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Chair: Mr. Ken Hardie



Special Committee on the Canada–People’s Republic of China Relationship

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• (1830)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 41 of the House of Commons Special Committee on the Canada–People’s Republic of China Relationship.

Pursuant to the order of reference of May 16, 2022, the committee is meeting on its study of the Canada–People’s Republic of China relations.

As indicated in the communiqué from the Speaker to all members on Monday, April 29, we have a number of measures in place to help prevent audio feedback incidents.

I think that by now, you’re all accustomed to the new headsets that you’ll find in the committee rooms. They’ll normally be found unplugged, so you can plug them in. Make sure to set them down on the decal that’s on the desk in front of you. The idea is to keep them away from the microphone so that we don’t get feedback, which has been injurious to some of our translators. Lord knows we need them. We don’t have enough of them in some cases, so we need to keep every one we have.

There are cards on the table. They will give you all the guidelines, but I’m sure, as I said, that you’re all housebroken when it comes to the issue of preventing feedback for our translators.

Today’s meeting is taking place in a hybrid format.

A number of members are on the screen. You know how to use the Zoom application to mute yourself when you’re not speaking and how to access the translation.

For people who are here as witnesses, you should wait until you’re recognized by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic. Please mute it when you’re not speaking.

For interpretation, you have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of floor, English or French.

As a reminder, all comments should be addressed through the chair.

For members in the room, we have a speaking order tonight, so that will prescribe who gets to speak and when, at least for the first half of the meeting. We will be going in camera for the second half to conduct some committee business.

We’re meeting today on the matter of Canada’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

I’d like to welcome our witnesses for today’s meeting.

From Alternatives, we have Feroz Mehdi, program officer, by video conference. From Human Rights Watch, we have Maya Wang, acting China director, also by video conference. From the Tibet Action Institute, we have Lhadon Tethong, director.

You’ll note that Madam Wang is appearing with her camera off. That is at her request. I’m sure we can all understand some of the reasons for that.

We now have an opportunity for each of our witnesses to present up to five minutes of opening comments. We’ll begin with Mr. Mehdi.

Mr. Mehdi, you have five minutes.

Mr. Feroz Mehdi (Program Officer, Alternatives): Thank you very much. Good evening.

I would first like to mention that the written submission I have made has many references that have been hyperlinked.

I am not an expert on Canada–People’s Republic of China relations, but I’m here to speak of another country which is integral to Canada’s Indo-Pacific strategy, namely India.

We are deeply concerned that in the pursuit of containing China, Canada might turn a blind eye to a deeply distressing human rights situation in India as well as the erosion of its pillars of democracy, including the legislature, the judiciary and the free press. Canada must stand against the erosion of rights and democracy in India irrespective of its China policy, because a compromised India at war with itself cannot make a reliable partner in the Indo-Pacific.

The most severe threat that I see on the horizon is the possibility of mass violence. India is home to over 200 million Muslims. Continued escalation of hate speech and home demolitions as well as calls for ethnic cleansing and genocide raise the spectre of horrific mass violence in the subcontinent. Genocide Watch and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum have both declared India at risk of mass violence.

Prime Minister Modi very recently made openly Islamophobic remarks, calling all Indian Muslims “infiltrators” during his national election campaigning just last month. By a very large majority, the European Parliament adopted a resolution last year on July 13 warning against the existence of “Hindu majoritarianism” in India. The resolution calls on the Indian government to put a rapid end to the ongoing ethnic and religious violence. The European Parliament thus joins the worldwide movement denouncing growing authoritarianism and human rights violations in India.

Even more recently, last month on April 23, the U.S. Department of State, in its human rights report, flagged a dozen different kinds of human rights abuses in India, including extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances, arbitrary arrests or detentions, torture to coerce confessions, repeated imposition of Internet shutdowns and blocked telecommunications, surveillance of civil society activists, trolling of human rights defenders and punishment of family members for alleged offences by a relative.

According to Human Rights Watch's India country report 2022, the BJP—that is the ruling party in the government, the majority government—“continued its systematic discrimination and stigmatization of religious and other minorities, particularly Muslims. BJP supporters increasingly committed violent attacks against targeted groups. The government's Hindu majority ideology was reflected in bias in institutions, including the judiciary and constitutional authorities such as the National Human Rights Commission.”

The authorities have intensified their efforts to silence civil society activists and independent journalists using politically motivated criminal charges, including terrorism, to imprison those who denounce or criticize government abuses.

The BJP government's implementation of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act in 2019 is a blatant example of discriminatory legislation providing a pathway to Indian citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from neighbouring countries while excluding Muslims.

According to the Reporters Without Borders Asia-Pacific report, violence against journalists, politically partisan media and concentration of media ownership demonstrate that press freedom is in crisis in 'the world's largest democracy, governed since 2014 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.’’

We call upon the Government of Canada to use every international forum at its disposal to hold India accountable.

● (1835)

For instance, India is currently undergoing its Financial Action Task Force mutual evaluation review. Canada has an opportunity to hold India to account for the misuse of FAFT recommendations and the misuse of anti-terror laws to target civil society and political opposition.

The Chair: Mr. Mehdi, I'm wondering if we could ask you to wrap up your comments now, because you've gone over your five minutes.

Mr. Feroz Mehdi: Sure. Can I just take 30 more seconds to wrap up?

Mr. Chair, we also believe that people-to-people dialogue through civil society organizations between Canada and India is important to share ideas and views on the human rights situation in our countries, and our government should think of investing in this process.

I'll stop there. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Ms. Wang.

You have five minutes. Go ahead.

Ms. Maya Wang (Acting China Director, Human Rights Watch): Thank you very much.

It is my pleasure to speak with you this evening. I hope you're all well.

I am Maya Wang. I'm the acting China director at Human Rights Watch. I have worked for 17 years in tracking human rights abuses in China, Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong.

First of all, I would like to agree with Mr. Mehdi. In the efforts to address China, I think it's very important to not lose sight of the growing abuses in places like India, which Human Rights Watch also documents.

Going back to China, more than a decade into President Xi Jinping's rule, the Chinese government has very significantly deepened repression across the country.

In Xinjiang, the authorities have committed, as you know, crimes against humanity, which include mass detention, forced labour, cultural persecution and widespread surveillance throughout the region.

Hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims remain arbitrarily imprisoned as a result of the Strike Hard campaign, many of them imprisoned for everyday lawful behaviour. They're imprisoned for things like engaging in basic religious activities, such as praying or having recitations of the Quran on their cell-phones. The average sentence for these kinds of behaviours is 12 and a half years.

As to the situation in Tibet, I'll leave it to my co-speaker, my colleague after me, Lhadon, who will elaborate.

In Hong Kong, the authorities have erased long-protected basic civil and political rights after Beijing imposed a draconian national security law on the city in 2020. The government has also taken rapid-fire steps since then to eliminate the pro-democracy movement and the free press, arresting over 10,000 people for their involvement in the 2019 protest, and has just imposed a second security law on the city, known as “article 23”, in March this year.

Throughout China, the Chinese government has tightened its already vise-like grip on society. I don't think I need to explain in just how many different ways the Chinese government is using the law and using security forces to keep control over society, but for just a simple example, expressing pessimism about the state of the economy right now can be punishable as an act endangering state security.

