



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Special Committee on Canada- China Relations

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 006

Tuesday, November 17, 2020

Chair: The Honourable Geoff Regan



Special Committee on Canada-China Relations

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• (1840)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number six of the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations. Pursuant to the motion adopted on Wednesday, September 23, the committee is meeting on its study of Canada-China relations.

[Translation]

Today's meeting is being held in a hybrid format, in keeping with the motion passed by the House on September 23. The meeting is also being televised. It will be available on the House of Commons website.

[English]

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of “floor”, “English” or “French”.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are participating by video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself.

The witness, who I think has probably appeared at committees before, will know that when one of the members is asking him questions, he doesn't have to wait for me to recognize him. He can go ahead and answer the question.

[Translation]

I want to remind you that committee members and witnesses should address all comments to the chair. Please speak slowly and clearly.

[English]

When you are not speaking, your microphone should be on mute.

I will now welcome Mr. Shawn Steil, executive director, greater China policy and coordination, from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, to speak to us.

Thank you very much for being here. Please proceed with your five-minute opening remarks.

Mr. Shawn Steil (Executive Director, Greater China Policy and Coordination, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to address the committee on the subject of Tibet today.

First, permit me a disclaimer: the committee has asked to hear from an expert on Tibet from Global Affairs Canada. Unfortunately, the limited access Canadian officials have to the Tibet Autonomous Region in China means that few officials have first-hand experience with the situation in Tibet.

Access to Tibet remains strictly controlled by the Chinese government, and on the rare occasions when official visits are allowed, they are highly scripted. In recent years, Tibet's central government has made it more difficult for diplomats, journalists and foreigners overall to visit. A travel permit and an invitation are necessary. Canada consistently and frequently requests visits to the Tibet Autonomous Region. Permits to visit Tibetan regions in other Chinese provinces are not required, but those visits can also be heavily restricted.

This session is particularly timely. Canada's ambassador to China, Dominic Barton, just returned from a visit to the Tibetan capital of Lhasa and nearby Shannan prefecture, at the invitation of the Chinese government. The trip was with a group of other diplomats and took place from October 26 to 30. This was the first visit by a Canadian official since 2015.

The lack of meaningful access to Tibet is one aspect of severe restrictions imposed by Chinese authorities on the Tibetan people. The Government of Canada remains deeply concerned about the human rights situation affecting Tibetans. In line with reports such as those by NGOs and by the UN Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination, human rights issues include restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief and the protection of linguistic and cultural rights.

We maintain engagement with members of the Tibetan diaspora, including Tibetan Canadians, and with organizations that study and conduct and support the Tibetan community abroad. Contact with this community remains important to the Government of Canada and informs our approach to advocacy for rights and freedoms in Tibet.

Canada bestowed honorary Canadian citizenship on Tibetan spiritual leader His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama in 2006. While we know there are longstanding grievances between the Chinese government and the Central Tibetan Administration or government-in-exile and His Holiness, Canada supports meaningful dialogue between these parties toward a resolution of issues acceptable to both sides.

Tensions between the Chinese government and Tibetans have remained high and ongoing over several decades, and the last 10 years present no exception. The government has continued to intensify its crackdown on Tibetans with increased surveillance and forced patriotic education. Acts of protest by Tibetans can result in detention or worse. To the world's horror, there have been more than 150 self-immolations by Tibetan Buddhists during this period.

Canada has a long history of support for Tibetans. The government began work to resettle some of the first Tibetan refugees to Canada in the 1970s. There have certainly been more immigrants and refugees since that time.

Within the last decade, the Government of Canada has established special measures to facilitate the private sponsorship and emigration of up to 1,000 displaced Tibetans from India. Individuals were matched with sponsors through Project Tibet Society, with the resettlement of 1,000 refugees completed in 2017.

These Tibetans and more than 7,000 others—in fact, according to the 2016 census there were more than 8,000 Canadians identifying as Tibetan—are contributing to our country's multicultural fabric, including through participation in public life.

In line with diplomatic relations, Canada recognizes the People's Republic of China as the governing body of the Tibet Autonomous Region. In line with China's own constitutions and its international obligations, we call on the government to respect religious freedoms and end repressive policies in Tibet. While there is economic development in Tibet, it does not mask the need for the protection of political and civil rights.

Canada will continue to ask for unhindered access to the region, especially in light of the recent crackdowns. Although there is increased attention being paid to the crackdown in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, we must not forget that the situation in Tibet remains very serious.

I thank the committee for raising this issue tonight.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Steil.

Now we'll go to our first round of questions, led off by Mr. Williamson for six minutes.

Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for appearing tonight. You paint a rather bleak picture of the situation in Tibet, not only for the people of Tibet but also for our government's ability to monitor, participate and get a sense of what's happening on the ground there.

In August, this committee heard from Dr. Lobsang Sangay, who is the president of the...I'll refer to them as Tibetans abroad or the Tibetan diaspora outside of the territory. He talked about the mid-

dle-way approach as a way to perhaps reconcile his people's way of life within mainland China. It was to seek a "genuine autonomy" for the Tibetan people "within the framework of the Chinese constitution".

Could you talk a little about the Government of Canada's position on this middle-way approach and any work that's been done to facilitate it or to move it forward?

• (1845)

Mr. Shawn Steil: I'm very much aware of the Central Tibetan Administration's proposal for a middle-way approach. It's one that we understand sets aside questions of independence, but rather seeks greater autonomy within China. I would just underline that from Canadian policy, we recognize that the People's Republic of China is the governing body over the Tibet Autonomous Region.

We don't take a particular position on the middle-way approach but have consistently advocated for the Government of China to engage in meaningful dialogue with the Dalai Lama and his representatives in the Central Tibetan Administration. We haven't taken a position on the content of that dialogue, but certainly we recognize that the middle-way approach does refute the complaint that we often hear from the Chinese government that the Dalai Lama and his "clique" are separatists and troublemakers trying to split the country. If they were listening to what Lobsang Sangay and others are saying about the middle-way approach, they would recognize that splitting the country is not what they're looking for.

Mr. John Williamson: Right. I think that's it.

It seems that Canada's policy towards Tibet really hasn't changed very much since the Mulroney government. It has been an acknowledgement or recognition that Tibet is part of mainland China. Is that accurate or am I missing something? Has there been an evolution in the view of the Tibetan region in that time or has there been a pretty consistent policy as I have just described?

Mr. Shawn Steil: Mr. Chair, I think that's quite accurate. I don't think there's been a significant shift in Canada's policy approach over time. I may be called out by the Chinese government for speaking harshly about our position on that, but it's not the Canadian government policy so much that has changed over time; it's the People's Republic of China's policy that's changed over time. We've seen an increasing crackdown and limiting of rights.

Mr. John Williamson: I think that's exactly it. Whether it's a failure to live up to its side of the bargain, which of course we've seen more and more, not just in Tibet but elsewhere.... In fact in a July 7, 2020 interview with Agence France-Presse, Dr. Sangay compared China's failure to uphold the 17-point agreement with Tibet to the imposition of the national security law in Hong Kong. He warned that, "What you see [in Hong Kong] already took place in Tibet".

What do you think are the parallels between Tibet and China's other autonomous regions?

Mr. Shawn Steil: I think the trend lines that we've seen in Tibet have been shown in other regions of China as well. You mentioned some of the history there.

Even in more recent history—I could say since 2008—there has been a violent crackdown on protests, followed over the last decade by much harsher mechanisms of control and surveillance in Tibet. Some of the patterns of those mechanisms of control we're now seeing reproduced in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, for example. It really comes out to less and less space for opposition to the Communist Party.

• (1850)

Mr. John Williamson: I'll just make a comment. I was in Tibet in 2007 and I got a first-hand taste of just how complete the Chinese control of the media is there. I was talking with many Tibetans who look for news. The young generation I had spoken to there had no knowledge of, no information about, the Tiananmen Square massacre, which shocked me.

The Chair: You have only five seconds, Mr. Williamson.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Williamson.

Mr. John Williamson: Thank you.

The Chair: I think we're all interested in hearing that story, but I shouldn't have let you go beyond six minutes. I hope members will forgive me for that.

I'll go on now to Mr. Fragiskatos for six minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to Mr. Steil for his testimony tonight.

Mr. Steil, could you share with the committee a little bit more about the ambassador's recent trip in Tibet and what exactly he did?

Mr. Shawn Steil: Mr. Chair, I'm happy to give the broad strokes of the visit. The ambassador, of course, would be better placed to go into some of the details and nuances of it.

As I mentioned, we've been campaigning with the Chinese authorities very consistently for a visit, and his was the first in five years of any Canadian diplomat. I think for the previous ambassador it was even longer than that, perhaps in 2013.

His visit was with a group of other diplomats. It followed a previous visit of other ambassadors. Other countries' visits have also been restricted, but there was an earlier visit of diplomats and ambassadors from other countries in September. I believe this was the second visit in a relatively short succession.

He travelled primarily to Lhasa, the capital, but was also able to see parts of the surrounding prefecture of Shannan. He was able to visit the monastery, a school, and to meet with senior officials of the Tibetan government and visit some of the regions outside of Lhasa. But again, it was a highly scripted visit.

