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• (1535)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (The Honourable Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills North, CPC)): Welcome to meeting number 38 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, February 12, 2026, the committee is meeting to review Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy.

[English]

I would like to now welcome our witnesses for our first panel today.

We are joined by Professor Dominique Caouette, professor of political science and Asian studies at Université de Montréal; and Professor Stéphanie Martel, associate professor in the department of political studies at Queen's University.

Each witness will be given five minutes for their opening statements, after which we will proceed with questions and comments from members of the committee.

[Translation]

Ms. Martel, you have the floor.

[English]

Stéphanie Martel (Associate Professor, Department of Political Studies, Queen's University, As an Individual): Thank you, Chair and members of the committee, for the invitation to appear.

[Translation]

I will deliver my remarks in English, but I can answer questions in both official languages.

[English]

I won't belabour points that have already been made effectively by several other expert witnesses on this committee, but I do want to amplify what I see as a pretty broad consensus within the expert community. The Indo-Pacific strategy already gets a lot of things right when it comes to increasing Canadian presence, and beginning to overcome our capacity, reputational and knowledge deficits in and on the region. This includes, of course, putting additional resources where our mouth is. It should be clear to this committee that the core objectives of the strategy cannot reasonably be expected to be met within a five-year period, but this first phase has no doubt moved the needle in the right direction on balance.

Still, there remains significant room for improvement of what needs to be, in my view, a flexible approach that not only sends a coherent message but also allows breathing room to adjust over time. I want to make two key points here that can hopefully inform this next phase.

The first one is that we should keep calm and carry on when it comes to more win-win, co-operative aspects of the Indo-Pacific strategy, particularly when it comes to our successes in security-focused initiatives, where we can actually make a difference, have added value to offer and can meet regional demand. Key examples for me include dark vessel detection, maritime domain awareness, combating illegal and unregulated fishing, disaster relief, non-proliferation, countering violent extremism, capacity-building in peacekeeping, and conflict mediation, among others.

These are issue areas that have received far less attention than clean energy, technology, supply chains, food security or critical minerals, yet this is also where we've been able to contribute in very concrete and, I would add, more sustainable ways. This is also where we can better align the IPS with the comprehensive approach of our regional partners on national and regional security, cutting across those unhelpful divides among security, the economy and, I would add, social development.

These contributions may not make as great a headline or a photo op as Operation Horizon—although they could, with a little more effort—but they have way more impact than we think in the long term, not only for people's lives but also for the Canadian brand, and in a much more cost-effective way. In this context, I feel strongly that Canada's support for ongoing regional efforts associated with, for instance, the implementation of the women, peace and security agenda in the region should not be downgraded but instead carry over this next phase.

The second point I wish to make is that there is, in my view, some room for adjustment in the more zero-sum dimensions of the Indo-Pacific strategy, particularly when it comes to mitigating some of the effects of China's rise that may conflict with Canadian interests or values and with those of our key allies and partners. Obviously, this is where the most substantial change, from the initial formulation of the IPS to whatever phase 2.0 is going to look like, needs to happen. Also, of course, this is against the backdrop of our evolving relationship with the United States and the broader moment we find ourselves in.

Ultimately, as others have suggested, this is really about the way we approach like-mindedness in a broader sense. A value-informed, pragmatic approach to like-mindedness requires more than just categorizing each country as like or unlike overall, of course. It should also be more than adjusting that distinction to specific issue areas.

What we actually need to be doing is looking at what specific aspects of a country's behaviour within each particular issue area align or clash with our interests and values, and to what extent, and then locating where it makes sense for Canada to draw the line by coordinating with others. Describing China as an increasingly disruptive power then and as a strategic partner now creates confusion on the part of our partners that our foreign service is now painstakingly trying to clear up. That's only because we came out with that kind of oversimplistic labelling in the first place to speak to a very particular low moment in the relationship, and now we have to adjust to reality.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Please wrap up quickly.

Stéphanie Martel: This is the exact opposite of the kind of granular approach, ideally, that we would need to take to distinguish facts from noise and to strategize accordingly, not just when it comes to China but, ideally, for every country we name more than once in the IPS. I hope the next phase of the IPS can do something to remedy that.

Thank you.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you, Ms. Martel.

Mr. Caouette, you have the floor for five minutes.

