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Chair: Mr. Ali Ehsassi



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• (1635)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.)): I'd like to call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 90 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the Standing Orders. Therefore, members are attending in person in the room as well as remotely through the Zoom application.

I'd like to make a few comments for the benefit of members and witnesses.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. You may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available.

Although this room is equipped with a powerful audio system, feedback events can occur. These can be extremely harmful to interpreters and cause serious injuries. The most common cause of sound feedback is an earpiece worn too close to a microphone.

With regard to a speaking list, the clerk and I will endeavour to do our best to have a speaking order that is acceptable to the members.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Wednesday, November 8, 2023, the committee resumes its study of Canada's diplomatic capacity.

At this point, I would like to welcome the witnesses. We are grateful to have them before us today.

We start off with Mr. Allan Rock. As members are aware, Mr. Rock currently serves as chancellor of the University of Ottawa. By Zoom, we're grateful to have Ms. Louise Blais, diplomat-in-residence at Université Laval. We have Dr. Stéphane Roussel, professor, École nationale d'administration publique. We are also grateful to have with us today Mr. Guy Saint-Jacques, former Canadian ambassador to the People's Republic of China; and Ms. Pamela Isfeld, president, Professional Association of Foreign Service Officers.

Each of our witnesses will have five minutes for their opening remarks. We will start with you, Mr. Rock. The floor is yours.

[Translation]

Hon. Allan Rock (Former Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations, As an Individual): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and honourable members.

Thank you for inviting me to appear before the committee today. The mandate of this committee is crucial, as it assesses Global Affairs Canada's ability to fulfil its important functions and achieve its essential objectives.

[English]

There is no shortage of challenges. Global warming, an existential threat, is upending everything from food production to transportation and global public health. Massive flows of migrants, many forceably displaced, are destabilizing societies and changing governments in many countries. The number and strength of democracies worldwide are diminishing and authoritarianism is on the rise.

Two major wars, each engaging Canada's national interests, continue with no end in sight. The UN Security Council, on paper the most powerful organ in the UN system, is seriously dysfunctional, raising questions about its fitness for purpose. Indeed, some major powers are, through BRICS, fashioning and expanding an alternative model of global governance that they believe better serves their interests.

[Translation]

Global Affairs Canada's mission is to represent and promote Canada's values and interests in this volatile and unstable environment, not only by pursuing a coherent foreign policy, but also by coordinating the efforts of trade portfolios...

[English]

The Chair: All good?

You have my apologies. Please continue.

[Translation]

Hon. Allan Rock: I probably spoke too quickly.

I just said that Global Affairs Canada's responsibility is to maintain a coherent foreign policy, while coordinating the trade and international development portfolios.

[English]

In that context, let me identify three subjects that I respectfully suggest merit the committee's attention.

The first is the level of funding. Global Affairs and its foreign service cannot succeed without resources commensurate with the breadth and significance of their mission. That means money to establish and maintain the presence of appropriate size, not only in capitals, but also at the busiest intersections of the multilateral world. It also means levels of development assistance that will earn us influence and credibility at the table. At present, in comparison with our key allies, we underinvest in both.

Secondly, GAC must open the doors. It cannot be a closed shop. It needs a diversity of views and the expertise of those beyond the department, whether in universities, in think tanks or in civil society. Bringing other voices in through consultations and secondments will enhance the department's ability to plan for over-the-horizon events. That might be done, for example, by returning to the former practice of organizing annual, multi-day consultations or by having standing advisory bodies.

Finally, there must be scope for boldness. Canada has in the past been seen on the international stage as a leading source of good ideas. We were among the most active in the establishment of the International Criminal Court. We led the process that resulted in the Ottawa Treaty to ban land mines. We introduced the human security agenda and made it a central part of the Security Council's work—when the council was working. That agenda included things that echo to this day: the protection of civilians; women, peace and security; children and armed conflict; and the responsibility to protect.

We are still uniquely positioned to show leadership by conceiving of and promoting fresh ideas and new thinking. There have been occasions in the recent past when we've done just that.

• (1640)

[*Translation*]

However, we can do much more. The department and its officials should be encouraged to imagine a leading role for Canada in devising new solutions to contemporary problems.

Mr. Chair, there are other important topics I could mention that will perhaps be raised during the committee's question period.

[*English*]

In particular, I can think of the need for effective sharing of information among GAC, security intelligence and defence; the urgency of strategic recruitment and lateral transfers to build the department of tomorrow; the importance of strengthening consular services; and showing leadership in international criminal justice and before the International Court of Justice.

Thank you again, Mr. Chair and members, for having invited me.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*English*]

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

We next go to Ms. Louise Blais, who is joining us via Zoom.

Ms. Blais, you have five minutes for your opening remarks.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Blais (Diplomat-in-Residence, Laval University, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the Foreign Affairs and International Development Committee for this invitation to be with you today.

The issues you are addressing are fundamental. In the absence of a comprehensive review of our foreign policy, it is important to examine Canada's current capabilities to deal with this changing world.

It is therefore an honour and a privilege to share my observations with you, which are based on the experience I have gained during my long career with GAC, including my experience with Canada's last campaign for a seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Distinguished members of the committee, to say that the world has changed has become a cliché. Unfortunately for Canada, it hasn't done so in a way favourable to our interests. However, what we're facing today is within our control, because it's about our inability, until now, to adapt to this changing global chessboard.

Many factors are responsible for this observation. First and foremost, the bureaucratization of Global Affairs Canada has undermined its effectiveness. Indeed, the essential qualities of diplomacy such as sound analysis, intelligence gathering, international networks, negotiating skills and time spent abroad have been replaced by internal management prowess. Over the past 20 years, civil servants who have risen to high-level positions have done so predominantly on the basis of their administrative skills rather than their foreign policy experience.

Equally damaging, the administrative burdens on our missions abroad mean that diplomats spend more time in embassies dealing with human resources and other internal initiatives than with diplomacy.

A lack of coordination between departments on global issues has also been unfavourable. The imbalance between interdepartmental priorities sometimes directly undermines our interests. For example, a year before the vote for the UN Security Council, when Canada was a candidate, the Immigration Department implemented onerous biometric requirements for people from dozens of countries despite advice from Global Affairs Canada. It didn't improve our chances.

So, how can we ensure today that Canada has the tools to navigate the current geopolitical context?

First, we need a foreign policy more closely tied to our core interests and less focused on virtue-signalling. To achieve this, we need to set clear, and fewer, priorities. Canada belongs to far more international organizations than many countries of similar size. We are too dispersed. A systematic review of our commitments and a rationalization of our field of activity are called for.

Secondly, we need to put foreign experience back at the heart of the skills required for senior GAC officials and heads of mission. Diplomacy is an extremely complex profession. Knowledge and skills are acquired over time, starting with junior positions in the field. This experience has no equivalent in the rest of the government apparatus. You neglect its importance at your peril.