I think it did afford him the opportunity to make some personal observations, with the limited free time he had to make contact with ordinary Tibetans. That, I think, is of tremendous value for us. I think we're always concerned about, as we say, the instrumentalization of these visits—being used for propaganda purposes and these sorts of things—but you balance that out with the rare opportunity for first-hand observation, and also with the very important opportunity for Canada and its government to show Tibetans that we're there and we care, just by his presence there.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you. It was a rare opportunity indeed.

Do you think this committee would benefit, Mr. Steil, from having the ambassador appear, testify and share information and take questions on the recent visit to Tibet?

Mr. Shawn Steil: Yes, absolutely. I had the chance to be briefed very briefly by him as well. I think the nuances and the observations he would be able to provide on his visit would be very helpful, especially given that these visits are so rare.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

This is the other question I want to ask, Mr. Steil. How does Canada's approach to the Tibetan question compare and contrast to the approach taken by other middle-power democracies, whether Australia, New Zealand or the U.K.? I won't fill in all the examples of middle powers that we could point to, but could you offer any thoughts on that question?

Mr. Shawn Steil: Sure. I think our position is quite similar. I should note that it's increasingly coordinated. We have the opportunity at a working level and at higher levels, all the way up to the minister, to engage with our like-minded democracies on some of these critical issues, to ensure that we're not missing important parts of our approach and our advocacy, and where we can, to coordinate that advocacy.

Of course, we're also not alone in suffering some of the consequences for that advocacy. I think there would be a long list of, as you say, middle powers and friendly democracies that have been punished at one time or another for permitting the Dalai Lama to visit, for example. I think many of us have been through periods where we've suffered the wrath of the Chinese government for engaging with Tibet.

• (1855)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I have a final question, Mr. Steil.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I see that I have a couple of minutes.

This is a more general question regarding China's approach to Tibet. I know from other conflicts.... I'm not well-versed in this conflict, I must admit, so thank you to the analysts at the Library of Parliament for their always very learned analysis. I've relied on it.

I do know from a conflict that I have studied in the past, the Kurdish question, that one of the ways in which Turkey, Iraq and Iran integrated Kurdish dissidents into the state structure was to appoint them to high-level positions of authority. Is that something the Chinese state has also done to sort of dissipate dissent within Tibet and among Tibetans?

Mr. Shawn Steil: Yes, I think that's probably a fair assessment in this case. In fact, I listened to Lobsang Sangay's testimony before the committee as well, and I know that's a point he's drawn. The co-option of the elite can be a factor.

In the People's Republic of China politically overall, I think that there are very, very few Tibetans who make it to high-level positions within that system, but certainly within the Tibet Autonomous Region you see a mix of ethnic Han and ethnic Tibetan leaders within the political system.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I was just simply going to thank the witness very much.

I've had the chance to engage with him on other issues relating to Canada's foreign policy in previous meetings at the committee level, Mr. Chair. We're very fortunate to have him here tonight.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bergeron, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Steil, for joining us at this late hour. We appreciate the fact that we aren't the only ones still at work at this time of day.

After Mr. Sangay appeared before the committee a few weeks ago, the committee prepared a report that was tabled in the House of Commons.

Has Global Affairs Canada followed up on the motion passed by the committee and tabled in the House of Commons?

[*English*]

Mr. Shawn Steil: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Indeed, we took note of the motion passed by the committee to encourage dialogue, and that is a motion that is entirely consistent with the government's policy. I want to congratulate the committee for making the motion, because although we take opportunities to advance that position, when we speak with the Chinese government on the opportunities we have to raise these issues, I think it's important for the Chinese government to recognize that it's not just the government but our Parliament that supports that position.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: The motion is a call for dialogue. We're all baffled by the fact that Beijing is so indifferent to this openness to dialogue on the part of the Tibetan authorities in exile.

How does the Department of Foreign Affairs view Beijing's indifference when the Tibetan authorities are willing to fall in line and enter into a new agreement?

• (1900)

[*English*]

Mr. Shawn Steil: Mr. Chair, this touches on an essential problem that we have with the current government of the People's Republic of China, which is increasingly rejecting criticism, no matter how constructive, of its positions and policies in places such as Tibet.

From a foreign policy perspective, it's important for us to maintain consistency in our approach and to continue to push these is-

ues. I think the argument that is being put forward by the Chinese government not to engage in dialogue has only become hardened over time. It's difficult, given that rigidity, for the government to find a way to back out slowly and find a new way, more flexibility in their position.