Given this worsening environment for the human rights situation in China, here is what we think the Canadian government should do.

First of all, words do matter, and we shouldn't be affected by the fact that the Chinese government is deeply abusive. We should take words very seriously. We urge the Canadian government to publicly express concerns about the Chinese government's human rights violations at the highest level. It should urge the Chinese government to end crimes against humanity in Xinjiang. Let's not forget that.

Words alone are not enough. They should be backed by concrete actions. Otherwise, we all know that the Chinese government would consider words just a paper tiger. In Hong Kong, for example, the Canadian government should impose targeted sanctions on rights-abusing Chinese and Hong Kong officials after article 23 was just enacted.

While we appreciate the Canadian Parliament's decision to reset the 10,000 at-risk Uyghurs and we also appreciate Canada's ban on forced labour, we fear that the current ban and these actions are not enough. We recommend that you adopt laws, such as a prohibition against imports from Xinjiang, similar to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act in the United States, to address Chinese government-sponsored forced labour throughout the region. We also recommend that you pass a due diligence law requiring companies to address human rights abuses in their supply chains in Xinjiang and elsewhere.

Finally, Canada should also act to address transnational repression by the Chinese government in Canada. We recommend that the Canadian government encourage universities to track instances of direct or indirect Chinese government harassment, surveillance or threats on campuses. It should assist universities to report annually the number and nature of these kinds of incidents and take other measures that can protect academic freedom on campus.

We also recommend that the Canadian government conduct a review regarding the government agencies' monitoring of, and response to, Chinese government-backed harassment and intimidation in Canada, meet regularly with communities and individuals affected and hold accountable people who harass and intimidate others in Canada for views critical of the Chinese government.

Thank you. I very much look forward to your questions and the discussion tonight.

● (1840)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wang.

Now we go to Lhadon Tethong, director of the Tibet Action Institute.

You have five minutes.

Ms. Lhadon Tethong (Director, Tibet Action Institute): Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today and represent Tibetans. I am a Tibetan Canadian.

My father was born in a free and independent Tibet in 1934. My brother was born in a Tibetan refugee camp in south India. I was born on the traditional land of the Songhees and Esquimalt nations in Victoria on Vancouver Island.

As a Tibetan Canadian, I have to say that I welcomed the announcement of Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy last year for numerous reasons, but most significantly because it brings into the light some critical truths about the People's Republic of China that Tibetans have known all along and that we need the world to recognize if we are to successfully navigate the clear and present threat that the PRC poses to peace and security in our world.

The first, of course, is that that the PRC is an expansionist power. This is something Tibetans learned the hard way a long time ago, with China's invasion and occupation of our nation in 1950. It was the very first act of aggression and annexation carried out by the newly formed Communist government of the People's Republic of China.

The second truth is that the Chinese Communist Party does not in any way share the values that Tibetans, Canadians and so many others around the world hold dear, especially respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Tibetans have lived without fundamental rights or freedom since 1959. Some years and decades have been worse than others, depending on who may have been in power at the moment in China. Ultimately, the CCP is the CCP and has been ruling Tibetan people with the most vicious iron fist for all these decades. Just these past five years alone, Tibet has been ranked as the least free place on earth in Freedom House's very high-profile global ranking on civil and political liberties.

Today at least one million Tibetan children between the ages of four and 18 are living in a system of colonial boarding schools in Tibet. This means that at least three out of every four school-aged children are living their lives separated from their parents and families in state-run residential schools that are specially designed to isolate them to erase their Tibetan identity and replace it with a hyper-nationalist Chinese identity.

The final truth that I want to talk about is that the reason the PRC government engages with the international community through the UN or through political or trade associations or agreements is not because it wants to promote mutual prosperity for the betterment of all people or because it wants to be friends with and learn from our democratic leaders and our democratic models; rather, it engages in these ways because it wants to learn how best to dominate and control these spaces and, ultimately, how to remake them to serve its own interests and purposes for its own benefit.

This has been most obvious for Tibetans watching China at the UN all these years, where PRC leaders and delegations do nothing but lie through their teeth and paint a picture of life in Tibet in particular that's completely devoid of any on-the-ground reality. While all these truths about the nature of the PRC government paint a very bleak and distressing picture, I think it's critical to also recognize one other truth that, I believe, speaks to hope for the future.

Xi Jinping and the CCP are unelected and therefore have no real legitimacy to lead the Chinese people. They've held power until now by ruthlessly suppressing any and all opposition and dissent and also because they have delivered some measure of economic prosperity, but from what we can tell now and what many experts are saying, this is ending, and it's not a matter of if; it's just a matter of when.

Xi Jinping's totalitarian rule, failing economic policies and paranoid political manoeuvring have created deep discord and division within the CCP. In particular, widespread suffering under China's very harsh zero-COVID policies and the sudden lifting of the restrictions undermined Xi Jinping's legitimacy and generated an understanding, especially among young people, as seen in the White Paper protests, that the CCP does not have the capability to lead and does not have what China needs now in terms of a future with freedom and democracy.

We believe that taking a strong public stand and a principled stand on Tibet, and on human rights more broadly, will tell people inside China and beyond what Canada truly values.

• (1845)

Although the CCP leaders won't take kindly to such messages, we recognize that Xi Jinping and the CCP are not the future; the future actually lies with young people, workers and the legions of human rights defenders who are suffering, dissatisfied and hungry for change.

The future also lies with Tibetans who share basic values with Canadians. Canada has a long history of—

The Chair: Lhadon, excuse me, madam, but I wonder if you could wrap up. You've gone past your five minutes. Thank you.

Ms. Lhadon Tethong: I will.

Canada has a long history of supporting human rights in Tibet and the aspirations of Tibetan people. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is one of only seven honorary Canadian citizens. Everything Tibetans and His Holiness the Dalai Lama stand for—peace, compassion, democracy and justice—are the fundamental values that Canada has stated it supports, which are also core to peace and security in the world, as is the Indo-Pacific strategy.

Therefore, we would ask that Minister Joly, on behalf of the Government of Canada, speak out publicly against the colonial boarding school system in Tibet and echo the recommendations made by UN human rights experts, who are calling on China to abolish this system.

Also, we ask that Canada further impose sanctions against the architects of the boarding school system, since doing so would have a huge impact with respect to accountability for Tibetan parents and educators on the ground inside Tibet.

Also, we need the Government of Canada to make very strong and clear public statements and to work with like-minded partners and allies to make it clear that Tibetans will decide who the next Dalai Lama is. Tibetans have been managing this process for a half a millennium, and the government of the PRC has no role in this matter, no matter how desperate they may be for one, because this process belongs to the religious leadership of Tibet and the people to whom His Holiness the Dalai Lama entrusts it and no one else.

Thank you.

• (1850)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now, we'll go to our rounds of questioning.

We'll begin with Mr. Chong for six minutes.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Today we're talking about human rights, whether it's with respect to Uyghurs in Xinjiang, people in Hong Kong, people in Tibet, Muslims or other minorities throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

My first question for all three panellists is this: Which peer democracy of Canada's do you think has the best practices in terms of advancing human rights in the Indo-Pacific region? What country among the peer democracies that Canada is associated with do you think is doing this in a way that's most effective in the region?

