was made by the US. Our Defence Minister made that very clear. And that's consistent with the conversations that we had with the Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper as well. I think a lot was being read into a very few comments that the Secretary of Defense made in relation to a very general question on his way over here.

GREEN: As you say though, the situation is febrile. I mean this is this is the most tension we have seen internationally since the Second World War, and we are in the in the thick of

that pincer between the US and China. If such a request was made, what should we do?

MARLES: I don't think it serves to answer hypotheticals. I mean a request isn't being made and don't I think that's on the agenda. There is a times tension. But I wouldn't want to overstate that. I think why the strategic circumstances are challenging is because this is a very dynamic situation that we're in. We are not talking about black and white binary situations. This is not the Cold War. And whilst on the one hand there is competition between the United States and China, on the other hand this also cooperation. And of course this also cooperation from Australia's point of view as well. So our way forward is not obvious, it actually requires a lot of careful consideration. The rise of China has been very good for Australia in economic terms and that's important to understand. And within the context of an enduring alliance with the United States- which I think is unbreakable- and we welcome the comments of Secretary Pompeo in respect to that, but within the context of that I think we should be building the biggest political relationship we can with China. It is complex is the point-

GREEN: It is certainly complex. I mean, within our unbreakable relationship with the United States. If the United States goes increasingly head-to-head with China and as no lesser commentator in this country than The Australian's, Paul Kelly observes; that if you think we haven't chosen the side between the US and China you're kidding yourself. I mean the consensus seems to be in and perhaps the tone of those AUSMIN discussions confirms this, we are very much in the US faction in this conflict.

MARLES: Well of course we're in an alliance with the United States and we've been in one.

GREEN: So how is that not picking a side?

MARLES: Well we have been in alliance with the United States since 1942- and the significance of that alliance, the relevance of it today is as great as it's ever been. It's an alliance which we describe as being based on shared values but one of the critical values is seeking to build and maintain a global rules based order. That's been very important for us in terms of our economic prosperity. You only need to look at the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea as an example of that, and how important that is in terms of establishing the rules which enable us as a trading island nation to engage in trade, which is so important to our economy. But the point to be made here Jonathan, is that whilst you see tensions, if we want to use that word, between the US and China in relation to trade and to seeking to negotiate different terms of trade they are nevertheless countries which are trading with each other on very significant manners. Now that is different to the Cold War, where essentially there was very little economic interaction between east and west. We're talking about a very connected world now where the fortunes of China are connected with the fortunes of the United States as they are connected with us. And that's what makes it complex. So whilst clearly we're in an alliance with the United States that doesn't then mean we don't have significant interests with China and we don't need to be building our relationship with China because we do.

GREEN: You mentioned that rules based order; to what extent has that been imperilled by the United States position with Iran? In scrapping the nuclear deal with Iran and the

tensions that have flowed from that, is the United States the irritant in that situation?

MARLES: That is a particular agreement that was put in place. And it was put in place in respect of Iran seeking to move down the path of gaining a nuclear capability, which in terms of the Non-Proliferation Treaty is something that we would be-

GREEN: There is no sign that that is happening, and the deal has been dumped and has had consequences.

MARLES: But the point of the deal was to try and put some controls around Iran's acquiring of a nuclear capability and we are a long time signatory and adherence to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which of course has at its heart an idea that countries which are not nuclear powers do not seek to become nuclear powers. I don't think it's right to, in a sense, go to one side here in terms of laying the blame. Having said that; the agreement that was put in place under the Obama Administration was something that we supported and continue to support, that is an issue on its own terms. I think what is also important here though is Freedom of Navigation is very central to Australia's national interests- as I've just described. So it's important that we're bearing that in mind. What we actually need here coming out of the weekend is some clarity from the Government. About what request, if any, in terms of specifics has been made by the United States-

GREEN: This is in terms of potential naval input into the Straits of Hormuz.

MARLES: Or whatever contribution we might make to any effort there. I think we need clarity from the Government about exactly what is being proposed- and assess it accordingly.

GREEN: This is the point here, is it not? And I suspect goes to that strength of that unbreakable alliance; that the US can pretty much provoke a situation within the Strait of Hormuz- in that that critical shipping area in between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman- and that we could potentially be drawn into that escalated tension, purely on the basis of that relationship. And, where it was caused by pulling out of an agreement with which we were in full agreement.