We can only hope that by maintaining our own consistent policy, by pushing this as a potential solution, there will be at some point an opening that would allow the Chinese government to set aside this very rigid position and engage some sort of dialogue. It wouldn't be the first time. The Dalai Lama, back in the fifties, did engage with Chairman Mao. It was only after the uprising in 1959, when the Tibetan community said that enough is enough and the Dalai Lama fled, that this dialogue ceased.

There have to be opportunities for increased dialogue in the future. We truly believe that is the best way to ensure the stability within Tibet, within China, and the welfare of Tibetans both within and outside of China.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I know that some of my colleagues addressed this issue a few moments ago. Mr. Sangay said that the failure of the 17-point agreement foreshadowed the failure of the "one country, two systems" approach, which may in turn herald the failure of a possible agreement with Taiwan.

What's your perspective on this? You were talking about hope earlier.

We asked Mr. Sangay this question. Perhaps you had a look at our discussions. He simply told us that hope is at the heart of the Buddhist religion and that we must keep that hope alive. Personally, I'm a little concerned about the fact that we can't think of a solution simply based on hope.

What can the international community do under these circumstances?

The Chair: I'm sorry, but the six minutes are up.

You can ask Mr. Steil the question again in the next round.

Thank you, Mr. Bergeron.

[*English*]

Speaking of the late hour, it's now 8:33 in Newfoundland and Labrador, where we have Mr. Harris for the next six minutes.

Mr. Harris, please.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Yes, it is 8:30 now. We're a little later here.

Nevertheless, I'm interested in asking Mr. Steil some questions.

We had a very interesting meeting with Dr. Sangay. One of the remarkable things about his views, especially towards the end of his remarks about all the difficulties, was his great optimism. He believes that the future for the Tibet Autonomous Region and the people of Tibet is going to be positive. I think that's an encouragement to the rest of us to share that hope, and also to work towards it in any way that we can facilitate the process.

I thought there was an opportunity not so long ago, and a possibility, that discussions would start, but that didn't take off. Do you know anything about that? It was a couple of years ago.

• (1905)

Mr. Shawn Steil: I'm not immediately aware, Mr. Chair, of openings for dialogue. I think during the period of Hu Jintao, before Xi Jinping became president, there had been some openings. Hu Jintao, a former president of China, had some connections, I believe, with the Tibetan region. I'm not aware, however, of anything concrete that has come out recently.

Mr. Jack Harris: Leaving that aside, we supported the whole idea of the middle way and of working towards autonomy within the Chinese constitution.

Do you know what working within the Chinese constitution may mean? Do you know what an autonomous region actually consists of under the Chinese constitution and what one would expect under the existing constitution?

Mr. Shawn Steil: Within Chinese law at the moment, autonomous regions, of which there are a few, do have some provision for self-government and a self-say in the way they operate. It also provides, notionally within the Chinese constitution, freedom of religion and freedom of belief. I think Chinese officials will tell you, yes, we have all of that in Tibet, as long as it's in accordance with other aspects of the law. Then they may point you to the very broad notion of national security law, for example, which forbids anything resembling sedition.

I know the committee has been studying Hong Kong and the national security law there, so you have a good idea about that broad definition of national security, which in some sense will trump other provisions of the constitution and law that allow for religious freedom, for example.

Mr. Jack Harris: Some of our colleagues have asked about freedom of the press and freedom of religion. In the Chinese context, to my knowledge, that is not a China-wide phenomenon, although they have it in their constitution.

Would you care to comment on that? Is there something particular about the way this is approached in Tibet, or was there an expectation that they would, by virtue of being an autonomous region, expect greater freedoms?

Mr. Shawn Steil: Everything, even within the autonomous regions, is increasingly subject to the guidance and the supervision of the Communist Party of China. That conception of autonomy would be quite different, I think, from a common understanding of "autonomy". There's no electoral process to participate in, and any leadership of the Tibet Autonomous Region must be vetted through the Communist Party system.

As just one example, if you want to be a Communist Party member, you're forbidden from practising religion, and so, in a Tibetan region that excludes many people who would want to be involved in any sort of political process.

Mr. Jack Harris: That may be a function of political activity elsewhere in China, that because of the nature of Communist Party membership, they are the ones in control, but if religion prevents you, then you aren't able to exercise any autonomy.

Is that the way it works?

Mr. Shawn Steil: I'm not sure it would be quite so cut and dried, but there are all sorts of formal and informal blockages to true autonomy.

Let me give an example, not in terms of the political sphere but the economic sphere. Most of the investment into Tibet—and, yes, there are statistically higher rates of GDP growth in Tibet—is the result of investment from outside Tibet, often through state-owned enterprises. This has created, some say, a closed loop of economic benefit. The Tibetans themselves, who had been at least provisionally and historically nomads, are cut out of that economic loop.