The Chair: Why don't you designate somebody to answer?

Hon. Michael Chong: I'll start with Mr. Mehdi and then Ms. Wang and Ms. Tethong.

Mr. Feroz Mehdi: It's a good question. I don't know which country to identify of those that are promoting democracy or democratic institutions in there today, if that is the question, Mr. Chair.

However, as I mentioned in my presentation, the European parliamentarians have passed a resolution highlighting the abuse of human rights in India. Also, there are institutions like USCIRF, which rates—

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Mehdi. I'm wondering if you could turn your camera on, please, sir.

Mr. Feroz Mehdi: I'm sorry about that.

The Chair: It's all right.

You can leave your camera on and just mute your microphone when you're not speaking.

Mr. Feroz Mehdi: That's great. Thank you.

There are institutions that are testing and promoting the Indian democratic institutions, but so far nothing concrete has been done in India, as far as I know.

Ms. Maya Wang: I think that's a very difficult question because there are basically no perfect policies on human rights, especially because we saw in a previous era—essentially the era of engagement with China—that human rights issues got very much pushed down the hierarchy while economic engagement with China was prioritized.

Now, in this era, I think we see national security being the top priority in many governments, and again, although human rights are being talked about, a lot of the policies are not really about promoting human rights. I think a lot of it is about competition, and there are some understandable reasons for that. Nonetheless, I think using human rights as an instrument to compete rather than also promoting them as a value to speak to people inside China and give them the strength and support they need—ultimately they are the people who would change China for the better—is a short-sighted way of seeing it.

However, if you really pushed me on what kinds of policies have been declared in terms of being better when it comes to China and human rights, I would probably put forward some of the European Union's laws that have to do with due diligence, which were recently passed, or their laws having to do with forced labour. Although I think some of those are watered down, they have the ability to deal with these issues in a more comprehensive manner that includes China. However, we would like to see some legislation more like the Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act, which is specifically about Xinjiang.

There's no good model, but I would encourage two things: Number one is that we are in an age when political leaders have to stand up for human rights, because they are important. If we don't, I think we're going to enter a very difficult era globally. Number two is that we must hold the Chinese government accountable in an equal manner, one that is not used just for scoring political points.

• (1855)

The Chair: Ms. Tethong, do you wish to weigh in?

Ms. Lhadon Tethong: I don't know that I would say which one is doing it best; I don't know enough to say.

I think the key to a healthy democracy and upholding human rights and the rule of law can be seen best through strong support for civil society and for movements.

The best way to counter the rise of authoritarian governments and powers in the world is to support and invest in people's movements. That needs to happen more, considering the now total crack-down on what space there was for civil society in China until recently. There has to be more of an investment made in people's movements and student movements and in supporting space for these groups to get together to organize and to share lessons and skills. I think that is ultimately the best way to promote and protect democracy and counter authoritarianism.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chong. Your time has expired, sir.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

The Chair: I will now go to Mr. Oliphant for six minutes or less.

Hon. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to all the witnesses, and thanks to Mr. Chong for his question; it was basically what I was going to ask around best practices of other countries. I find the answers interesting, because we are being asked to do something that every country, I think, is struggling with.

I want to take it to a next step and talk about the intersection of democracy, human rights, economic activity, international engagement and trade. Again, I guess we would go around the table to all three witnesses on this question.

Do you see democracy and democratic rights as equivalent to human rights and as a necessary precursor to human rights, or is it possible to have human rights in a non-democratic country?

That's not a leading question. I'm genuinely interested in whether or not you believe that human rights can be protected in a system that is not the same as a democratic Canada.

The Chair: Is there anybody you wish to start with?

Hon. Robert Oliphant: We'll go in reverse order to the last one, just to be fair.

The Chair: All right.

Ms. Tethong, you'll start.

Ms. Lhadon Tethong: No, I don't think that it's possible to have human rights protections and true respect for human rights in a non-democratic country.

I think that's what some of these authoritarian leaders.... The PRC government would want us all to believe that it's possible and that there's just a different culture or a different way of doing things that is somehow cultural, social and somewhat rooted in history, but I don't think that's true. I think that's a really good excuse and a quick way to try to shut people up.

We see the Chinese themselves, Tibetans.... Everywhere you look in these closed societies where there is no true democracy, people are calling for it and asking for it.

To think that in the Xi Jinping era, in the first protest in that COVID lockdown period, when the man put the banner on the bridge and openly said that they don't want a king—they want democracy and they want rights—

• (1900)

Hon. Robert Oliphant: My time is limited, so I want to go to the next person.

Ms. Lhadon Tethong: That to me is the key. That's the answer.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Wang.

Ms. Maya Wang: I don't think I can improve on what Lhadon has said.

I think the Chinese government would say that they are perfect in protecting human rights. It's basically a lot of propaganda. We see around the world, from Lebanon to Sudan—

Hon. Robert Oliphant: I know your opinion on that.

I'm asking whether or not you believe that it is possible to ever have human rights protected in a non-democratic country.

Ms. Maya Wang: No, I don't think so.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Mehdi is next.

Mr. Feroz Mehdi: This applies very well to India today. The Indian government calls itself the mother of democracy. As I have pointed out, it is not possible to have universal human rights when the real democracy...which India is not today. As many observers have written, in 2014 India became a de facto Hindu nation. In 2019, it became a de jure Hindu nation.

In 2024, we are already talking about making a change in the constitution, so that is where we're at right now.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Thank you.

I wanted to raise those points because I thought that's probably what you would say.

I want to draw it back to the Indo-Pacific strategy, which says it will “support efforts toward democracy, inclusivity, accountable governance and sustained economic growth, helping key countries in the region.”

Underneath the IPS and its value statements is the idea that we should be supporting the growth and emergence of democracy in those countries.

I want to ask you—and I have not even two minutes—if you have any thoughts on how best Canada can promote democracy. Could we move it to that one?

We can go to Ms. Wang to start.

Ms. Maya Wang: That's a very long-term vision, for China. At this moment, with Xi Jinping in power, we are going to have a very tough one inside China.

Nonetheless, I would start with making sure the Chinese government faces consequences for crimes against humanity. In the last two decades, we've seen that the Chinese government kept pushing that line, and it never gets enough push-back from other governments, so it can say that it can do whatever it wants, and here we are.

If it does not get held accountable for crimes against humanity, I fear to think what comes next.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Could you explain how that leads into democracy?

I'm not opposed to doing what you say, but if democracy is required for human rights, how does that lead to more democracy, in your logic?

Ms. Maya Wang: A government that is forced to be held accountable for something like crimes against humanity emboldens

the people on the ground to think, “Wait, this isn't the way a government should behave.”

We already see these White Paper protests. We see an emergence of consciousness of feminism in China, which includes half of the population.

The Chinese government cannot put this kind of consciousness down forever. I expect that a strong, principled stance on human rights can have knock-on impacts. I'm not guaranteeing it, but I'm saying it's important for people to push for that over time. This is a longer-term struggle. You see the Chinese people doing that over generations.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wang.

Before I go to Monsieur Bergeron, I want to make sure our guests on Zoom know where the translation is—unless they have really good French.

There's a little globe at the bottom of your screen, almost in the middle. If you click on that, you have your option of floor, English or French. You can make that adjustment if you want.