• (1645)

[English]

I recently had the honour to contribute to a paper co-authored by Michael Manulak and Kerry Buck, entitled “Canada and the United Nations: Rethinking and Rebuilding Canada’s Global Role”. It puts forward recommendations for how Canada could navigate today’s more challenging context at the UN and demonstrate leadership. I’ll be happy to share the full report. There are a few key recommendations relevant to today’s hearing.

One would be to review our UN priorities with the aim of identifying a short list of five or six focus issues. We should ensure that we communicate to our allies what we will be focused on with a view to complementing each other’s work. The European Union negotiates on behalf of its members on many issues at the UN, while countries like Canada, Australia and New Zealand have to stretch themselves across an increasingly vast UN agenda.

We need to adapt our working methods.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Blais.

We will now go to Professor Roussel.

Professor Roussel, you have five minutes for your opening remarks.

[Translation]

Dr. Stéphane Roussel (Full Professor, École nationale d’administration publique, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I’d like to thank the committee for inviting me today. It’s always a great privilege to be able to address the elected representatives of the House of Commons.

In the coming years, Canada will face major structural challenges. Climate change has already been mentioned. Combatting climate change must be a priority. We are also witnessing the rise of China, which will perhaps become one of the two great superpowers of the international system, which will shake things up a lot.

I would like to draw the attention of the members of the committee today on the risk, unfortunately increasingly real in recent months, that we will see elected, in the United States, a president or, indeed, a leadership team that abandons the role played by the United States—its role as leader of the western world and guarantor

of the international order in which we have been operating since the Second World War.

I’m not alone among my colleagues in being concerned about issues like these. I’m thinking in particular of my colleague Kim Richard Nossal, retired from Queen’s University, who a few weeks ago published a book entitled *Canada Alone: Navigating the Post-American World*, which also posits this problem as being at the heart of what should preoccupy Canada. Right now, I’m speaking for myself, but I mention it, because it is, I think, an important resource for the committee.

There’s a good chance, then, that the next American presidency will be much closer to an isolationist foreign policy, tinged with distrust, if not contempt, for international institutions; this would include military alliances such as NATO. Such a presidency and policy would have strained, or difficult relations, to say the least, even with its allies and closest partners.

Of course I am referring to Donald Trump, but the individual himself is no longer, in my view, as important, insofar as the Republican Party of the United States and a large number of American leaders espouse the “Make America Great Again”, or “America First” approach. This policy, which we generally attribute to Donald Trump, may therefore become institutionalized in American foreign policy.

This phenomenon has several consequences for Canada. On the one hand, Canada is likely to have very difficult relations with the United States in the years, if not decades, to come; on the other, the international system that was put in place, largely under U.S. leadership after the Second World War, could be called into question. Yet this international system has largely served Canada’s interests.

To address this, what recommendations can we make? I won’t go into strategies today. Canada generally uses three or four main strategies in its relations with the United States, but I will simply remind you that should a more isolationist government be elected next November, the Canadian government will have to be ready this time, rather than improvising a policy towards the United States in a hurry, as seems to have been the case in 2016-17.

As for the purpose of the committee’s current work, the need to have a very competent diplomatic apparatus, and with a very large staff, is going to be crucial in this context. On the one hand, the Canadian government is likely to rely on a classic strategy of cultivating its relationships with interest groups in the United States, groups that would also benefit from maintaining good relations with Canada.

On the other hand, Canada must also cultivate perhaps closer relations with other countries, especially western states that would find themselves in a similar situation and would also have to deal with a more inward-looking and perhaps tougher U.S. government in its relations with others.

These two fundamental missions of Global Affairs Canada do require resources, and they require personnel in the field, and therefore foreign service officers, both numerous and ready to fulfil this role.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

We now go to Ambassador Saint-Jacques.

You have five minutes, Ambassador.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy Saint-Jacques (Former Ambassador of Canada to the People's Republic of China, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for your invitation to testify today.

I spent nearly 40 years at Global Affairs Canada, 25 of them abroad. In Ottawa, among other things, I worked for five years in the personnel office, where I was responsible for some 2,000 rotational employees, i.e., those whose careers alternate between posts in Ottawa and postings abroad. I therefore supervised staff recruitment, assignments in Ottawa and abroad, including heads of mission, promotions, but also conditions of service abroad.

It's worth noting that over 60% of employees serve in difficult posts abroad, and that we must try to manage careers using a balance between difficult assignments and those that are a little easier, while developing regional expertise, which includes learning difficult languages. It should also be pointed out that this career poses particular challenges in terms of spouses' careers, moving the family every three or four years, choosing a new school for the children, not to mention security issues.

[English]

It is fair to say that Global Affairs now presents many problems. How can this be explained?

I would say that there were tensions in the past between the department and the Public Service Commission, which wanted the department to open its competitions to the rest of the public service. However, this neglected the fact that the working environment is very different from the rest of the public service and that you cannot become instantly a diplomat.

Global Affairs eventually lost that battle, and for the last 15 to 20 years, we have seen an influx of people without much relevant experience. This was further exacerbated by the fact that there was a succession of deputy ministers coming from outside of the department, with the resulting loss of expertise in foreign matters and a lack of understanding of the challenges faced by people serving abroad and of the culture of the department.

To give you a small example, traditionally in Washington, London and Paris, if the ambassador is anglophone, his or her number two will be francophone and vice versa. This is for obvious national unity reasons. Well, what is the situation now? The number twos in London and Washington are anglophone, despite the fact that the ambassadors are also anglophone.

Also, for reasons that are difficult to understand, as we knew 20 years ago that we would lose lots of employees as they were going to retire, the department stopped recruiting foreign service officers

for many years. That's when the chain came off the bicycle. We stopped recruiting great young people from across the country, training them and offering postings to further develop their expertise and competencies. The result of such policies has been a gradual weakening of the department in the quality of the advice it can provide to the minister and to the government.

To be frank, if I look at the previous prime minister and the present Prime Minister, I don't think they have devoted enough attention to foreign policy, failing to recognize its link with the economic prosperity of the country. As well, a succession of five foreign affairs ministers since 2015 has not helped to build expertise.

I would add that appointing an increasing number of political appointees as ambassadors to our most important missions is not the recipe to be taken seriously by our partners.

• (1655)

[Translation]

That said, I congratulate the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mélanie Joly, who has clearly understood that her department needs urgent attention, who has recognized the existing problems and who is trying to rebuild the department's expertise. This will take several years, and I hope she will have the resources to carry out her mission successfully.

I also recommend that you read the report just published by the Senate, entitled "More than a Vocation: Canada's Need for a 21st Century Foreign Service". Among the report's recommendations, I would urge you to pay particular attention to the need to hold annual competitions to recruit foreign service people, to relaunch the training program, to pay more attention to the difficulties faced by spouses and families abroad, and finally to recognize that the work of a diplomat is different from that found in the rest of the public service.

In conclusion, I would add that it is urgent that Canada increase the budgets devoted to defence, particularly in Canada's north. Such spending could, moreover, count as part of NATO spending.