• (1910)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, I'm unable to hear anything you're saying.

The Chair: Mr. Harris, I'm sorry about that. I should have learned by now. When does one learn to unmute when one should?

That's your six minutes. Thanks very much for concluding on time without hearing me.

[*Translation*]

We'll now move on to the second round.

Mr. Paul-Hus, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good evening, Mr. Steil.

A Chinese company called Nuctech operates throughout China. This company provides surveillance and monitoring tools for the security bureau in Xinjiang. We know that citizens are being monitored.

In your opinion, is this surveillance tool being used to monitor Tibetans?

[*English*]

Mr. Shawn Steil: Sorry, Mr. Chair. I might have missed the name of the company, but it does not ring any immediate bells. It might be something I'd have to get back to the committee on.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: The company is called Nuctech.

Does this sound familiar?

[*English*]

Mr. Shawn Steil: Yes. I recognize that it's high on the agenda for parliamentary committees at the moment.

I don't have any first-hand knowledge of the company itself and its activities elsewhere, so I'm afraid I can't comment. I would certainly be pleased to consult with some of my colleagues who watch that a bit more closely than I do and get back to the committee.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Do you think that, unbeknownst to us, some of the COVID-19 protective equipment that Canada purchased recently, such as gowns, may have been manufactured in Tibetan labour camps?

[English]

Mr. Shawn Steil: There have been increasing reports about labour camps in China and the potential for the use of forced labour. Many of those reports, of course, have been linked to the situation of Uighurs in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, but as the member points out, there have also been reports of labour camps being set up in Tibet.

There's less information about what's happening with labour internment camps in Tibet, but we do know, even before this period, that there was forced resettlement off nomadic lands, the relocation of Tibetans who were traditionally working off the land as nomads or shepherds, to make way for mining or infrastructure projects, or for other purposes, and then having them retrained and put into factory jobs.

There seems to be significant evidence to suggest that this has taken place and continues to take place in Tibet as well.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Unfortunately, the Canadian government may have purchased equipment made by people in forced labour camps.

We know that Canada is currently considering renovating the embassy in Beijing. Do you think that has Canada taken steps to ensure that there are no forced labourers from Tibet or elsewhere in China?

Has the Canadian government provided any instructions in this area?

[English]

Mr. Shawn Steil: For Tibet in particular, the major concern we have is less for the safety of the diplomats who travel there, but the surveillance they're under when they do. In Tibet, and I think the ambassador would attest to this, it's very difficult to break away from your handlers and the constant surveillance you might have.

I would note, as mentioned in my opening remarks, that you're not required to have permits for travel to Tibetan areas outside of Tibet, in places such as Sichuan province or Qinghai province. We've noted that, historically, when diplomats do travel there, they are indeed under surveillance and followed when they're there.

• (1915)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Do you find it normal that ambassadors, diplomats and journalists are monitored in this manner, while members of the Chinese Communist Party can come to Canada and move about freely?

[English]

The Chair: It's a five-second answer, Mr. Steil.

Mr. Shawn Steil: No, I wouldn't find that normal.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Paul-Hus.

[English]

Now we'll go on to Mr. Virani for five minutes.

Welcome, Mr. Virani.

Mr. Arif Virani (Parkdale—High Park, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I wanted to ask some generalized questions about the state of the Sino-Tibetan dialogue from your perspective, Mr. Steil. I apologize for having not heard the first part of members' exchanges with you.

We know that dialogue was ongoing for a certain amount of time from about the mid-2000s to the end of the 2000s. Then around 2010 it came to a standstill.

Can you give us a sense of your understanding of the blockages to restarting the Sino-Tibetan dialogue and the importance of discussions about the middle way approach, which is the approach—you'll be aware obviously—that His Holiness espouses to ensure that there is a compromise between the perceptions of Tibetan independence versus the notion of being completely subsumed within the Chinese federation? It is establishing a compromise, which looks a lot like the way the Canadian federation was established. You just have a region that has greater linguistic, cultural and religious autonomy, but within the broader Chinese federation and broader Chinese constitution.

Could you give us an update on that piece and your understanding of it from the GAC perspective?

Mr. Shawn Steil: There's reason to be pessimistic about the openness of the People's Republic of China to engage in that dialogue at the moment. The signs are not there, at least as we see them. It would be lovely to think that somewhere behind the scenes of that harsh exterior and rigidity in the government's position, there is a little bit more openness to dialogue, but we just haven't seen it. The opposition to the Dalai Lama and the Sikyong, Lobsang Sangay himself, just tells us that there's not a lot of appetite.