Monsieur Bergeron, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us today, and for continuing to give us insight into the situation not only in China, but also as regards Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy.

In 2023, Human Rights Watch posted the following statement on its website:

Since 2017, the Chinese government has carried out a widespread and systematic attack against Uyghurs and Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang. It includes mass arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances, mass surveillance, cultural and religious persecution, separation of families, forced labor, sexual violence, and violations of reproductive rights. Human Rights Watch in 2021 concluded that these violations constituted “crimes against humanity.”

In addition, a number of authorities, including the Parliament of Canada, have found that the situation literally amounts to genocide.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee released a report that is extremely troubling, as well.

Human Rights Watch also stated that authorities in Tibet have imposed severe restrictions on freedom of religion, expression, movement and assembly. Tibetans who speak out about this crack-down or, for instance, the phasing out of the Tibetan language in elementary education suffer reprisals. People are encouraged to report those who oppose the measures in any way. Simply contacting Tibetans in exile can lead to detention. That applies to Uyghurs, Kazakhs and Turkmen too.

According to Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy, “Canada will continue to speak up for universal human rights, including those of Uyghurs, Tibetans and other religious and ethnic minorities.”

How is Canada doing that? One way is by not importing goods made with forced labour. Canada even intends to provide its trading partners with more technical assistance on that front. The strategy goes on to say that Canada will “provide greater technical assistance to Indo-Pacific trading partners to improve the enforcement of labour provisions, including on forced labour”.

So far, however, Canada hasn't exactly set a good example in that regard. A private member's bill was passed, and it merely seeks to establish a registry whereby companies self-report on forced labour. The government was supposed to come forward with much more binding legislation, and we are still waiting. What's more, the Canada Border Services Agency was given a single directive on preventing the importation and entry to Canada of goods produced by forced labour.

My question is very simple. These measures have so far proven ineffective, to say the least. How can Canada claim to be a world leader capable of providing greater technical assistance to its Indo-Pacific trading partners in order to improve the enforcement of forced labour provisions?

The question is for all three witnesses.

• (1905)

[English]

The Chair: Which person would you like to start with, Monsieur Bergeron?

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: They can go in the same order in which they gave their opening remarks.

Mr. Mehdi can go first, Ms. Wang, second, and Ms. Tethong, third.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Mehdi, we can hear your comments first. Then we will go to Ms. Wang and Ms. Tethong.

Mr. Feroz Mehdi: Mr. Chair, I'll give it a little thought before I say something. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Mehdi, you're on mute now, sir. Did you have something to offer by way of an answer?

Mr. Feroz Mehdi: No, not as yet, thank you.

The Chair: All right. Very good.

Ms. Wang, you're next.

Ms. Maya Wang: I mentioned in my testimony at the beginning that we welcome Canada's ban on forced labour, but, as you have put it, it's not adequate.

We recommend two things.

One is that you adopt laws that have a prohibition against imports from Xinjiang, similar to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act in the U.S., because the forced labour that's taking place in Xinjiang is a region-wide, government-sponsored forced labour system.

The second thing is that we recommend that you pass a due diligence law that actually requires companies to take action to address

human rights abuses in their supply chain in Xinjiang and elsewhere.

I think those two things would go towards what you just described as Canada taking an important step as a leader in protecting human rights at the intersection of trade, imports, business and human rights.

• (1910)

The Chair: Ms. Tethong, what are your comments?

Ms. Lhadon Tethong: I think I'll go a little more to a broader approach here. I think that what we need on the one hand is a much more public approach, speaking to these issues of human rights abuses, speaking to all of this more clearly, more publicly, and not being afraid to address these directly because it might upset Xi Jinping or offend the Chinese Communist Party leaders or whoever it is we're dealing with.

I think there are lots of good tactics and tools being rolled out and talked about, but I do think that overall—and I see this everywhere—there's this belief that we need to tiptoe around the CCP in all of our talk on human rights. I guess I would say that the Chinese government can read us pretty clearly, and they know that some of the measures and initiatives that our governments take are not as robust as they could be. At the same time, I think they know that if they threaten to huff and puff and blow the house down, we all shrink back in fear.

I think the issue of human rights should be one that's public, with no more private backroom bilateral dialogues but public pressure, public discussion. We should lead by example and signal to the Chinese people, to Tibetans and to everyone who's watching from the other side—and they do see and hear what's happening outside—that we're serious about it and that we're not afraid. They don't want us to be afraid of Xi Jinping and the rest. We need to be bolder in our approach and more public with all of it too.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Ms. McPherson, you have six minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for being here and sharing this important testimony with us.

You know, I'm struck by all of your testimony. I don't think there's anyone in this room who doesn't agree that the human rights abuses we are seeing in both India and China are dire, and that there needs to be more done. Where I struggle is to know what we can do as Canadian parliamentarians, what those concrete pieces are that can be done.

Based on your testimony, I have some questions for each of you that I'd like to start with. I think what I'll do is perhaps start with you, Ms. Wang.

You spoke about forced labour and the forced labour legislation that Canada has. To be perfectly honest, from my perspective, we do not, in fact, have forced labour legislation. Bill S-211 was a bill brought forward that basically says corporations or companies have to tell us if they think there is forced labour within their supply chains, but there are no implications on that. There is nothing that has to be done to stop that from happening, so I do think there is some real need for us to strengthen that.

We also have an ombudsperson. I've spoken many times about the toothless ombudsperson, the CORE ombudsperson, who does not have the ability to compel testimony or witnesses and is not able to do the job that the office needs to do or the job that the office was promised when this particular government put that office in place.

You spoke about the fact that we've prioritized economic development and security over human rights. I'm wondering, though, what concrete steps Canada could take that China would actually see and listen to. We have called out the Uyghur genocide within this Parliament. We have written about what's happening in Tibet within this committee. We have done these studies, and we have spoken quite strongly. If you could, please give me a concrete thing that this Parliament or this government could do that China would hear and that would cause the PRC to actually listen to us. I know you brought up monitoring, harassment and whatnot. What's the one thing you'd like us to be taking action on?

The Chair: Would you like to direct your question?

Is somebody going to volunteer to go first?

Ms. Heather McPherson: It was for Ms. Wang.

Ms. Maya Wang: Thank you.

I think I was definitely being polite with the forced labour ban quote.

• (1915)

Ms. Heather McPherson: You don't have to be polite in this committee. We're okay. We can take it.

Ms. Maya Wang: Okay. I do think there are other governments that would do less, unfortunately, so we duly recognize some of the efforts, however little they are at the beginning. We ask for them to be more.

Basically, with the Chinese government, I don't think we are asking for a silver bullet. I doubt there is one. We are building many different pieces together. That changes the narrative of how the Chinese government is being treated and discussed.

Lhadon talked about how, suddenly, when it comes to China, everybody shakes in fear. I think that kind of feeling of shaking in fear has begun to diminish a bit. I think more governments are willing to confront the Chinese government, but confronting means, for example, mainstreaming human rights. We are talking about human rights in a human rights hearing; however, often we are in this place rather than talking with people who are talking about national security. If you look at the spending on national security and the spending on human rights, you see how much these issues matter to governments.