We also need to devote more attention to international development. Canada has already had a great deal of influence through its investments in development.

We need look no further for the reason why our last two campaigns for a seat on the UN Security Council have been failures.

Thank you. I'll be happy to answer your questions.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ambassador Saint-Jacques.

We now go to Ms. Isfeld.

You have five minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Pamela Isfeld (President, Professional Association of Foreign Service Officers): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

As president of the Professional Association of Foreign Service Officers, the organization that represents the 2,000 current service officers in Canada, I'm very pleased to be here.

[English]

As a career foreign service officer myself, I'm very happy that the committee has chosen to hear about Canada's diplomatic capacity from those of us who represent the current practitioners in the field.

I believe that my presentation is going to be a little more “nuts and bolts” than are those of some of my colleagues, but that's because that's what we hear about in our domain from the people who are currently working there.

The FS group is the only Canadian public service group whose entire membership is committed to serving both at home and abroad as one of its fundamental conditions of employment. This commitment affects not just foreign service officers themselves but also our partners, our children, our extended families, our friends, our neighbours and even our pets.

Over the past decade or so—people have already covered the turmoil that the world has gone into—the international conflict has been on a scale that we haven't seen since World War II, along with a global pandemic that we are still recovering from, economic recession and climate crisis. At the same time, Canada's career foreign service has found itself fighting for the political support, the funding, the training and the leadership that we need to really effectively represent Canada and Canadians abroad.

We were very happy to see the launch of the Senate study on the foreign service as well as Minister Joly's future of diplomacy initiative, and this study, all of which signal to us that Canadian decision-makers might be willing to give Canada's diplomatic and international engagement the attention and the practical support it deserves. This is very welcome, and it certainly has not always been the case since I joined the foreign service back in—I hate to say it—1993. Time flies when you're having fun.

We agree with most of the points that were made by the Senate committee in its final report, especially on the need for reinvestment in our diplomatic and foreign policy infrastructure. Although we understand the reality of diminishing resources, we do believe that refocusing on priorities and core business and investing in the foreign service right now are essential. We're hoping that the views of this committee will help to encourage the government to do just that—to take practical action to support the great words and analysis that we are hearing.

We also agree with the Senate committee's recommendation that the foreign service directives, in particular, which govern many of the conditions of service abroad, need to be fundamentally revamped and modernized to meet the needs of today's public servants and their families.

Many of the principles on which those directives are founded have not been re-examined since the 1981 McDougall commission report. Many of the issues identified in that report have never really been properly addressed.

The gaps are particularly large when it comes to issues related to spousal employment and support for employees and families with disabilities.

I note that Professor Roussel referred to our need to pay more attention to the U.S. in light of what might be happening there. Getting people to go to the U.S. is one of the problems that the foreign service has faced. A lot of that is related to FSDs, including provisions for health care. That's something to think about in terms of how these very practical things can affect our ability to represent Canada and Canadians abroad in a very practical way.

We also support the Senate committee's recommendations on enhancing expertise in the foreign service, but one point I would like to make—as I understand my time is almost up—is that it needs to be layered on top of the traditional diplomatic skills of networking, analysis, cross-cultural awareness, flexibility and adaptability. Language capacity is great, but if you have poor judgment, that is not going to work. We need to recognize those areas as important areas of expertise as well.

We're very happy to see that both the minister and the Senate committee agree with us that we need to continue to recruit, and just so that I'm not being completely negative about Global Affairs, I do want to point out that they have taken many measures.

● (1700)

We have seen over 170 new members in PAFSO in the last 18 months, and that is making a big difference to our capacity to represent Canada and also to represent Canadians of different backgrounds and younger people as well.

When I gave evidence to the Senate committee, I think I reported that the average foreign service officer was 45 years old. Global Affairs Canada came out to say that the average officer is actually 47 years old. That is definitely a demographic that absolutely should be heard from, but we need to hear from other people as well, and they are taking steps to do those things—

The Chair: Ms. Isfeld, you're at five and a half minutes. I will ask you to wrap it up in the next 15 seconds or so.

Ms. Pamela Isfeld: I'm sorry.

I just want to say thank you. Five and half minutes is not very long, and I'd be very happy to follow up with any members of the committee who have other questions.

[Translation]

Thank you all very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Isfeld.

Now we go to the members for questions. We're going to start off the first round with four minutes per questioner.

We will start with Mr. Aboultaif.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thanks for all great testimonies from the witnesses.

Among resources, funding, influence, credibility and opening up, there are so many things that we need to do. For Mr. Roussel, we need to be ready for the next American administration. Also, our relationships with China and India are not at their best.

I would like to ask Mr. Rock and then Mr. Saint-Jacques how we are going to navigate between those two superpowers, the United States and China. They seem to basically agree on many things. Of course, they have their own plans for the future of the planet and the leadership they present. How can Canada navigate those relationships? Is there a way back to fix some of those broken relationships? Do you see any path forward?

Mr. Rock is first.

Hon. Allan Rock: Thank you.

I believe there is. First of all, with the Americans, it depends very much on what happens next November. As has been pointed out, we don't know what's going to turn up in the White House a year from now, and some of the prospects are quite frightening. As we like to say, the Americans aren't always right, but they're always right there, and we have to manage that. We have to deal with that.

I thought the current government took a wise approach with Trump number one by deploying as many resources as we could to other levels of government—governors and members of the Senate and the House of Representatives—to make sure that Canada's presence was felt and our views were known, without having to confront the man himself. I thought that was an effective strategy. It assisted in softening up the position of the administration in the negotiation of the renewed North American Free Trade Agreement. I think that kind of artful approach, where you pick your spots and you deploy your resources laterally, is a good one.

With respect to China, obviously we have to take steps to thaw before we can actually start to relate to one another. I've always felt that health—health care, public health—is a very good point of entry. I spent almost five years as Canada's minister of health. During that period, I established an annual meeting between the Canadian and the Chinese health ministries. We found that we had an enormous amount in common. They admired our public health care system. The single payer is, for them, the most effective way of deploying health for 1.3 billion people.

Furthermore, they're interested in our model of community care. When I was president of the University of Ottawa, our medical school was chosen to open a medical school at the University of Shanghai—Jiao Tong. They took our curriculum. They sent their professors to our campus to learn how to teach it. They took it home and opened a medical school in Shanghai with our MD curriculum, because they want four-year MDs to practise community care and family practice.

I think that kind of relationship based on common interests in health, something which is a very positive and important subject, can help open the doors, get people to relax and thaw the environment and the atmosphere so that we can make progress on bigger items. I think there are ways we can do it.

• (1705)

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Mr. Saint-Jacques, can you please weigh in on the same question?

Mr. Guy Saint-Jacques: In the case of the U.S.A., I would say first that of course we have to watch very closely what's going on there, but again, I think the department and the government have proven in the past that we can mount a very well-coordinated effort involving premiers as well—because there are many premiers who have good relationships with governors—to demonstrate how much prosperity we create in the U.S.

