



SENATOR THE HON SIMON BIRMINGHAM

Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs
Leader of the Opposition in the Senate
Senator for South Australia

TRANSCRIPT

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Interview on Sky News Live, AM Agenda with Cheng Lei

Topics: *Teen terrorism; China response to defence announcements;*

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Cheng Lei: Joining me now is Shadow Foreign Affairs Minister, Simon Birmingham....so let's talk about this Wakeley stabbing within the whole trend of growing teen terrorism. You know what sort of all round policy approach should we be considering to counter that?

Simon Birmingham: Well Lei, Australians have confronted many shocking incidents tragically over the last week. Of course, the deaths of numerous people at Bondi Junction Shopping Centre and then this stabbing of Bishop Emmanuel in place of worship - and there is no place for this type of violence in any of these settings. Of course, the idea that a priest or a holy figure going about their work in a place of worship – it is meant to be a place of peaceful respect and of commemoration of religious blessings - is really quite, quite shocking for so many people. New South Wales Police have clearly been very methodical in the approach that they are taking to all of these terrible incidents and to making sure that we understand them. And it has been the designation of this as a religiously motivated terrorist attack that is deeply troubling and does show that there needs to be even greater effort made between religious communities in Australia, through our education system, and for governments to ensure that there is a culture of mutual respect promoted across faiths, between faiths and between all peoples.

Cheng Lei: Are we getting any closer to connecting with teens though, you know they've grown up as digital natives, as social media natives?

Simon Birmingham: The real risk that is presented in the online world is a very, very serious one, and it is one that our government previously took seriously in the establishment initially of the eSafety Commissioner, in putting in place a range of different powers, take down notices and other steps that were taken and we certainly believe it's incumbent upon the Albanese Government to show similar leadership in putting pressure on the big technology companies that online content that is inappropriate, particularly the display or videos of attacks and such horrific imagery should be removed and it should be removed far faster. You think about what tech companies can manage to push into our line of sight when we're using our devices, well they should be able to act just as quickly and just as effectively to take away inappropriate content, particularly when it is violent content and when it is content that is associated in any way with the promotion of terrorist activities.

Cheng Lei: I would also ask you about China's response to Australia's defence strategy, the \$50 billion defence boost. I mean, this is a country that spends \$230 billion a year on its own defence and it's saying you know, Australia should drop it's a cold war mentality. What message do you think that's really sending?

Simon Birmingham: Well, China seems to think that nobody notices how they behave when it comes to military conduct and activities or engagement with those causing disruption around the world, and that they can just put on a peaceful veneer and lecture a country like Australia about how we are approaching national security. The reality is that countries are right to look at with concern some of China's actions. If China wants to be viewed in a different way, then it should cease being so confrontational with the Philippines; it should cease when a parliamentary delegation visits Taiwan for example, responding with huge military activity and the firing of missiles overland in such confrontational ways; it should cease engaging in military cooperation with a country like Iran in the midst of a period of time when Iran is sponsoring such terrorist activities and atrocities and in the last week has undertaken direct military strikes and action against Israel. So there a range of ways where China could change its behaviour that may then justify the rest of the world having a different outlook or approach. But the reality is China is behaving in ways, through its military buildup as you referenced and the way in which uses and conducts those military operations and activities, that are cause for concern and therefore necessitate strong clear defence strategy and significant defence investment, of which the Albanese Government sadly is failing to step up the degree that they should.

Cheng Lei: Do you think China's also referencing or I guess, warning that Australia shouldn't get too close to the US?

Simon Birmingham: There's always a subtext or the like there in some of China's remarks. What we welcome is United States presence in the region in a way that helps to ensure stability across the region, stability underpinned by deterrence from any conflict and that deterrence requires us all to have strong defences that can deter any type of escalation by China or anyone else into an activity or environment that creates the opportunity for conflict. Now, the Albanese Government has made some \$80 billion worth of cuts, deferrals, delays to defence programs and expenditure. That's completely unacceptable and heading in the wrong direction. This week, the announcement is an opaque one with little clarity about where defence spending is going and even less clarity about which programs are being cut. The Government needs to be far more honest and direct with Australians and the Australian defence industry about the priorities that it's building and it needs to act with far greater urgency in the way in which it is investing to achieve those outcomes.

Cheng Lei: Thank you so much for your time and hope you enjoy your weekend.

Simon Birmingham: Thank you, Lei.

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MEDIA CONTACTS

Julia Ebbs: +61 498 778 269

Office: 08 8354 1644 (ADL) 02 6277 3059 (CBR)