Dominique Caouette (Full professor of Political Science and Asian Studies, Université de Montréal, As an Individual): Good morning.

I will deliver my presentation in French.

[English]

I'm very happy to answer questions in either of the two official languages.

What I'd like to present today is very much in line with what my predecessor, Stéphanie, mentioned.

• (1540)

[Translation]

I'd like to discuss the context that led to the emergence of this Indo-Pacific policy in 2021.

In 2021, while Mélanie Joly was Minister of Foreign Affairs, my colleagues and I identified five challenges for Canada.

First, delivering on the promise that Canada is back.

Second, managing Canada's relationship with the United States.

Third, promoting feminism internationally.

Fourth, revitalizing Canada's multilateralism.

Fifth, rethinking relations with China.

This was in 2021, before the Indo-Pacific strategy was unveiled the following year.

As previous speakers have mentioned, the idea was to allocate a substantial \$2.3-billion over five years to implement a five-pronged strategy: promoting peace, resilience and security; expanding trade and investment; investing in and connecting people; building a sustainable and green future; and making Canada an active and engaged partner in the Indo-Pacific region.

Let's look at what has been accomplished. I think Ms. Martel's presentation touched on these same ideas.

Canada has substantially increased its visits to and presence in the region. It has also increased the number of high-level visits. This was one of the recommendations because, for Canada's Indo-Pacific partners, the presence of high-level representatives is important both symbolically and perceptually.

Canada has also increased its presence in regional forums, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, forum.

Another objective of the strategy was to build stronger relationships and strategic partnerships. This was touched on earlier.

It also sought to create trade and investment opportunities. Missions were established.

Canada also wanted to increase its national defence presence, particularly through participation in joint exercises and initiatives to detect illicit vessels.

Lastly, the strategy was designed to promote collaboration on combatting climate change, supporting civil society initiatives and protecting Canada's sovereignty and security.

What outcomes have we seen? How is Canada being perceived? First, I should point out that, in this region, outcomes matter, but perceptions are important. Perceptions are particularly important in Asia and the Indo-Pacific because people there have long memories. Diplomats and governments in the region remember what was done in the past. This means perception is truly relevant and significant.

Canada has participated in military exercises and in the detection of illicit vessels, but we remain a lesser partner. I'd be curious to see if the value Canada brings to the table is well understood. I'd say it remains limited, not because there's a lack of engagement, but because that engagement is a bit too fragmented.

There's also trade and investment. We've seen a rapprochement with Japan and South Korea. Over the past 12 to 15 months, Canada has been able to revitalize economic relations with India and China. This was important because, as Canada was launching its Indo-Pacific strategy, there were significant tensions with China and renewed tensions with India, the two regional superpowers. Canada has also strengthened ties in Southeast Asia, although the trade balance still favours the region by a ratio of about two to one. On the plus side, Canada's exports to the region are growing slightly faster than its imports. All in all, there's been slow but steady progress in the right direction.

Regarding the objective to invest in and connect people, it should be noted that there have been numerous delegation visits, but the impact is difficult to assess. For example, in November 2024, the then-minister of international trade travelled to the Philippines accompanied by a delegation of 300 businesswomen. Was it really necessary to have 300 people? That's quite a large delegation, after all. Why not send a more select delegation? Shouldn't we be taking more targeted actions?

Furthermore, when it comes to perceptions, contradictions have sometimes emerged over the past two years between our Indo-Pacific strategy objectives and immigration policy changes regarding admission thresholds. When I visited Indonesia and the Philippines, many people asked me what was going on with Canada and whether the country would remain open to immigration.

As to the building a sustainable future objective, people have talked about green and sustainable development initiatives. I would point out, however, that Canada's credibility is eroding both domestically and internationally due to policy shifts and reversals on the environment and the fight against climate change.

• (1545)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Please wrap up, Mr. Caouette.

Dominique Caouette: Certainly, I'll wrap up.

Being an active partner in the region is important, but there are sometimes inconsistencies, and that's a challenge.

In conclusion, how should we proceed? I think Canada must stand by the position it took in the Davos speech—that Canada is a middle power. That means it must forge alliances, uphold international standards and embrace this role.