In terms of dealing with difficult countries, I was encouraged when I heard Minister Joly say recently that Canada will have a “pragmatic diplomacy”. I hope by this that in fact we will have ambassadors in countries like Iran. I'm glad that we have a new ambassador in Saudi Arabia. It's important to discuss with these people—

The Chair: Ambassador Saint-Jacques, could you wrap up in the next 15 seconds, please?

Mr. Guy Saint-Jacques: In the case of China, the Indo-Pacific strategy outlines a very good approach.

I agree with Mr. Rock. Global health, the environment and biodiversity are good areas where we should focus. Hopefully, there will be movement on both sides of—

The Chair: I'm afraid I'm going to have to cut you off, Ambassador Saint-Jacques. I apologize.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

Can I ask for clarification? How long is each of our sessions right now?

The Chair: For the questions, it's four minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Why is that? We have until six o'clock.

The Chair: As you recall, we were having discussions beforehand. There seemed to be some understanding that we will go until 5:30. Ambassador Rock has to leave at 5:45. One of the members wasn't here. That member came back. We were thinking of doing, if the members—

Ms. Heather McPherson: Since we changed that to go back to 6:00, would it be possible to allow Mr. Aboultaif to have the full seven minutes he is entitled to?

The Chair: He never gets that. No one ever gets seven minutes. The highest you can go is six minutes. In any event, Mr. Aboultaif did go considerably over—a minute and a half over. He had five and a half, actually.

Is it the will of the committee to continue on with the witnesses until 6:00 or 5:30?

Some hon. members: Go until 6:00.

The Chair: Okay.

Therefore, there is no committee business after that.

Ms. Heather McPherson: However long it takes.... We have from 6:00 until 6:30.

Hon. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): I have a point of order.

I thought there had been a request to end at 6:00—not from our side, but from that side, for holiday parties.

The Chair: That's correct. I asked the other members if they were okay with it. They initially said yes, but now there seems to have been a change of plans.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Mr. Chair, I suggest the following. We have so many witnesses. We can ask witnesses questions until 6:00, then do committee business in camera for as long as it takes. We have until 6:30. It may only take five minutes. I think we're all feeling very amenable to getting—

The Chair: Sure.

I would ask that, from now on and going forward, when members agree to something, they not change their mind after we commence the proceedings.

Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC): There was no motion presented today.

The Chair: There wasn't a motion. There were discussions. Mr. Hoback, you weren't in the room, but yes, there was agreement among other members.

• (1710)

Mr. Randy Hoback: No, there wasn't. I wasn't here.

The Chair: You weren't here, Mr. Hoback, but yes, there was. I personally spoke to members.

Mr. Randy Hoback: I was here when the meeting started. You did not, in the meeting time, come to the meeting and say, "We're going to change the itinerary."

The Chair: It was prior to your arrival. I spoke to members. I never said that was a motion, Mr. Hoback.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Then you don't have.... You have the agenda set—

The Chair: Mr. Hoback, wait one second please. I never said there was a motion. I said I chatted with members. Then, everyone wanted to stay with the witnesses until six o'clock.

Is everyone okay with that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay.

Why don't we do it this way?

Mr. Aboultaif, shall we say that you have another minute? Then we will go to the other members for six minutes.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you.

The question is for Ms. Blais.

Changing five foreign affairs ministers in six years.... Does that matter to the strategy of the department and foreign affairs policy, as far as Canada goes?

Ms. Louise Blais: The role of foreign minister is one based on relationships and experience. When they change constantly, it makes things more challenging. During the campaign for the UN

Security Council, we essentially had three different ministers. When you have one who starts to have relationships with counterparts, then all of a sudden you have to change.... Obviously, the world of politics has its complexities and some things can't be helped.

I will go on the record to say that having some tenure in the role of foreign minister is key to success for a country like Canada.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Chatel, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank our witnesses for attending, both in person and virtually.

I also thank you for your services, ambassadors. I'm very pleased that you took the time to come and meet us.

Mr. Rock, earlier you were talking about improving the quality of expertise inside foreign affairs, but also among diplomatic staff and those surrounding ambassadors. You were talking about two things. You talked about finding expertise, for example, through exchange policies, i.e., an exchange between people in private practice at university, for example, who have studied in the field, or also economically. You also mentioned the creation of an advisory committee made up of people with expertise. For example, in the case of China, we would need expertise in the various sectors that affect our relations with China.

Mr. Saint-Jacques, you were telling us that it would be better to rebuild solid in-house expertise, so to really focus resources on our internal capacity.

Ms. Isfeld, you talked about much the same thing. I'd like to hear from all three of you on this. Are we going to seek expertise internally through exchange policies?

I've worked for international organizations, and this was one of the measures used with members. It ensured that they had a lot of expertise and a very solid base internally.

Mr. Rock, Mr. Saint-Jacques and Ms. Isfeld, I'd like you to tell us about that.

Hon. Allan Rock: Thank you for your question.

Mr. Chair, the department's openness to the views of others is important. I'm thinking of the consultation processes.

A few years ago, the Department of Foreign Affairs devoted three days annually, in January or February, to receiving representatives from NGOs, universities, as well as experts on subjects related to the department. These people were invited to visit Ottawa and take part in discussions with senior departmental officials, to exchange views on the major projects and challenges facing Canada as a country. This is just one example of a possible approach.

There is another potential approach. The department, for a period of two or three years, could appoint consultants, so that they could pass on their expertise and give their point of view.

The aim of all this is to increase the sources of information available to the department so that we can gain a broader perspective on the complex world.

As you mentioned, madam, you've been involved in several NGOs with international accountability relationships. So you have valuable experience and perspectives to share.

● (1715)

[English]

My point was simply that remaining open to different points of view is healthy for the department and better for Canadian foreign policy.

[Translation]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you, Mr. Rock.

I would like to ask Mr. Saint-Jacques to react to this proposal.

Mr. Guy Saint-Jacques: Thank you for your question.

Both approaches are necessary. We have to recognize that there are new topics. For example, about 30 years ago, we didn't have any expertise in the department on terrorism issues. Now terrorism has become a major issue.

Artificial intelligence and cybersecurity issues have also become very important, and we don't necessarily have many experts.

What I'm advocating is having an external service where we develop as much expertise as possible. It's difficult to develop this expertise, these skills. It's done over the long term, and when necessary, when there are one-off needs, you have to try to go and find specialists.

As Mr. Rock was saying, we need to encourage consultations with universities, civil society think tanks, to hear other points of view. I'm all for doing that whenever possible. There's no contradiction between the two.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Ms. Isfeld, would you like to add anything?

[English]

Ms. Pamela Isfeld: Thank you.

I agree with my colleagues that it's not an either-or thing. We need both kinds of expertise.

Before I came to do the president of PAFSO job full time, I was deputy director of foreign policy research at Global Affairs. One of my frustrations there was that due to the chronic understaffing in the department, we had a very hard time protecting our small foreign policy research group of experts from day-to-day tasks.