It's mainstreaming human rights, making sure human rights are raised at the highest level. We often see, when governments go to talk with the Chinese government, that human rights are mentioned in some kind of separate human rights dialogue rather than when the top leaders are going to talk with Xi Jinping and mentioning that front and centre. Those are things—along with laws being changed on forced labour—that would have an impact.

Now, if you ask me one thing you should do tomorrow, I would still consider crimes against humanity as a very important one to focus on, I think, with time passing, especially.

This is going to sound somewhat unsatisfactory, for example, with crimes against humanity. At the United Nations, the UN high commissioner came out with a report saying that there may be crimes against humanity. They documented lots of the violations that took place, much as Human Rights Watch did in 2022, two years ago. That was the previous high commissioner. The current high commissioner has not briefed the council about the report, has not spoken in follow-up to the report. This is because the high commissioner fears the Chinese government.

Canada could take the lead at the Human Rights Council to press the high commissioner, to say that we need to talk about this and we need to have a joint statement. I know this is a very low bar, but these are building blocks towards holding the Chinese government accountable.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I will try to get just one more question in.

Ms. Tethong, it's nice to see you. I'm sorry that I'm not there in person. It would be nice to see you in person again. It's lovely that you're back at our committee.

We spoke about the Human Rights Council and wanting to get them to hold China more accountable for the human rights abuses that are happening there, but we also see the PRC spreading influence within sub-Saharan Africa with the belt and road initiative. How does Canada push on that?

Bravery might not be the right term, but do you know what I mean? We want countries in sub-Saharan Africa, in other parts of the world, to be standing up and saying that what China is doing is wrong. It's very difficult to do that when China is the only one investing in infrastructure and development projects within those countries. How do we manage that?

The Chair: Ms. McPherson, you have just gone way over time. However, Ms. Tethong—

Ms. Heather McPherson: I'm sorry. I will let Ms. Tethong think about it for my next one.

The Chair: —if you have a brief answer to provide, we'd really appreciate that. Thank you.

Ms. Lhadon Tethong: It's going to sound a little repetitive, but I think it is critical for all of the nations that are like-minded with Canada—the U.S., the U.K., Australia—to speak, and not just by taking action together in the UN but speaking individually, more clearly and directly with China, and publicly, so that other nations can see it, so that the Chinese people can see and hear it, and so that Tibetans can see and hear it.

Yes, I agree with Maya that there is a stronger approach in general now. I feel there is no other option at this point, and governments are far more willing to say something about transnational repression because it applies right at home, so it's really clear. However, I think we shouldn't shy away from the idea of talking about democracy, genocide potential, crimes against humanity and all of these things in really public, pressuring, painful ways. I think one of the biggest successes that the PRC has had over these past two to three decades is driving all of that conversation into the dark and out of the spotlight.

I see in so many ways that in Canada these discussions are happening, and it's excellent. They are much more public. However, from our leadership, the highest officials in the Canadian government—the Prime Minister, the foreign minister—we need to see really clear and strong language on all of this—human rights, Tibet, the Uyghur genocide—up front and not as a sidebar issue. It has to be core and integrated into the conversation every step along the way, with benchmarks and measures to hold the Chinese government accountable.

One of my colleagues says this best. He says that they are here because they need—

• (1920)

The Chair: Excuse me, Ms. Tethong. We did need a shortish answer, and we got a longish answer.

Ms. Lhadon Tethong: Yes.

The Chair: We do have to go on to our next questioner.

Ms. Lhadon Tethong: I apologize, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: That would be Ms. Lantsman.

You have five minutes.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman (Thornhill, CPC): Ms. Tethong, I'll let you continue that later, but I'm going to start with Ms. Wang.

Thanks for joining us, Ms. Wang.

Last year, the U.K. released its China policy. I know you looked at it. What works? What doesn't work? What should Canada adopt?

Ms. Maya Wang: Are you asking about the U.K.-China policy?

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: Yes.

Ms. Maya Wang: I have to say that I don't think I have studied it in detail.

In general, the U.K. approach to China, like that of many other governments, has not been totally consistent or satisfactory, especially with regard to its special obligations to Hong Kong. It has made statements condemning, for example, the imposition of the security legislation—the second one, article 23—but it has not imposed consequences.

In talking about concrete steps, we are asking for targeted sanctions on Hong Kong Chinese officials who were responsible for this security legislation.

Hong Kong officials, unlike Chinese officials, do travel abroad and have families abroad. These kinds of sanctions would send the right message to the Chinese government that repression has a cost.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: I must have been mistaken. You were quoted as saying that “the U.K. [needed]...a more ambitious plan to reduce overall economic dependency”. That's what I got from your analysis of the U.K. foreign minister's speech last year.

We're talking about concrete actions. Perhaps you can be more detailed about what you meant or what you mean, or about what lessons we can take from the U.K., with particular focus on reducing that economic dependency.

Ms. Maya Wang: I'm sorry. We actually ask governments to do many things.

I think there is a difficulty among many governments when they are at the same time dependent on the Chinese government for their critical supply chains. That has led to many of them being essentially unable to take concrete and serious actions on human rights.

For us, these issues are connected, and a move towards de-risking either critical supply chains or de-risking more broadly, is importantly linked to the promotion of human rights.

There are going to be questions or difficulties with regard to ensuring that economic and trade relations continue, and they continue to be important for bilateral relations. However, I think we cannot promote human rights without also looking at the impact. Trade and economy must be built on a foundation of healthy human rights relations.

This is where, I think, that recommendation comes from. We cannot divorce these issues completely.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: Are there specific elements that you can point to in terms of what could work in the U.K. and what we would emulate here?

• (1925)

Ms. Maya Wang: I think some of those recommendations are already taking place.

For example, I think the German government has looked at how their economy is dependent on the Chinese government, basically. The Chinese government controls access to the country. I think there have been some efforts that seek to address that. I would say that it is important to have some kind of review on how the Chinese government has been using these kinds of economic levers to make sure governments do not speak on human rights issues, either in Canada or globally.

Going beyond that, many different kinds of implications would need to be carefully studied to balance the intention to promote human rights and protect peoples' livelihoods. I think that is needed in the first place to make sure your foreign policy is essentially decided by people in Canada and not by the Chinese government.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wang.

We will now go to Ms. Yip for five minutes.

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Thank you.

Ms. Tethong, you highlighted the fact that China does not engage with other democracies. That makes it very challenging for nations like Canada to have a meaningful impact. How can the UN and other like-minded democracies work with China to engage in a dialogue? Is it even possible?

Ms. Lhadon Tethong: I mean, they do engage. I think the key is to set up terms of engagement on the question of human rights.

I think the bilateral human rights dialogues have now shown themselves to be mostly powerless and ineffective. One thing governments and nations can do is tell the Chinese that they're not going to engage in a private backroom discussion on human rights, that the human rights discussions need to be more robust, perhaps, and involve other governments.

I was actually thinking of this in terms of what Canada could do right now. One thing we've talked about a lot is that the PRC government wants you to address all our issues separately, as if they're separate and distinct, to keep us all in our various silos. Tibetans might be a religious freedom issue or a separatist issue for them. There's the question of terrorism and all this other nonsense for the Uyghurs. I feel that addressing all of our issues together in some way, creating some body or group to do that more, signals to them that you're in it for the long term. You want to talk about the Tibetans, Uyghurs, Mongolians and Hong Kongers. In recent times especially, they've tried to enforce a silence over our communities through transnational oppression and by the shutting of our regions or clamping down on our nations and territories.