Every time Lobsang Sangay visits Canada—or participates virtually, I suppose, in the last case—we receive protestations and representations from the Chinese authorities complaining that we are engaging with a separatist and a terrorist.

I've met Mr. Sangay. Each time in the past he's travelled to China, the Chinese have asked us to deny him a visa and asked how we could possibly provide him one.

That may be the harsh exterior of the official position that we're seeing, and that there's instead more openness somewhere. However, all of the signals that we get, whether it's directly around Tibet or Xinjiang or Hong Kong, for that matter, seem to suggest that the emphasis on stability and security and brooking absolutely no compromise in the unified leadership of the Communist Party suggests that the time is not nigh for an opening in that dialogue.

Mr. Arif Virani: Let me take it from a different angle.

There's an argument about asserting human rights protections and a basic defence of statutory rules or norms that exist on the books in China itself—things like the language of instruction in the Tibet Autonomous Region. There are rules about ethnic minorities and about the language of instruction, which actually on paper look like they could be somewhat—“robust” might not be the best word—rigorous in ensuring that Tibetan is a language of instruction in the Tibet Autonomous Region.

What is your understanding from the GAC perspective of Chinese compliance with Chinese rules themselves as they're outlined in the Tibet Autonomous Region? The language of instruction is a critically important piece, not just for language activists like Tashi Wangchuck—and I appreciate that the government has made representations about that— but also for the Canada Tibet Committee that operates here and advocates for at least the observance of the laws that are on the books in China.

Can you comment on the language of instruction and that sort of strategy?

• (1920)

Mr. Shawn Steil: Absolutely. This is one of the bases we have on which to advocate. It's one thing, which we always do, to appeal to international norms and universal human rights on these issues, but in fact it's China's own laws that provide a basis for respect of linguistic and cultural rights and religious freedoms. As I said, the trends aren't great.

I will give you an example. This has been broader than Tibet; there's been reinterpretation of bilingual education in China, including in Mongolia, and also in Tibet. There's more that could be done according to Chinese law.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Virani.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bergeron now has the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Mr. Chair, I want to very quickly address the failure of the 17-point agreement, which foreshadows the failure of the “one country, two systems” principle, which foreshadows the failure of the possible integration of Taiwan. I also want to address the whole issue of hope. Mr. Virani spoke briefly about this issue.

Are we still helplessly watching the situation unfold, or is the international community working together to try to force the People's Republic of China to change?

[*English*]

Mr. Shawn Steil: Yes, Mr. Chair, I appreciate the chance to address the question.

I think an issue that's rightly pointed out here is that China's government has to come to an understanding that if it wants the international community to accept it at its word, it has to fulfill its word.

The 17-point agreement, long before Canada established diplomatic relations with China, is difficult for us to use as a basis for holding them to account, but certainly in the case of Hong Kong, as you've mentioned, the Sino-British Joint Declaration, a UN-registered treaty, and the violation of the obligations under that treaty

give us pause. China has to realize that behaviour has consequences for the trust that the international community will bestow upon it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I'll proceed quickly, Mr. Chair, because I can see you waving at me.

Mr. Steil, President Xi Jinping announced a new rail link project in the Tibet Autonomous Region. What do you think about this new project?

Is the goal the development of Tibet?

The rail link will come close to the border with India.

[*English*]

Mr. Shawn Steil: Yes, indeed, and I think there are views on both sides: one, that this will bring more economic opportunity for Tibetans, but two, that it will hasten the speed of cultural assimilation in Tibet.

It would be clearer to us, which it were, if Tibetans themselves had freedom to move in and out of Tibet, which they do not.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bergeron.

[*English*]

Thank you, Mr. Steil.

Now we'll go back to Mr. Harris for two and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you.

Mr. Steil, you stated a disclaimer at the beginning, saying that you weren't a Tibet expert. Therefore, I'll ask you this: Does Global Affairs have any expertise on Tibet? Do they have people with knowledge?

I see some general comments, but also that we don't know very much about what's going on. Do we know anything about migration patterns, population, people from the mainland or the rest of China being brought into Tibet? Are these speculations, or are these based on other people's information?

What is the state of knowledge within Global Affairs about this, or are we relying on CIA reports?

• (1925)

Mr. Shawn Steil: In terms of a cultural or linguistic expert, we have employees of Tibetan origin within Global Affairs Canada, as we do throughout the country.