Our job was not necessarily to be experts on every single file. As Mr. Saint-Jacques pointed out, you have new issues emerging all the time. However, you can be experts on the experts and seek out that expertise from outside. That's the kind of thing I would like to see Global Affairs doing more of.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go to Mr. Bergeron.

You have six minutes, sir.

[Translation]

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

I thank all the witnesses for joining us and contributing to our reflection on the future of Canadian diplomacy.

Ms. Blais, Jennifer Welsh, Director of McGill University's Centre for International Peace and Security Studies, shared the following with the committee:

Canadians are living in an international system that is less hospitable to our interests and values than perhaps at any time since the end of the Second World War.

I understand that you share this view. What has led to this deterioration in the perception of Canadian values around the world? How can we reposition Canada in this changing context?

Ms. Louise Blais: Thank you for your question.

In the international context, especially the multilateral one, you have to look at the UN. Indeed, it had about fifty members in the 1950s, and, today, it has 193.

The southern hemisphere has become more prominent, and is asserting itself in international fora, through negotiating groups including the Group of 77, or G77. This is a group of around 130 countries, accompanied by China, who negotiate as a bloc at the UN. They have, de facto, two-thirds of the seats at the UN. Today, Canada's influence has waned in this company, which has expanded.

However, Canada hasn't helped itself in recent decades by focusing its foreign policy on exporting its values. We've been very moralistic abroad. When we talked to developing countries, we talked about what we could do for them and what they should do for themselves. We wanted to remake them in our image.

Today, we realize that this doesn't serve us, in the long run. For one thing, we haven't succeeded in changing these countries, and our world is becoming increasingly autocratic. So we haven't succeeded in making the world more like Canada.

Moreover, we've tripped ourselves up a bit, because, by dint of telling others what to do and talking to them on an unequal level, I think there's been some wear and tear. Now, people listen to us a lot less. Personally, I've heard heads of state say that we were not willing to listen to their priorities.

I think we first need to become aware of our position on the world chessboard and talk with countries about the things that interest them. What's more, we need to succeed in developing relations with countries we don't agree with. To be successful, we need to adopt a change of tone and a change of tactics.

We have often surrounded ourselves with those who had views similar to ours, but I think Canada would benefit from talking more often with Latin American countries, for example, with the smaller countries that have very important things to say and have their own sphere of influence in their region.

• (1720)

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Mr. Roussel, first of all, good evening. I'm very happy to have you back.

A number of Canada's allies, including the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, have deemed it important to have some sort of periodic process for reviewing their foreign policies. We have no such plans. I took part in the last major review of Canada's foreign policy, in 1994. There haven't been any as complex since. On the other hand, Canada is in the process of revising its defence policy.

Don't you think we're putting the cart before the horse a bit?

Dr. Stéphane Roussel: First, good evening, Mr. Bergeron. It's good to see you again, too.

As for whether thinking about defence before thinking about foreign affairs is putting the cart before the horse, in fact, I'd say the one influences the other. While it's true that defence policy is generally expected to flow from, or conform to, foreign policy, I would also respond that, in Canada's history, the two may have operated in a decoupled fashion, or that there has rarely been much effort to make them coherent.

That said, let me return to your first point, namely the consultations we held on foreign policy, in Canada, until the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s.

This model leaves me a little ambivalent. Indeed, it had the advantage of allowing Canadian society to express itself, to set its priorities, but it sometimes left, too, an impression of co-optation; the government received a series of contradictory opinions from civil society, and it only had to choose those that suited its purposes.

On the other hand, there's another process I like, and that's a review every 10 years. This process is used in other states. I think Norway uses it. We set up a committee that could resemble a Canadian commission of inquiry. This committee makes recommendations to the government on how it should approach its foreign policy, as well as its defence policy, over the next few years.

• (1725)

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: We now go to MP McPherson. You have six minutes.

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

First of all, thank you very much to all of our witnesses.

Thank you for being here in person, Mr. Rock. I know you have to leave, so I'm going to ask you a few questions first, before you have to go. I'm going to ask questions about current events through that diplomatic lens.

I read your recent article that you wrote with Lloyd Axworthy, "In the conflict in Gaza, we must think about the children". It was very well done. Thank you very much for writing that. You said that "Shielding children from armed conflict was once an international priority" but in recent years has fallen off Canada's priority list. You also asked the question: "Do we not all love our children, and thus want to spare them the horrors of war?"

I want to ask you specifically about Gaza and the massive impact on children. We know that 7,000 to 8,000 children have been killed in the bombardments, and many more of course are at risk due to the blockade and the ongoing war. In fact, I think it's fair to say that Gaza, right now, is the most dangerous place in the world for children.

In the West Bank, we know that Israel is prosecuting between 500 and 700 Palestinian children in military courts each year. Palestinian children in the occupied West Bank, like adults, face arrest, prosecution and imprisonment under an Israeli military detention system that denies them basic human rights.

In your opinion, why has it taken Canada so long to call for a ceasefire when the impact on children in Gaza is so severe? What should Canada do now to reaffirm its commitment to the protection of children in places like Israel and Palestine or, in fact, in any conflict?

Hon. Allan Rock: I'm reluctant to second-guess any government on the timing of calling for a ceasefire. The enormous complexity of the issues is quite daunting, and I don't envy those who have to make that decision. That having been said, I was delighted to see that yesterday we formally called for a ceasefire.

In accepting your point, I will say that, as the Secretary-General pointed out, Gaza has become "a graveyard for children". It's a young population anyway. Civilians are taking the brunt of the violence, particularly women and children.

It was Graça Machel who, in 1996, published a report about children and conflict. Her report gave rise to a conference that we organized here in Canada, putting children in armed conflict on the agenda. The Secretary-General appointed a special representative for children in armed conflict, and the Security Council adopted resolutions for naming and shaming countries that mistreated children. At least there was a process by which you could identify those who were committing grave violations against children in conflict. That has weakened over the years, unhappily. Now, in Gaza, it might just as well be ripped up and thrown away. We've made a mockery of all of that.

One of the main reasons for having a ceasefire, apart from providing humanitarian aid, is to spare the lives of the remaining children who are there.

I don't know if I'm responding to your question, but it has been a priority for Canada and for the world. It has slipped off the top of the agenda. It must be put back on the agenda. If we can agree on nothing else in this crazy world, we must at least agree that children should be spared the horrors of war.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Hear, hear!

I agree with you that it has fallen off for Canada. Canada, of all countries, must be one of those countries that leads on this. We have to have that ability to lead.

I've asked the minister and representatives from Global Affairs a number of times why Canada is not supporting international justice mechanisms, like the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice, in the context of Israel and Palestine. I'm very pleased to see that we are supporting those investigations in places like Ukraine, but we are applying the use of these courts very irregularly. For the rest of the world watching how we apply international humanitarian law, it must seem baffling—that's probably the best-case scenario, be perfectly honest. There's a very clear double standard.