We must therefore ask ourselves the following questions: Does Canada have the resources necessary to achieve its ambitions? Will renegotiating the Canada–United States–Mexico Agreement with the United States divert Canada's attention away from the Indo-Pacific? I advise Canada not to turn its back on the region. As my colleague, Ms. Martel, said, Canada must continue to invest, in a more structured and targeted manner, in the military, trade and civil society spheres.

We've proven ourselves and made a comeback, but we need increasingly targeted policies and we must avoid contradictions, such as those on environmental and immigration issues.

I'll stop here. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you, Mr. Caouette.

We now have 44 minutes for questions and comments from members of the committee.

We're going to start with Mr. Aboultaif.

Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to the witnesses.

[*English*]

Thank you very much for the presentations you made.

When we talk about the Indo-Pacific, it's a beautiful, short name for a very powerful region geographically, politically, economically and demographically. It's a region we deal with, where we must consider setting a ground that is going to make it good for Canada and for the region to continue to have those relationships. It's very crucial. We have some calls to evolve, to have an evolution rather than a reinvention as far as our approach to the Indo-Pacific goes.

We know that there is an Indo-Pacific strategy set by our current government. The question for both of you—and maybe I'll start with Dr. Martel—is this: Are you convinced that the base point of starting the strategy and looking into the region is good enough? Is that set for reinvention, or is that set for evolution?

I would like comments from both of you, but I'll start with Dr. Martel.

Stéphanie Martel: Evolution is probably the right way to put it. As I and others have mentioned, there are a lot of things that the IPS, as it is, does right.

I'll amplify the comment made by Professor Caouette. This is also about evolution in a way that allows for more flexibility to adjust to changing conditions and a complex reality, instead of being so focused on the short term.

A way to also approach the evolution of the strategy to reconcile inconsistencies within the strategy is to have a better grasp at how the various sub-regions and various parts of the strategy are interconnected. One initiative that might go very well in one particular sub-region or that might be very well received in one particular country or by one particular group of stakeholders might not have the same effects elsewhere and with another group of stakeholders.

This is where weaning ourselves off the kind of blanket characterizations of certain countries might actually be somewhere where we can adjust. The kind of signalling this sends is something that is not needed for the Indo-Pacific strategy in Canada to define the facts around a particular relationship but without creating unnecessary burden that needs to be backpedalled after the fact.

• (1550)

Ziad Aboultaif: Professor Caouette, go ahead, please.

Dominique Caouette: I would agree with what has just been said, but I would say that I think there's a part of reinvention that is also there. It's mostly evolution or specialization, I would say, that is most important, but I think we now have to partly reinvent our relationships with China and India. We need to be consistent with the idea that the world as we know it, as we've known it since the end of World War II, has changed. Tectonic plates have moved, and we are in a different setting. That's part of why I'm using the expression "reinvention".

For evolution, I would agree with what you have said, but I would say that we need to make sure there's consistency in our policy. This is what I was mentioning, because of the idea of perception. Perception matters in diplomacy, and the perception of inconsistency or contradictory policy is something that people might bring up. This is about the diminishing number of inconsistencies or contradictions, and this first phase allowed us to discover more affinities with certain countries. I think these should be reinforced, for example, with Japan and South Korea.

Also, we need to learn. Reinforce affinities, but learn that, for example, in Southeast Asia you have a country like Indonesia, which is quite close to Canada, that conducted military exercises with Russia two months ago. It seems incredible or very contradictory, but it makes sense within the Indonesian context. Malaysia took a strong position in supporting Palestine, which was very strongly.... It was not the only one doing it but one of a few in the region.

We need to understand the contexts we're dealing with. The action may not mean the same thing if you're based in Canada or if you're based in the region. I think that learning and deepening our understanding of these different societies and blocs are crucial. I think that's what Stéphanie Martel was just saying.

Ziad Aboultaif: Besides putting more effort and resources in there, how can Canada best navigate this relationship in a very complex, very diverse and very rich region?

I have about 10 to 20 seconds left.

Stéphanie Martel: Who should go first?

Ziad Aboultaif: Professor Martel, go ahead.

Stéphanie Martel: Thank you.

I think one thing we can do is find a way to better leverage the higher education sector. I speak or I preach for my own domain here, but there are several ways we can do that and support the IPS better.

Beyond limited ad hoc support for one-off specific initiatives, being able to develop a kind of bridging the gap network that is dedicated to the IPS and brings in a broader panel of experts and people from government, the business sector and civil society, having those conversations we're having right now in a more sustained way, would be a great idea.