In terms of understanding the actual situation on the ground, I think all of us, including those who study Tibet on a more or less full-time basis, rely, at least in part, on official Chinese statistics, the reliability of which you can question, but that's what we have. Whether it's statistics on economic growth, which suggests that Tibet's economy is growing much faster than the average—although from a low base—or population statistics, which tell us that approximately 90% of the population in Tibet that is shrinking slowly is Tibetan, versus for example, Han.

When we keep in mind things like that, you also have to remember that migrant labour is not necessarily counted in those official statistics, so they can be skewed.

Mr. Jack Harris: I did ask questions about religion in my previous turn, but I do want to emphasize that that's totally separate from the notion that religion is being suppressed and that the Buddhist monasteries are being suppressed actively by the government as well. Is that your understanding?

Mr. Shawn Steil: Yes, absolutely. I'll just give you one example. The Sera monastery in Lhasa has the capacity for 2,000 monks. According to reporting that we've collected, in 2015 there were 600 monks. When Ambassador Barton visited, there were 400. Part of that is because compulsory education, including patriotic education, is required before young monks can go to the monastery, so the numbers have been dwindling.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Harris.

I think we were all interested to hear that answer, as we are with all of these answers.

We'll go on now to Mr. Genuis for five minutes, please.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Steil.

I am going to go rapid-fire here because I want to cover a number of different things.

You said at the beginning that the Government of Canada recognizes the PRC as the governing body of Tibet, and for me, that includes not only the Tibet Autonomous Region but also historical Tibet, which is larger.

To me, in that recognition, there's nothing controversial. That's just the identification of a political reality, and if it weren't for that political reality, Tibetans would have no problem, so should I read anything else into that comment other than that you just recognize the reality that the territory is controlled by the Government of China at the present time?

Mr. Shawn Steil: No, you shouldn't read anything further than that. That's fine.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay. Thank you.

I think I heard you say to Mr. Bergeron that the motion that was passed is consistent with government policy. The motion that we passed expressed support for dialogue toward the establishment of

the middle way—genuine autonomy for Tibet within the framework of the Chinese constitution.

I want to be clear. Is the motion in its entirety—dialogue with a view to genuine autonomy—consistent with government policy?

Mr. Shawn Steil: Mr. Chair, I should probably clarify my position. If I misread or misremembered the motion.... The Canadian policy does not include a specific reference to the middle way. It only refers to our advocacy for dialogue without specifying the content.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay, that's the current government position. It's not to oppose the middle way, and it's not to support it. It's to support dialogue, and that's where it stops. Okay.

Mr. Shawn Steil: It's to mutualize, we often would say, a resolution to the grievances that is acceptable by both sides.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

We think a lot about the human rights of people in Tibet, but I think there's an important distinction: to speak about the rights of people in Tibet and to speak about the rights of Tibetans as a people. I wonder if the Government of Canada views Tibetans as a collective, of having certain rights as a people, and if so, what those rights would be.

Mr. Shawn Steil: Mr. Chair, that's an excellent point to raise because, as the committee knows, there's a large population of Tibetans living outside of the Tibet Autonomous Region, including in India.

The best way that I can put this is that our concern for the humanitarian, cultural and linguistic rights extends to the entire Tibetan population, no matter where it rests.

● (1930)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'm sorry, Mr. Steil. Could I direct my question a little bit? I wasn't so much referring to the broader diaspora community. However, when you speak about the rights of a people in their historic homeland, the implication is that they have rights that perhaps involve self-determination, that they have rights that are different from the rights of just individuals, that they as a people have certain political rights that are distinct.

Would you see Tibetans as a people in that sense of having particular rights that are distinct, maybe, from the rights of individuals vis-à-vis freedom and those sorts of things?

Mr. Shawn Steil: No, I don't think, in the sense of a political entity.... I'm just trying to understand the question a little more clearly. If it were to ask whether we recognized the Central Tibetan Administration or the government in exile as a separate political entity, then the answer is no.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay.

Whether or not the CTA speaks for the Tibetan people is maybe a distinct question from whether the Tibetan people as a people have rights. I think the question's been asked and answered, and feel free to clarify later on if you wish.

I want to ask this as well. Does the Government of Canada have a specific position around the reincarnation issue—the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama—and the Chinese government's efforts to rule on a proposal that it would determine the reincarnation? Does the Government of Canada have a position? Has the Government of Canada made representations on those issues at all?

Mr. Shawn Steil: Mr. Chair, I'm grateful that this particular question has been raised, because it's an area of preoccupation not only for Canada but also for many of our like-minded partners.

But the position, if I can articulate it carefully here, is that we support the right of the Tibetan Buddhists themselves to choose their leader.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay.