In terms of addressing our issues together and seeing where the themes and commonalities and all of that are, it sounds like it's not that much, but it is a way to seek solutions and to discuss our issues together and look for solutions together. Certainly as movements, Tibetans, Uyghurs, Hong Kongers and Chinese rights activists have been working together for some years now and finding a lot of common ground in a lot of our wording, with strength in our solidarity.

I think there's nothing the PRC government would like you to do less than get together and talk about our issues together and look for ways to address them as one so that they're not broken up and treated as an issue here and an issue there. These issues are core to the treatment of all our children, for example, in these residential boarding schools. They also exist in East Turkestan, or what China calls Xinjiang. They're also there for southern Mongolia, or what China calls Inner Mongolia.

Right there is one area that the Canadian government could look at as a whole. When you start to see that whole picture, then you

see that it's not an accident. It's not an unintended consequence that all our children and our future generations are in these genocidal school systems. There's power there.

• (1930)

Ms. Jean Yip: When you first answered the question, you mentioned something about backroom or behind-the-scenes discussions. Do you feel that diplomatic efforts behind the scenes could make a similar impact with respect to trying to improve the dialogue?

Ms. Lhadon Tethong: I think the discussions on human rights or on our issues just need to happen in more public ways now, because most of the discussion has been in private.

Of course, there are always measures and there's strength at certain moments in negotiating behind the scenes. I don't know. I feel as though at this point, dealing with Xi Jinping and looking at how far he has gone and taken China off a cliff, we're in desperate times, and we need more intense measures and more public measures.

I see a shift, and it's great, but I don't feel as though it's enough. There's still this idea that we'll be dealing with Xi Jinping and the Communist Party forever, and I think that's a flawed approach. I think our governments need to think about the future of China as being Chinese people and rights defenders and whoever comes next.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Tethong.

We'll now go to Mr. Bergeron for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to ask the witnesses to temporarily disregard everything I said about the acts of violence being perpetrated against Uyghurs, Tibetans, Kazakhs, Turkmen and Falun Gong practitioners in the People's Republic of China, or PRC.

I'm also going to ask the witnesses to disregard what I said about Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy in relation to forced labour and compliance with human rights. The government has indicated that it plans to restore and normalize, to use its words, relations with the PRC.

To that end, Canada sent a parliamentary mission to the PRC, as well as the Minister of Environment and Climate Change and the deputy minister of foreign affairs. They were tasked specifically with normalizing relations with the PRC.

Do you think that is consistent with what we talked about during the first round?

[*English*]

The Chair: Who would you like to have answer, Mr. Bergeron?

I'll choose. We'll go with Ms. Wang.

Ms. Maya Wang: Even if the situation with human rights abuses ebbs and flows—sometimes it gets better and sometimes it gets really worse—given the Chinese government's political system, a Leninist system of top-down, centralized control, I'm not sure, fundamentally, whether any country can have a "normalized" relationship, a stabilized relationship with China without essentially falling into the Chinese government's trap of language. Essentially having a normalized or stabilized relationship with China is often code for playing by the Chinese government's rules.

We don't want to see that, because international human rights laws are international norms, which the Chinese government has actually also signed on to. The Chinese government is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These are the rights that the Chinese government and the Chinese people are promised in their constitution.

We hope that you remember where the guiding principles that encompass those relationships are in your relationship with China.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wang.

That's your time, Mr. Bergeron.

Ms. McPherson, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much.

We've heard from other human rights folks who have come and talked to this committee and to other committees. I used to sit on the international human rights subcommittee and on the foreign affairs committee. We've heard from many advocates, many experts, about how Canada needs to have a comprehensive human rights strategy.

I'd like to start with you, Mr. Mehdi, because I didn't get to you in the last round.

Can you talk to me about the importance of this and whether you think this is something that Canada needs to undertake?

• (1935)

Mr. Feroz Mehdi: Thank you very much.

I do, absolutely.

One of the roles of this human rights committee could be to hold all the governments accountable, at least in the international fora.

One important international forum, as I mentioned in my presentation, is on addressing the misuse of the anti-terror laws and the Financial Action Task Force, the institution that is at this moment doing the mutual evaluation review. I think Canada should show all these reports—which I have referenced in my presentation—from Amnesty International and from the Global Non-Profit Organization Coalition on the FATF.

I think these are the very important issues that India will have to answer for in the international forum.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Wang.

Ms. Maya Wang: I think you need a strategy. I think you need people to staff it. You need funding for it. Otherwise, they're just

empty words, so I'd like to see that kind of comprehensiveness from Canada.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Yes, and frankly, I think we've seen that with our sanctions regime, which I'll ask you about in the next round, if I get a chance. Without enforcement, without funding and without staff for it, it becomes a PR process instead of a meaningful strategy.

Go ahead, Ms. Tethong.

Ms. Lhadon Tethong: Yes, I think it's key for continuity from government to government but also just in terms of infusing every discussion. When I think of all the different ways that governments engage with China on national security issues—military security, regional issues, trade and economics—human rights need to be throughout that engagement. The only way you do that well is if you have a clear, cohesive idea of how and when to raise these issues and link them.

Really, I agree with Maya that you can't do it without a good, well-staffed department to follow through on it.

I think the more human rights get chopped up and put, say, country by country or place by place, the more it just doesn't have teeth, and I think leaders like Xi Jinping know that.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Well, and as you pointed out—

The Chair: We're out of time, Ms. McPherson.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I'm really pushing the limit today. I'm sorry, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I know. That was a nice try.

It's now Mr. Chong's turn for five minutes.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

One of the highlights in the Indo-Pacific strategy is the Government of Canada's efforts to support democracy in the region. If we look at research from think tanks and other research organizations, what we notice is that over the last decade and a half or the last two decades, there has been democratic backsliding in the region, particularly in Southeast Asia in countries like Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and other countries.

My question is simple. What should the Government of Canada be doing in practical, actionable terms to strengthen democracy in those jurisdictions, seeing that they are of a size that Canada could have an influence in?

That's for all three of them, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: All right. We'll start with you, Mr. Mehdi, and then we'll go to Ms. Tethong and then Ms. Wang.

Mr. Feroz Mehdi: I think it's very important, as we all know, that there is no international co-operation development aid between Canada and India. That has cut a lot of people-to-people dialogue between Canadian civil society organizations and human rights and civil society organizations in India. I know of very few.

I have been working in alternatives in the NGO sector for 30 years and more, and there were a lot of people-to-people exchanges that shared and advocated with our specific governments, both provincial and federal, about the situations and what we think should be done to tell our governments and our representatives how to promote democratic institutions as a watch on what's happening in India. That is missing.

I think the Canadian government could invest in some kind of a platform to open that dialogue again, which is very much missing. I noticed personally in my career how it went down from a very vibrant exchange to nearly zero exchanges happening today at the civil society level.

● (1940)

Hon. Michael Chong: Thailand has a population of about 70 million. Myanmar has a population of about 55 million. Cambodia has a population of about 17 million. These are countries that are within an order of magnitude of the size of Canada's population. We are also an economy that's much larger than countries like that, where we could have an outsized influence.