In your experience, what can parliamentarians do and what can committee members do to put pressure on the Government of Canada to use the ICC and ICJ and to apply international humanitarian law equally in all contexts where it would be applicable?

• (1730)

Hon. Allan Rock: The trial chamber of the International Criminal Court has ruled that the ICC does have jurisdiction to investigate alleged war crimes in the West Bank and in Palestine. Canada can support the ICC in that financially. We can second people to assist them with person power.

The way to make the point to the Government of Canada is through Global Affairs. It's simply to press the minister and the department to do everything possible to support the international criminal justice system because accountability is a very important part of fixing these wrongs, and we must pursue it.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much.

Ms. Blais, I wonder if I can ask you the same question. Is there a response that you could provide as well?

Ms. Louise Blais: I think that Mr. Rock had the right answer.

The decision of who to investigate is really that of the prosecutor. We have Canadians on the court, but it is ultimately the decision of the prosecutor.

As time goes on, I think there will be questions raised on this issue. Unfortunately, you have a terrorist group like Hamas that did unspeakable acts and murders. Where is the justice there?

Whatever happens is going to have to be a balance. We have not had time to react. This is a relatively new conflict, and I think that, as time goes on, we'll have to make those decisions. However, I will go back to the fact that the prosecutor does have to make that decision.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Next we go to the second round, for which each member is provided five minutes. We start off with MP Epp.

Mr. Dave Epp (Chatham-Kent—Leamington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here.

Mr. Rock, I'll take advantage of you while you're here. At our last meeting, we heard that it's pretty difficult to have soft power if you don't have hard power. Canada's place in the world seems to be slipping on both counts. What would your advice be, or how would you come at that issue—or do you disagree with that statement?

Hon. Allan Rock: I think soft power has always been one of Canada's great strengths. You earn credibility through investing in defence and doing your share in terms of international defence efforts.

Monsieur Saint-Jacques referred to the Arctic as a place where we need to spend more on defence, and I agree with that completely. I think we could kill two birds with one stone. First of all, we could invest money to ensure that we have defence systems in the Arctic and for the Arctic, which would at the same time help us achieve the 2% of GDP required of us by our colleagues in NATO.

I think that's what we talk about when we say, "hard power". It's the actual equipment and investing in the ships, the airplanes and the troops, and putting them on the ground where they are needed for patrols and to ensure that our sovereignty is respected.

There is a link between that and our ability to be persuasive through soft power at the table, because it's a matter of credibility. If you're not respectful of your obligations for defence, if you're not pulling your weight and if you're not investing in defence systems, your credibility when you use soft power is diminished, so I think they are linked.

Mr. Dave Epp: In your opening comments, you also linked credibility to Canada's development assistance. What did you mean by that?

Hon. Allan Rock: It was Lester Pearson who suggested 50 years ago that countries ought to invest 0.7% of their GDP in international development assistance. We have never come close to that. Countries like the U.K. and Norway are in excess of that.

We have been reducing our international development assistance over time, and I think we should increase it. It's sort of the dues you pay. It's table stakes for credibility in the international community.

Mr. Dave Epp: Thank you.

I'm going to shift. One of the other criticisms, or one of the other suggestions to broaden the experience of folks going into our diplomatic core into Global Affairs.... I guess I will be up front. There was a preponderance of graduates from Carleton and the University of Ottawa.

Given your present position, how would you respond to that? Would our country be better served by a broader experience from our educational institutions?

• (1735)

Hon. Allan Rock: We have a number of excellent universities in Canada. We should take advantage of the graduates of all of them.

Let me smuggle in a comment to say that the time I spent in New York in the mission of Canada to the UN left me with a deep impression of the quality and commitment of our foreign service. They are fabulous people who work their hearts out and with great skill. Wherever they are coming from, they are doing a great job.

There are universities across the country capable of producing excellent graduates, and we should take as many as we can.

Mr. Dave Epp: Thank you.

I'm going to shift to Ms. Blais. I don't know if I can say the word that you did: the bureaucratization of Global Affairs.

Specifically, coming out of the Senate report, there are some recommendations around reducing the levels of upper management. How would you respond to that particular recommendation?

Ms. Louise Blais: I completely agree with that recommendation. I think there are too many layers in Global Affairs Canada, but at the same time, the work is there. There's a lot of work. This is why I have been talking about how we need to reduce the number of priorities. We can't be everything to everyone.

When I talk about that bureaucratization, really, it's a mindset. It's a culture that is now Global Affairs Canada. That wasn't the Global Affairs I joined. Back then, it wasn't called Global Affairs. It has changed names very often—

Mr. Dave Epp: I would ask if you can expand on only one point, because I'm running out of time.

You also mentioned core interests. We should focus on several areas. Can you identify which areas you think Canada should be focused on? Would it be more our trade interests...roll them in? Where do you think we should focus to prioritize?

Ms. Louise Blais: That's a short answer. In my view, it's security and prosperity. At the end of the day, Canadians need to have territorial security and economic prosperity. Both of these things are forged through foreign policy.

The Chair: Thank you.

We now go to MP Oliphant. You have five minutes.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll just begin by saying that, yes, we've had many foreign ministers over the last few years, but one parliamentary secretary over the last four ministers, which adds consistency. I'm like the sphinx.

Several comments have been made around different themes, including democracy and democracies in decline, multilateral bodies needing reformation, the expansion perhaps of BRICS causing a concern in the international rules-based order and the rule of law, a need for more consultation, a changing world, climate change, and the possibility of Trump or even other Republicans with “faraway lands” or “America first” ideas.

All of these things are complex and changing. As a result, I think Minister Joly has seen a need to make major changes in foreign affairs, which I am looking forward to.

I have two questions, one easy one and one hard one, for all of you.

The easy one is, do you believe that Canada needs to invest more money in global affairs and all its branches?

The hard one is, if we do, what are your top two or three priorities?

We can start with Mr. Rock, who wants to get out soon.

Hon. Allan Rock: The answer is, yes, I think we need to give resources to foreign affairs in order to meet its important mission.

I've seen, over my time in government and since I left government, a steady reduction in the investment in global affairs. It's as though we can afford to cut it because no one will notice, or it won't make any difference. Well, it does make a difference. It makes a difference to have those missions in Africa. It makes a difference to have a full complement of people at the table when the multinational organizations meet and set new rules for the game. We have to be there and we have to be there in a way that is effective.

Yes, I do think we do need more investment. I think the report that came out of the Senate makes the same point, as well as the minister's “Future of Diplomacy” report.

On your second question, I think the first priority would be the multilateral organizations; that's where the rules are being made that are going to affect us. We have to have a strong presence at the UN, NATO and the other multilateral organizations that make a real difference.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Ms. Blais.

Ms. Louise Blais: I fully agree with Mr. Rock.

What I would add is I think that, yes, we need more resources, but we also are in a fiscal jam. Respecting that and understanding that defence needs money, and many other initiatives need money, I think there needs to be a rationalization of how we do business at Global Affairs.