Are we seeing any evidence of Buddhist suppression in Tibet similar to what we're seeing in Xinjiang?

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Genuis. Thanks very much.

We'll go now to Ms. Zann, please, for five minutes.

Ms. Lenore Zann (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you very much, Mr. Steil. It's very interesting to hear your ideas about what is going on. I also would love to hear further about what life is like on the ground right now. Tibet has always been a country that I would like to go to.

Would you say that in the past 30 years, as far as you know, there has been large-scale migration of Chinese settlers to the Tibetan region? Also, have standards of living changed and become better for people in the TAR over the past decade?

Mr. Shawn Steil: Again, to answer the question about the standard of living, we often have to refer to or rely on Chinese statistics for economic growth and development. By those measures, it's quite clear that economic standards of living have risen across the board.

Our reporting would suggest that this economic development over the last 30 years, or even less, has been unequally distributed. As I mentioned, there's a bit of a closed economic loop that happens there. I think, related to that, there's the issue of migration, the inward movement. Yes, I think even the Chinese population statistics would acknowledge that there has been an influx of Chinese citizens from other regions of the country, primarily ethnic Hans, moving into Tibet.

It's also difficult to determine exactly the numbers, too, because there's been a history of even government officials spending part of their time—their summers—in Tibet, in Lhasa, and then moving and having their families reside in Chengdu, in Sichuan, in the plains, where it's a completely different climate and situation. It's difficult to determine, according to the statistics, exactly how much in-migration there has been.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Is it considered a vacation place? Is that why they go there? They have a place there and then then go back to work in the other part of China?

• (1935)

Mr. Shawn Steil: I think it reflects the harsh realities of the climate at the top of the world and the relative economic development. Many have commented about the sparse landscape. It's a very high elevation region, where some people who are not well adapted to the low oxygen in the high elevation can have aggravated medical problems. Also, the level of entertainment and urbanization is lower than in other parts of China. I think it's a preference for some to spend some of their time in places like Chengdu.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you.

We've talked about some of the human rights issues. How many of the problems the Chinese have with Tibet, would you say, are because of religion versus ethnicity, or versus wanting independence? Obviously, we know that a lot of Communist governments do not believe in God, and they don't follow that kind of religion. I would imagine that they probably have a problem with Buddhism as well. How much of it is that and their fear of religion versus ethnicity or a desire for independence?

Mr. Shawn Steil: Mr. Chair, I think religion is a particular target for the Communist Party in China. There's a long history of that. What we've started to see over the last several years is, I would say, both a Sinofication of religion and a “partyfication”, if I can say, of religion. There are signs of even.... I'll use the example here of the Central Asian minarets in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region being torn down from mosques and replaced with Chinese-style pagodas.

But the more insidious part, I think, is the partyfication of it, including with Buddhism. There is a Buddhist association that is recognized and sanctioned by the Communist Party as the authority on Buddhism in China. Outside of that, there's no recognition, and we're seeing increasingly that party doctrine is becoming a requirement to be inserted into religious doctrine in all religions, including Buddhism.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Steil, for appearing before the committee today. I believe I can speak on behalf of all members in saying that we appreciate it very much.

We're going to adjourn in a moment.

Mr. Fragiskatos

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I know that members are hearing your message of adjournment, and probably want you to get on with it. I would like to raise the idea with my colleagues that we collectively come together and agree to invite Ambassador Barton to the committee at a mutually convenient time. This would allow him to answer questions about his recent visit to Tibet, as we heard, the first visit by a Canadian official since 2015. The committee would really benefit from that. I want to put that idea forward, and perhaps we could decide on that tonight.

The Chair: We do want to get on to the other subcommittee meeting, but I will ask, is anyone opposed to that idea?

Mr. Harris, go ahead.

Mr. Jack Harris: We are having a discussion about committee business, but I guess it is in order. I'm not saying it's out of order. Is that a motion for the committee, or are you just seeking consensus? I think we'd be interested.

The Chair: It sounded to me like he was seeking consensus.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I am seeking a consensus, first, yes. We should have it, but if we don't, I suppose we can introduce it as a motion.

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, go ahead.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I think it's a great idea, and we should also give the ambassador an opportunity to give us other updates as he sees fit, and allocate a sufficient amount of time for all of the above.

• (1940)

The Chair: All right, thank you.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Mr. Chair, is that a consensus to proceed?

The Chair: I think it is. It's a direction to the subcommittee to work out the details, or to work with the clerk and so forth, to see what we can do in that regard. That's the direction of the committee as I take it.

Thank you, members of the committee. I'll see some of you in a few minutes at our subcommittee meeting.

The meeting is adjourned.

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