Another very concrete initiative that we could consider, building on the successes of the Canada-ASEAN scholarships program, would be to offer scholarships to graduate students or post-doctoral researchers to come and study in Canada and, therefore, not only build understanding across Canada and the region but also contribute to building the kind of expertise we desperately need in this

country, in this moment. That would be a much better way than to support a few undergraduate students to enjoy the Canadian winter for a couple of months.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you.

Mr. Clark, you have the floor.

Braedon Clark (Sackville—Bedford—Preston, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today and for offering your expertise on this really important subject.

Professor Martel, I'll just mention that I appreciated the end of your last answer there. I'm an MP from the Halifax area, and we have one of the highest rates per capita of institutions and students in the country. I certainly take your point on the value there.

One of the commonalities between both of you on your opening statement, I think, was the need for more granularity in this evolution of the strategy, and the idea of not looking at things with a binary, black-white, good-bad type of approach, which makes a lot of sense to me.

I'll start with you, Professor Martel, and then go to Professor Caouette. Could you give us some examples of areas that stand out to you, where we might be able to be a bit more fine-tuned on this as we evolve this strategy?

• (1555)

Stéphanie Martel: I'll probably draw from China-specific examples, because I feel as though this committee is particularly interested in those. To preface my comments, I'm not a China expert, but there are a lot of really good ones in this country whom you should be tapping into beyond the immediately digestible but perhaps not as nuanced type of analysis that has fed into the IPS so far.

When it comes to China, any serious research that really narrows in on the actual granularity that you're describing will identify a broad spectrum of patterns, even within particular issue areas. In some ways, China will be, of course, trying to shape the rules in accordance with its own interests and values in ways that will clash with our own—that's for sure—but there are also particular aspects of China's current positioning as a global power where it is actually upholding the rules against other actors—I'm thinking of the U.S., in particular—who may be attempting to revise or usurp those.

It's important to make room and have the cognitive flexibility to allow for those possibilities. Of course, in between those, you'll have a full array of grey areas in terms of particular strategies and tactics. If we're able to better distinguish the facts from the noise here and really pinpoint exactly where we should be coordinating with others to either ward off or find ways to actually coexist or even co-operate with China, I think that is the way we should be approaching the relationship.

Braedon Clark: Thank you very much.

Professor Caouette, can we have your thoughts on this topic as well, please?

[*Translation*]

Dominique Caouette: I think the idea of taking a so-called granular, more targeted approach is excellent. Having a greater diplomatic presence is important, but it would also be helpful to have researchers in residence at Canada's consulates and embassies. We need to leverage the expertise of Canadian researchers who can be based at embassies or spend time there. The region is extremely complex, as has been pointed out.

I also think it would be worthwhile to focus on supporting Indo-Pacific researchers and think tanks, which possess considerable expertise, and to ensure reciprocity.

Speaking of reciprocity, last year we launched a fellowship for Canadian students, student researchers and post-doctoral researchers to conduct research in the region. There was supposed to be something called the connectivity envelope, which would have facilitated bilateral exchanges enabling student researchers from the region to come to Canada to specialize, but the project was scrapped for financial reasons, apparently. Initiatives like that are crucial, though. The relationship must be based on reciprocal exchanges.

Third, high-level delegations are important, but I would urge Global Affairs Canada, or GAC, to establish an Indo-Pacific research centre within GAC itself, just as it did with the China research centre. The goal would be to develop in-house expertise and plan missions with regular civil servants, not high-level officials, to cultivate rapport and foster better understanding, because senior civil servants are the ones who implement policies and put proposals into action.

Strengthening this rapport between decision-makers and foreign affairs representatives in the region would allow for a more targeted approach and greater expertise.

• (1600)

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Mr. Clark, you have two minutes remaining.

Braedon Clark: That's more than I thought. It's a gift. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): The chair is using his discretion.

Braedon Clark: He's rather generous.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): The first round was seven and a half minutes.

Braedon Clark: Thank you for your fairness on the matter.

I appreciate those comments very much. I think that sometimes when we talk about these issues, we gravitate toward issues of hard power, whether that might be military, geopolitics, security or energy. Soft power, obviously, should never be underestimated. I think those are excellent points there.