MARLES: Well you've joined a lot of dots there. To Iran's behaviour; it has been destabilising and it's being destabilising in respect of the Straits of Hormuz. It is important that there is Freedom of Navigation there as it is important that there is Freedom of Navigation around the world and we have an interest in that-

GREEN: Is it really so much in our interest? I mean the bulk of our oil supplies- and this is another issue that we will address in a moment- I mean they come through the South China Sea not through the Persian Gulf.

MARLES: Freedom of Navigation wherever we are talking about is in Australia's national interest- be it the South China Sea or the Straits of Hormuz- because as an island trading nation, it is fundamental to our prosperity. So we have to stand for the proposition of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea in all the seas of the world. But it would also be true to say that there some product that comes through the Straits of Hormuz to Australia, and indeed product from Australia which goes in the other direction.

GREEN: Sure, but would we not be seen though is joining in the US provocation of Iran, if we were to send naval assistance into the Straits of Hormuz?

MARLES: Again, there is certain language that you've used there in that question. I think though, what is important here is that we get complete clarity from the Government about exactly what is being asked. If there is an ask that's being made. And what is the proposition that the Government seeks to fulfil, if indeed they intend to. And then we need to assess that request- and the specifics of that request- on its merits. You know, I note that the Prime Minister has really made similar comments to that during the day.

GREEN: Would you expect to be drawn into that conversation?

MARLES: We would. And I think, if the Government behaves in an appropriate way, we would expect that we would be consulted on that. Because when you're talking about issues such as this- which go to the heart of our national security- it obviously transcends partisan politics.

GREEN: National security is a big issue in terms of energy reserves and Angus Taylor, Energy Minister, telling AM this morning that to top up our rather depleted reserves of oil fuels; we could potentially do a deal with the US to get some of their oil reserves. I mean is that a coherent proposition?

MARLES: I don't think the Government has been coherent on what is a critical issue facing Australia today and that is the level of our fuel reserves that we have in place; which is far below what are the international standards. And when you consider, as we've just been describing Australia as an island nation, having fuel reserves for us is particularly important. And this Government actually needs to answer in a coherent way how it is going to address this issue.

GREEN: Why do we export 75 per cent of our oil, when we have 28 days supply in this country?

MARLES: I mean there might be a whole lot of economic factors around why those decisions are made. But in terms of Australia's national security, we need to have a certain number of days- 90 days is the global standard, we're well below that. And the Government needs to provide an explanation as to how it's going to fix this issue. Because this goes deeply to our national security and this is a Government which likes to spruik its credentials in this regard. Well on this issue, it is failing and it actually needs to come up with a coherent plan.

GREEN: Would you be comfortable with it with a deal with America which traded emergency oil access for naval support in the Gulf of Hormuz?

MARLES: Well I think these are separate questions.

GREEN: What if they weren't separate questions?

MARLES: Well I think these are separate questions but I think-

GREEN: How can you be sure they are separate questions?

MARLES: What I am trying to say is; you're asking me whether I'd be comfortable in relation to this? I think these need to be considered as separate questions. And it's really important from Australia's own point of view, that we have appropriate fuel security. Right now we do not. And this Government has not got a coherent plan or at least it's not articulating one to the Australian people. And we need to hear that.

GREEN: What's the best plan for this? I mean Labor went to the last election whether with a guaranteed fleet of Australian flag vessels that could securely import fuel if that were necessary. Is that a coherent response?

MARLES: We put together a proposal during the last election which should indicate the seriousness with which we regard this issue and the fact that we've been thinking about it. But Jonathan, the issue now given the May 18th of May is this Government is going to be governing the country for the next three years. So right now we actually we need to be hearing from them. This is something where we need action now, and we need action in a time frame where we're not going to be the Government. They are. And they need to explain how they are going to deal with this problem because it's a big one.

GREEN: Is it's sufficiently serious to curtail exports?

MARLES: Again, I think we need to understand from the Government about how they intend to have those fuel reserves in place. There is a number of means by which you can do it. But it's actually for the Government to explain how this is going to occur. It's fine for Angus Taylor to be saying these, or making these points this morning. It does not equal a coherent plan and we desperately need to hear one in terms of dealing with a critical issue which goes to Australia's national security. These people talk a big game when it comes to national security, but when you get to the nuts and bolts of it and you don't get a more granular issue than this one, you find that this is a Government which goes missing.

GREEN: Richard Marles, thanks for your time.

MARLES: Thanks Jonathan.

ENDS

Authorised by Paul Erickson, ALP, Canberra.