In practical terms, the government's Indo-Pacific strategy acknowledges that issue of scale. It focuses particularly on the north Indo-Pacific in terms of economic strategy by focusing on places like Japan and South Korea. It has a special mention of diplomatic outreach in the island chains in the Indo-Pacific. I think that's all predicated on an acknowledgement that Canada is not the world's largest country by population and not the second-largest country by population.

With the limited resources we bring to bear, how can we use them most effectively in the region? The government has decided that with respect to certain areas of this strategy, there will be a focus on the north Indo-Pacific. In other areas, they've decided to focus on ASEAN.

The question I have is, with respect to democratic backsliding when it comes to Southeast Asia—the part of the Indo-Pacific that organizations like the Hudson Institute have identified as the greatest weakness, and particularly countries like Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia—what practical actions can the government take to stop the backsliding and strengthen democratic institutions in those areas and in those countries?

Maybe we could go to Madam Wang.

Ms. Maya Wang: Thank you.

I know that your to-do list is probably going to be very long. I could send you human rights research reports from decades before with a very long to-do list.

We see democratic backsliding across the world at the same time as essentially a period of unprincipled international trade and economics—globalization, essentially. We see a growing inequality between the richest and the workers. You see China as exhibit A. We

used to hear former president Clinton talk about how as China grows, the middle class grows, so it will become democratic. That wasn't true. What happened was the Chinese government became incredibly empowered.

I'm not an expert on all of these other governments that you have to deal with, but a lot of these governments also became rich and very powerful in a way that is authoritarian. I would suspect that some legislation having to do with putting human rights and labour rights back into international trade and globalization would go a long way towards addressing that kind of imbalance in power between the people and the governments. That can address broader issues beyond China and the region.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chong.

Now we go to Mr. Fragiskatos for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair, and to the witnesses.

In the early 2000s, it was common, not just in academic circles but in foreign policy circles, to champion the idea of democracy promotion. The concept basically said that if the world was to be stable and if we were to have peace as much as possible, then democracies should promote democracy as a concept in theory and practice at every opportunity because, among other things, no two democracies have ever gone to war against each other. Democracy is seen as exactly that—a stabilizing force.

It was built into the foreign policies of the United States and even Canada. Other democracies made it a real focal point as well.

After the Iraq war, for reasons that I think will be obvious, the idea fell out of favour entirely. Out of that, in turn, came a view that if democracy was to be lasting, if it was to be achieved in a way that was truly meaningful and if it was to be a stabilizing force on its own, it would have to be organic.

The question that I have builds upon what Mr. Oliphant was raising earlier: How can we, as a middle power here in Canada, best promote democracy in a way that does not impose, but allows for an organic movement towards it in authoritarian environments where obviously any democratic expression is extremely limited?

That's for all of you.

● (1945)

Ms. Lhadon Tethong: I can start.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Sure.

Ms. Lhadon Tethong: I actually want to take this moment to point to a publication by a friend. The International Center on Non-violent Conflict and the Atlantic Council put out a book by Hardy Merriman, a colleague of ours, entitled “Fostering a Fourth Democratic Wave: A Playbook for Countering the Authoritarian Threat”. It is all about investing in civil resistance and movements and people.

I think the key, especially if you don't want it to be top-down or one side lecturing to the other, is looking for natural allies in those places. Sometimes it will be an exiled movement, as in the Tibetan case. Often it's people on the ground. In most places in the world, even those that are slipping more and more towards authoritarianism, there are still people, movements, organizations and civil society groups that are the best defence in both the long game and the short term to fight for rights and freedoms and to create the societies that we want and need.

It's not always easy, but I think the answer itself is just so simple on one level. It does lie with the people.

I think what this "Fostering a Fourth Democratic Wave" does is break it down and give really clear ideas for new principles for engagement, places government can put funding into foundations and fund organizations in general. I think there's been a problem with people being afraid and governments being afraid to talk about these things openly and to say really clearly that they are funding democratic resilience, resistance or whatever it might be. I don't think that helps anyone, especially the people on the ground in those places who most need...

I know Canada as a country just from my travels and work. I live in the U.S. now. I've travelled the world working on the Tibetan issue. Canada is looked to as a beacon by a lot of people all over the world. Canadians, the Canadian government and the Canadian Parliament say things clearly, as I believe you are doing, but we could do a lot more of it. We cannot underestimate the importance for the morale of people in places like Tibet of just being out there in front, speaking and leading—

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I'm sorry, Ms. Tethong. I only have about 40 seconds left.

Could we hear from Ms. Wang, just because she is next on my list? That's with all due respect to Mr. Mehdi.

Ms. Maya Wang: I would say, first of all, that Canada should not think that it's imposing values on other people. People around the world have demonstrated with their lives on the line that they love these values.

The only people who are basically saying not to impose these values are generally the people who are the authoritarian governments, the leaders who say we must not do that.

I think it has to do with how we think about these issues. I think you want to think about them as Canada standing in solidarity.

What would Canada do if you were standing on the democratic front line with these people, facing some very seriously militarized police and army these days that had come to crush them? What would Canada do?

I think the answer would come very easily to anyone.

Canada, like Germany and France, sometimes thinks of itself as a middle power, but that's not when it comes to economics and what it stands for. It has a lot of potential, especially in U.S.-China conversations, where I think Canada is not considered as necessarily... It becomes a little bit more problematic these days, as the U.S. uses human rights as tool to compete with China, but I think Canada has a different profile.

• (1950)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Maya Wang: I would suggest you use it.

Thank you.

The Chair: All right.

Here's what we have. We have 10 minutes left. There will be time for one five-minute round, which I'm going to give to Mr. Erskine-Smith. Then we'll split the last five minutes between Mr. Bergeron and Ms. McPherson.

If you are ready, Mr. Erskine-Smith, the next five minutes are yours.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Thanks very much.

I want to start with Ms. Wang and just close the loop on forced labour legislation.

We currently have the modern slavery act, which is more about reporting obligations. You pointed to the EU and to the U.S. in different ways.

In budget 2024, there's a commitment to introduce legislation in 2024 to eradicate forced labour from Canadian supply chains.

In the interest of time, would you be able, via Human Rights Watch, to provide commentary in writing on what works in those other jurisdictions and as well as on where there are shortcomings in those jurisdictions with respect to that legislation so that it can inform the Canadian approach in 2024?

Ms. Maya Wang: Absolutely.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: Great.

With respect to the Canadian ombudsperson for responsible enterprise, we've seen, specifically with respect to discrimination, that the UN has the concern around crimes against humanity committed against Uyghur Muslims. CORE has opened investigations just in the last year against Walmart, Hugo Boss, Diesel Canada, Guess and Levi Strauss. In their very first determination, just recently, they found that Uyghur forced labour likely took place in respect of a mining operation.

Of course, in that very first determination, we learned what we already knew, which is that CORE can only make recommendations and has no real teeth. In fact, the minister has more teeth in the modern slavery act and in relation to just reporting obligations than the ombudsperson has with respect to actual human rights violations.

Is it your view, Ms. Wang, that in addition to any legislation to eradicate forced labour, we should actually, for once and for all, empower the CORE with proper teeth?