Professor Martel, you mentioned in your opening statement an area of opportunity, which is the work related to the agenda of women, peace and security. In the minute or so we have remaining, I wonder if you could give us your thoughts on that. Why do you see that as an area of potential?

Stéphanie Martel: I would start by saying that it's an area of demonstrated potential, in the sense that Canada has been an active player in that space as part of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Canada has been very active, in particular, in supporting ASEAN's efforts to develop its own regional action plan on women, peace and security. ASEAN was late to the party when it comes to women, peace and security, but it has now caught up.

This is an ongoing trend we're seeing and one that offers a number of very interesting entry points for Canada across issue areas where we already provide contributions not specific to having that kind of gender lens. All the issues I mentioned, from dark vessel detection to disaster relief and countering violent extremism, can use a women, peace and security entry point. Despite what we're seeing, with our southern neighbour the United States pulling out of that space and deeming that kind of policy agenda to be controversial, the U.S. is still an outlier, and—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for seven and a half minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being with us for this important study.

Mr. Caouette, as a professor of political science and Asian studies, I imagine you're aware of what's going on in places like Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan. I imagine you know what's happening there. In your speech, you said that we need to reinvent our relationship with China.

How can Canada defend international human rights—that is, the international rules-based order—while building closer diplomatic and economic ties with China? It doesn't add up.

Dominique Caouette: That's an excellent question. It applies not only to China, but also to Myanmar and other countries where significant human rights violations occur.

The idea is to facilitate a dialogue on these issues. For years, Canada was perceived as preachy, and that got in the way. Meanwhile, China constantly brought up the Canadian government's relations with its Indigenous communities.

We could use examples of reconciliation approaches or diplomatic approaches centred on dialogue and alignment. By that, I mean that we must also acknowledge our inconsistencies, and I think China is sensitive to that. There is no quick, ready-made solution. However, it is important to be consistent. Canada must create spaces for dialogue while upholding and repeatedly reaffirming its commitments. I think there's a feasible way to do this, but it may not be the same approach we've taken in the past.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You mentioned China's criticism of Canada's relationship with first nations. What happened in residential schools was horrific, of course, and now a process of truth and reconciliation is in motion.

Right now, China is subjecting Tibetans and Uyghurs to the same treatment that Canada inflicted on first nations many years ago. It's happening right now. To invoke the same argument is to walk into a trap, so to speak.

I don't mean to be harsh, Mr. Caouette, but we're in no position to lecture others about what's currently happening on Chinese territory. For its part, Canada has at least established truth and reconciliation mechanisms. We mustn't fall for that line of reasoning.

• (1605)

Dominique Caouette: That's exactly it. What I'm saying is that, instead of lecturing others, we should draw on our own experiences and show what we've done and how we've addressed these issues through truth and reconciliation commissions and investigative processes. That's when we can take a credible position. I think that's what we should focus on.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand.

Dominique Caouette: Another aspect we haven't discussed much is the expertise of civil society organizations in those regions and in Canada. They can get to the most difficult regions, such as China, to conduct investigations.

I think it's important to listen to human rights groups, to raise awareness about their reports and findings, and to draw on their expertise. Often, embassy staff cannot travel to regions in conflict. They lack direct connections there.

Why not also tap into the expertise of the diaspora here in Canada?

There are nine million Canadians of Asian descent who are familiar with the region, but we don't actively engage them very much. I think constructive engagement is a good idea, but it needs to take place in forums, among other things.

Another effective approach we advocate for is building consensus through in-depth dialogue behind closed doors rather than in public, which allows the parties to address issues directly.

I believe this kind of diplomacy must be subtle and carefully calibrated, but we must stand firm. I completely agree with what you're saying. We have to stand firm on basic principles of human rights. However, in terms of how we go about things, we need to be creative and find ways to move forward that also align with these countries' foreign policy approaches.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The problem I see is that, since diplomatic relations with China have somewhat thawed, we have

seen that an agreement on electric cars has been signed in exchange for lower tariffs on canola. What we have seen since then is that Mr. Carney called back Liberal MPs who had shown up in Taiwan. A Chinese envoy came here to Canada. He told everyone not to send Canadian MPs to Taiwan. In fact, our chair here, Mr. Chong, whom I thank and congratulate, didn't listen to that directive.