To be blunt, I think HQ is too big vis-à-vis the missions. I think the investments should be abroad, as that's where the value added is. There are too many systems in Ottawa. I'm not saying the people in Ottawa aren't busy—they are—but I think we should really look at that and favour the resources on our footprint abroad. It is a foreign department.

• (1740)

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Monsieur Saint-Jacques.

Mr. Guy Saint-Jacques: I agree with what has been said so far, but I would say that the department does not need a lot of money. We are talking about incremental amounts here. I was a bit discouraged when I read in the National Post that foreign language training has been cut at missions until the end of the fiscal year. To operate abroad, you need to be able to speak the local language, so this is very unfortunate if it's true.

I agree with Mr. Rock that we have to invest more in multilateral organizations.

On the trade side, it would be important to work with the Americans to try to convince them that we need to make the World Trade Organization work again.

Internally, in the department, I was glad to hear Ms. Isfeld say there are 170 new members of PAFSO, but I think we have to continue to recruit qualified young people from across Canada and give them good training, and also try to improve conditions abroad.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Professor Roussel.

Dr. Stéphane Roussel: I fully agree with what the other witnesses said, that increasing the budget for the foreign service would be good. However, let me speak for my own bailiwick just for a second and recommend that if foreign affairs had a certain budget, it could do what the Department of National Defence has been doing for 50 years, which is giving awards and supporting academic research outside the department. This would make sure we have a new generation of future diplomats trained in universities and increase the possibility for academics to act as consultants for the department.

It's very successful at the Department of National Defence, but foreign affairs never accepted to do the same or saw the need to do the same.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we go to Mr. Bergeron for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

My question is for Ms. Isfeld.

In an article in the Hill Times this week, you argue that the political class and the department must be willing to take risks. In your view, risk aversion is linked to a lack of understanding of Canada's foreign policy interests and values.

Now, as you no doubt know, this committee and the MPs on it are willing and ready to travel and take risks. Yet we are regularly discouraged from doing so by Global Affairs Canada and parliamentary security.

How can we change this mentality?

[*English*]

Ms. Pamela Isfeld: I'm afraid I'm not really qualified to speak on what decisions are made by security people at Global Affairs. We have a very developed network of people on the ground, and they make decisions and give advice based on what they are seeing.

The world has, as people said, gotten a lot more risky in many places. I know that it is difficult sometimes to organize visits and things like that. I would not want to second-guess.... We would have to know what the individual situation was that people were being discouraged from visiting.

I would say there's a lot that could be done, perhaps to increase awareness and ties going the other way, for instance, having more outreach from people from missions coming to speak to parliamentarians when they're in Ottawa, doing conferences, doing things like that to increase the awareness of what Global Affairs does and what the foreign service does. Sometimes they're their own worst enemies, as far as getting the story out. There are ways of doing that.

I'm sorry to hear that parliamentarians are feeling they're being discouraged from travelling. I believe that is a loss to our understanding and to good decision-making on issues related to the foreign service and foreign policy.

• (1745)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Ambassador Saint-Jacques, the Government of Canada, in its Indo-Pacific strategy, explains that in areas of deep disagreements, we will challenge China.

There seems to be a lot of emphasis on Canada's capacity to do this. Yet we have challenged Azerbaijan for its behaviour in Nagorno-Karabakh; we have chastised Israel for its lack of restraint in Gaza—with the results we know.

Does Canada have a real power to comment?

Mr. Guy Saint-Jacques: Of course, we have to understand that our power is quite limited, but I think that what's important is to try to change China's behaviour. On this, progress has been made, and I welcome the adoption of the Declaration against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations.

We are at the stage where this declaration should be given teeth, in order to punish countries that dare to use hostage-taking in the future.

It's also important for Canada to work with friendly countries to try to change China's behaviour. The message is simple. We have no problem with China being a superpower, as long as it respects international law and international rules. Moreover, it must put an end to the tuggish behaviour it displays by taking people hostage or imposing coercive trade measures.

[English]

The Chair: MP McPherson, you have two and a half minutes.

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

Again, thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I want to thank Ms. Blais for bringing up the idea that the International Criminal Court has a role in prosecuting both sides of any conflict, and of course, we would expect that they would prosecute the terrorist organization that is Hamas.

We were happy to see the change from the Canadian government on the vote at the United Nations, but I want to get a better understanding of how the voting happens in the UN.

On November 10, at the UN General Assembly, Canada voted against a resolution that was condemning illegal settlements, going against Canada's own stated position.

In response, you tweeted,

Canadians need to ask our government, the rationale behind this devastating decision for Canada's standing in the world.

From my experience, the [U.S.] did not ask us to side [with them].

We did this on our own. But why? Because the cost is enormous, we should be told the reason.

This vote was a month ago.

Do you have any further insight into why Canada would vote against its own policy at the United Nations while the illegal settlements are expanding and causing severe harm to any chance of a peace process being able to go forward?

Ms. Louise Blais: Thank you for the question. I'm glad you raised it.

Resolutions are complicated, and it's not unusual for a member state to vote against a resolution that might appear on the surface to be aligned with its own policy while sometimes it mentions things that are red lines to us. You really do have to take the resolution as a whole.

I recall that with the resolution previous to the one that was passed this week, Canada tried to get an amendment in that would have made it possible for Canada to vote in favour. We ended up abstaining, and then with a different resolution we voted in favour because there was an evolution in the conflict and our position.

Historically, Canada has, let's face it, been voting somewhat in isolation on a lot of the perennial Palestinian resolutions that have come up at the UN because we have said and we have felt, or the government has said and felt, that they are one-sided and that Israel is unjustifiably targeted at the UN.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I'm sorry to interrupt, but you did say that there's enormous cost to the vote when Canada votes against its own policies.

Ms. Louise Blais: I'm just coming to that. I was just quoting the government's position.

There has been a cost to this. This was a factor in why we lost our last bid, because it was well known by many countries that support the Palestinian plight that Canada might not vote in alignment with them, so it was a factor. When Canada votes with the U.S., Israel and maybe a handful of other countries, I would call that isolation. The U.S. can afford to do this; it's a superpower. Canada is a middle power, and so the cost for us is higher. This is something that—

● (1750)

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm afraid I'm going to have to go to the next question, Madame Blais.

Mr. Hoback, you have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for being here on a Wednesday afternoon.

One of the comments I get when I talk to people at GAC, the employees—and we do have some really good employees at Global Affairs. I will say that. They go beyond their job descriptions. They actually exceed there. In the interactions I've had with them, I've actually seen the work they do, and it's very good.

But one of the comments they'll always make is that GAC is run by human resources and they feel very frustrated with the HR department and their ability to have control and to get promotions and to move to different jobs because of HR policy.

Would you agree with that comment?

I'll start off with you, Ms. Blais, and then move down the list.

Ms. Louise Blais: Thank you.

As did Guy Saint-Jacques, I had a stint in human resources in the department. I saw how it was run. I've also been on the receiving end as an officer, an employee.