Ms. Maya Wang: I am not an expert of that particular institution, but from what you described, I would agree that we need enforcement power for legislation to act against forced labour, yes.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: Thank you very much.

Beyond taking action on the issue of forced labour, I think Ms. McPherson put it well with respect to the fact that Parliament not only debated the issue but concluded with a vote that genocide has taken place against Uyghur Muslims. The government has spoken out forcefully on a number of occasions.

What more do you think we and the government ought to do, beyond forced labour legislation?

Ms. Maya Wang: I already spoke about the actions that should be taken at the UN, and the next Human Rights Council session is coming up in June. In addition to that, we have lots of recommendations from our report on Xinjiang, which I'm glad to share.

For example, the Canadian government should encourage the preparation of criminal investigations into Chinese government officials responsible for crimes against humanity—preparing prosecution files, essentially.

We also encourage government to document the individuals who are still missing in the region, who are detained and imprisoned, and to press for their release, obviously.

Also, I think there are actually some families or—

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: There undoubtedly are some families connected, and actually, one of the longest-standing cases is connected to Canada.

My last question is specifically in relation to the Indo-Pacific strategy, because in black in white, Canada has a strategy that is calling out the human rights abuses in China. It actually doesn't, I think, properly mention some of the challenges we face in the Canada-India relationship, but it clearly articulates the challenges in the Canada-China relationship.

I'm not going to ask you in less than a minute to do this—and this also applies to Mr. Mehdi and Ms. Tethong—but if you could provide in writing recommendations for specific improvements you would like to see in the Indo-Pacific strategy as it currently is laid out, I would appreciate your providing that to the committee.

• (1955)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Erskine-Smith.

We now have two and a half minutes for Mr. Bergeron.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Mr. Chair, if I may, I'm going to pick up where I left off last time. Unfortunately, only Ms. Wang had a chance to answer my question about Canada's claims of normalizing relations with the PRC.

I'd like Ms. Tethong and Mr. Mehdi to comment on the possibility of normalizing relations with a dictatorship like the PRC's current government.

[*English*]

Ms. Lhadon Tethong: I don't think it's possible to normalize relations with the People's Republic of China, especially under Xi Jinping. I think his future and the Communist Party's future are very much at risk and unclear at this moment. I heard someone describe it recently as there being eight loaded weapons facing them, and it's just a question of which one goes off first, whether it's demographics, internal issues, the economy or banking—all of it.

We can think of Xi Jinping and the Chinese government at this moment more in the way we think of Russia and Putin, and think about where we're going to be and what it's going to look like. I think change is coming more quickly than we realize, and it's probably going to be upon us before we know it. Thinking very clearly now and digging into who is there, what the movements are, where the people are, what we can support and what the plans are is, I think, a safer strategy moving forward than looking to normalize relations.

I didn't get to say this earlier, but my colleague from Tibet, with 35 years of experience in the education system, is following all of this every day from the Tibetan perspective and in Chinese internal discussions and conversations. His read is that it's all going to come to a head very soon and that no one's really ready for it.

I think the way Xi Jinping has been behaving lately and the fact that he's coming out is because, as my colleague said, he needs us. He's here because he is weak, and all we do is make him strong when we keep giving him the legitimacy and the platforms that don't challenge him, but rather, in a way, just accept him. It's the way Putin used to be built up and accepted.

I don't know. I don't think you can have normal relations with the People's Republic of China, the PRC government and especially Xi Jinping and those who are in power right now.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Tethong. Your two and a half minutes are up.

We'll go to Ms. McPherson for our last two and a half minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

What you were just talking about, Ms. Tethong, resonates with me so much.

On supporting movements, your reference to the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict is wonderful. Thank you for acknowledging the amazing work they do.

I'll finish with a very simple question. I know all three of you have spoken about the potential for sanctions to play an important role. I've been quite critical about the way the government has enforced our sanctions.

I'd like to ask each one of you if there are individuals who are not yet sanctioned by Canada who should be sanctioned. Do you have any suggestions for us with regard to the sanctions regime?

I'll start with you, Mr. Mehdi.

Mr. Feroz Mehdi: I cannot talk about the sanctions on individuals. I can only say that in India, we are talking about the backsliding of democracy in the Indo-Pacific region.

India, to begin with, has a very robust and excellent constitution that was adopted in 1950. However, since 2014 and the coming into power of this regime, there has been a very serious backsliding in democratic institutions. I think we need to address this and stop this backsliding.

If you watch the elections going on in India these days, you see there is a very open announcement of a fight between democracy and dictatorship, so I think this is the issue for India today. The government, which is a majority government today—let's hope it's not in the next elections after June—should be called out for the abuse of human rights and should be questioned on international platforms.

• (2000)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

Ms. Wang, would you comment?

Ms. Maya Wang: Unfortunately, I don't have a ready list for you, though there are lists of other Hong Kong groups. For example, I have spoken about the importance of sanctioning Hong Kong officials. The list runs really long, but I would say the timing.... I would like to see.... It's a bit late for article 23, but it's still timely.

When sentences are handed down to the pro-democracy media tycoon Jimmy Lai and the 47 pro-democracy ex-legislators have their sentences handed down, I want to see that kind of response with sanctions, at least.

Thank you.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Yes.

Finally, we have Ms. Tethong.

Ms. Lhadon Tethong: Yes, accountability is everything, and I think in Tibet it should be in particular for the party secretaries, and also, in the case of the boarding schools, the intellectual architects of the policy that seeks to openly, blatantly, forcibly assimilate Tibetan children, Uyghur children and southern Mongolians. I think all of these people should be held accountable.

Right now is the moment is to use sanctions and to deepen our use of them as a tool, because if you think of the decisions inside

the Communist Party and the way that breaks down across all of China and Tibet and East Turkestan or Xinjiang, you realize that lot of Chinese leaders right now in the system are wondering where their future lies and how it's all going to shake out in the end if we want to put pressure on Xi Jinping for these terrible policies, for the ethnonationalism and all of that.

Of course, we want to try to pressure him to stop these policies, but at least now we can be signalling to all of those people that they don't want to be involved in this and ask them if in the future this is who they want to be aligned with. I mean, there has to be a cost for them now and in the future, and I think sanctions are one of the only tools we have to really make that clear.

The U.S. has imposed visa sanctions on Chinese leaders involved in the colonial boarding school system in Tibet, and I think Canada could also and should also think about engaging in this way. The party secretaries are the very obvious people, because they are in charge of the CCP policy as it is implemented in all of Tibet, though they've carved it up into the Tibet Autonomous Region and other so-called autonomous regions, and then there are the intellectual architects. We are actually working to try to make a clear picture of who is responsible.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

The Chair: We've come to the end of the testimony from our witnesses, and I'd like to thank all three of you.

Actually, starting with you, Ms. Tethong, you mentioned that one of your colleagues had written a book about democracy, and I'm wondering if you could email our clerk with the details of that book. It sounds quite fascinating. Thank you for being with us.

Ms. Lhadon Tethong: I will.

The Chair: Ms. Wang, it was good to have you on, as well as you, Mr. Mehdi.

We'll let our witnesses go about whatever the rest of their day looks like.

We will pause for a few minutes while we go in camera and take care of some committee business.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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