In the quest for transparency and equality in the department, we run processes that are blind, and that's part of the problem. We promote people as if they're newly off the street. They come in with a blind interview that doesn't really look at their background and their experience, and then they don't get promoted for a variety of reasons—such as they didn't demonstrate that they had intercultural effectiveness, even though they were posted in some of the toughest places in the world.

I think we have to review the way we promote and assign people abroad. I think it's a tough nut to crack, but I think it's one we need to address, because it is affecting morale. I don't know if Ms. Isfeld would agree, but it is really a deep problem in the department, and there's not enough communication as to why someone doesn't get this or doesn't get that. There really is poor management of talent in the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Mr. Randy Hoback: I'll go to Ms. Isfeld.

Would you agree with that comment? I have other questions, so I'd like just a quick answer so I don't run out of time.

Ms. Pamela Isfeld: Yes, I definitely agree.

I think they've gone to two extremes.

In the old days, it used to be that you got promoted by people knowing your reputation and based on different things like that. Then that got to be too much of a closed shop, and that was not fair.

They went to this very—on paper—objective thing that is based only on current capacities, and now they're at the other end. They need to swing back to where they look at current capacities and objective assessment as well as your experience and past performance.

Mr. Randy Hoback: They have the EX level in their pay grid, and I heard one complaint—it's a good example—of an employee who was stationed abroad as an EX-01 and how she was going to move up to an EX-02. There was actually an EX-02 position in that embassy, but because she was jumping to the next level, she actually had to come back to Canada and then apply for the job that she should have naturally just moved into.

I have heard about other scenarios in which people have gone from an EX-02 to an EX-03, and yet they have not had to go through that process. Since they were already an ambassador, they seemed to be able to just slide into it and it just seemed to happen.

How do you find fairness in that type of system?

I'll start off with you, Ms. Isfeld.

Ms. Pamela Isfeld: Well, you don't, basically. That's the bottom line for some of these things.

That is our complaint, sometimes. As a professional association and the union representing people with grievances and staffing complaints.... Sometimes, there are very rigid systems that serve the central authorities when they want. If those systems don't serve what someone in power wants, there are always ways around them.

It's not easy, but I believe it is something that needs to change. I would love to see Global Affairs get some advice on how to do that.

Mr. Randy Hoback: My next question is on where our resources are located.

Right now, I think 81.2% of all employees at GAC are stationed in Ottawa. Is that a real number? Shouldn't it be something where they have 80% abroad and 20% supporting them out of Ottawa? What is the right ratio here? Obviously, 81% is too high. Wouldn't you agree, Ms. Blais?

Ms. Louise Blais: As I said earlier, I agree.

I'm not sure what the current ratio is—you seem very well informed—but I know there is an imbalance, and we have to look at it. However, to do that, we have to look at what needs to be done in Ottawa. What are we doing that we shouldn't be doing, and what is the value of the department? It's a study that needs to happen. I hope it's part of what they are looking at, at the moment.

In my time, HQ has grown. The ratio was different when I joined, and things seemed to work just fine. I think we need to go back, but it feeds itself.

Yes, I know you have—

• (1755)

Mr. Randy Hoback: I apologize. I wish I had more time. I think we'll have to revisit that afterwards.

The Chair: Mr. Hoback, I'm sorry about that.

For the final questions, we go to MP Zuberi.

You have five minutes.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for being here.

My first question is for Guy Saint-Jacques.

It's on the Indo-Pacific strategy with respect to how it's been received by our partners, business leaders and stakeholders overseas and by Canadians living abroad.

Can you comment on how our Indo-Pacific strategy has been received by those different groups?

Mr. Guy Saint-Jacques: So far, the information I've received is that it has been very well received.

The reason for this is that it's a plan developed with the participation of all relevant departments in Ottawa, and it comes with substantial new money: \$2.5 billion over five years. As well, it compensates for the neglect of regions that had occurred in previous years. Also, it addresses the priorities of the countries concerned.

When I look at the implementation of the strategy... Of course, there has been a big setback with the problem we have with India. Of course, it would be better if the relationship with China were better. Otherwise, in terms of opening new missions, organizing team Canada trade missions and EDC opening new offices, I think it's pretty much on track.

From my perspective, it's a very good strategy and I hope it continues to be implemented.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: You mentioned the amount we've invested for the strategy.

Do you expect there to be a return on investment for that?

Mr. Guy Saint-Jacques: Yes. I think, both politically and on the trade side....

Politically, the department is now beefing up its expertise on China. China won't disappear, so there is more attention devoted to trying to understand how the country—especially the Chinese Communist Party—functions.

In terms of trade, it will help. I speak regularly with companies and advise them. I think there is a good effort taking place to help them look at new markets—to assist them. This should help us diversify our trade.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Mr. Rock spoke about Canada being bold again on the international stage. He spoke about the ICC, land mines and the human security agenda.

Do you want to share any comments on how you think we can lean forward as a country?

Mr. Guy Saint-Jacques: I think the value added of a diplomat—Louise alluded to this—is the quality of the networks and relationships you develop. This is extremely useful when you want to assess where a country is.

I think you have to take a long-term approach. You have to develop this expertise by sending people back. For that reason, it's important to speak the local language. That's the way to have a good understanding of the country.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

I want to ask you two questions. I hope that in the next minute and a half you could answer both of them.

You talk about language competency. When I travel overseas, I always make it a point to visit our diplomatic missions whenever

possible. I have noted that in Canada, we have people from many different backgrounds who can speak second and third languages in addition to English and French. However, at some missions, we have employees who can only speak English or French. We have Canadian staff, not local staff.

Could you comment very briefly on the importance of Canadian staff having the ability to at least understand a local language? That's the first question.

Second, could you comment on Mr. Bergeron's point about the importance of this committee travelling in order to enhance our understanding of what's happening overseas?

• (1800)

Mr. Guy Saint-Jacques: Well, I'm a bit surprised by your first question, because foreign service officers, before they are posted abroad—at least it was that way when I was in charge of that—are fully bilingual, and they can speak—

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I mean a local language other than English or French.

Mr. Guy Saint-Jacques: In terms of the local language, that's a problem. I was listening to what David Morrison, the deputy minister, said. He said that only about 30% of the officers speak the local language. Clearly, this is something we have to invest in more.

In terms of the work of the committee, I would encourage you to travel, to go to difficult missions in order to understand what it's like, but also to take advantage of what was suggested earlier, which is to talk to our diplomats when they return to Canada.

When I was ambassador to China, I would come back to Canada about six times every year. I would try to meet as many people as possible. That is part of the job of an ambassador, and it could be extended to other diplomatic officers.

The Chair: Thank you. That concludes our questions by members.

I'd like to thank former ambassador Guy Saint-Jacques, Professor Roussel, Ms. Isfeld and Ms. Blais. We're very grateful for your perspectives and your time. You can rest assured that you will find some of your views reflected in our final report.

We'll suspend for a couple of minutes, and go in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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