It's as if the Chinese Communist Party were dictating things to us here on Canadian soil. I, too, believe in dialogue, but since this diplomatic thaw, there has been nothing in history to show that we have gotten closer to China diplomatically and that there have been any positive results in terms of human rights.

The situation in Tibet dates back to 1949. The Uyghur situation has already been going on for a while. However, people continue to say that if we get closer diplomatically, if we get closer to China economically, its attitude will change.

You mentioned Myanmar earlier. Myanmar and China are worlds apart. We're talking about a global power, almost tied with the United States, when Myanmar isn't a player at all.

I'm wondering and trying to understand how we can really get closer to a regime that, as we all know, is currently using forced labour in supply chains producing goods that will be available here in Canada, all while we tell ourselves that if we get closer to China, it will change its attitude. I have yet to see any results. I don't understand how we can rely on that assertion to think that this will change anything at all.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Please answer the question briefly, Mr. Caouette.

Dominique Caouette: I think that argument is valid. However, I think it's important to maintain a firm position. What harms Canada the most is when Canada seems to compromise on its principles, particularly when it has a position and then changes it. For example, following Mr. Carney's visit to China, there seems to be a desire to distance ourselves from Taiwan.

I experienced a situation where, when a conference was being organized, a Taiwanese representative was invited to speak. China reacted vehemently by saying that the person should not come. A point was made about the independence of academia.

I think that Canada must take firm positions while being aware that this is not an orthodox position that will eventually lead to changes. That's where I think it's important to develop expertise.

• (1610)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Okay. Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Gill, you have five minutes.

Harb Gill (Windsor West, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I have a question for Dr. Martel.

India clearly is a very important player in the Indo-Pacific and an important country for Canada's future and economic interests. What many Canadians are struggling to understand, though, is how the government reconciles the reality of various concerns that have been raised by parliamentary committees here, CSIS, the RCMP, former ministers, and even members of the government's own caucus regarding foreign interference.

We have seen diplomatic visits, ministerial meetings, partnership announcements and MOUs in an effort to normalize relationships. Those efforts are clearly worthwhile and necessary, but beyond the optics and beyond the diplomacy, what problem has actually been solved? Academically speaking, what concern identified by CSIS, the RCMP, Parliament or the government members themselves is less serious today than it was a year ago?

Stéphanie Martel: To be perfectly frank with you, this is far outside the scope of my expertise, so I will not be able to provide a direct answer.

What I will say, to go back to the previous line of questioning, is that there is a need to grasp the reality of the interconnectedness of the global economy with those of China and India in ways that mean that any attempts to decouple because of legitimate concerns about foreign interference and human rights are not realistic.

We need to find other ways to apply pressure, and those ways are oftentimes best handled away, as my colleague mentioned, from the megaphone diplomacy and moral outrage that make us feel good but actually achieve very few results. I would defer to the expertise of the agencies in question to do the work that needs to be done and build the safeguards where we can build them and make objective calculations of risk here, and I think we have the capacity to do that.

Unfortunately, there is a whole lot of noise that is also crowding our ability to distinguish facts from speculation and fear of what might happen. Here, what is absolutely crucial is to also be able—and thank you for bringing up the case of India, because that's allowing me to make the point about China as well—to contextualize the kind of behaviour that we don't necessarily approve of against the backdrop of other relationships that we have that are also problematic in those ways but that we don't talk about and that don't lead to the same kind of outrage.

I find that kind of distinction telling, and it's something that also opens up or gives additional fodder to states like China to use that kind of tactical whataboutism to undermine our attempts to build those safeguards.

I think if we're able to accommodate the fact that, yes, reality is complex and two things can be true at the same time, and if we can ward ourselves against confirmation bias, that's the right way to go.

Harb Gill: Thank you, Dr. Martel.

I think what I heard there was, “Do not stand in Parliament like the previous prime minister and make wild statements that cannot be backed up.”

Dr. Caouette, the original Indo-Pacific strategy described China as an increasingly disruptive global power, and the Prime Minister called China a threat while visiting my home city of Windsor in April 2025. Now he has changed his tune and called them a “strategic” and “reliable” partner, possibly more reliable than the U.S.

We also heard from the Liberal government and the RCMP in the past that Beijing-sanctioned police stations are operating in major Canadian cities.

How does the government balance these competing realities, and what safeguards are there to ensure that today's re-engagement does not become tomorrow's problem for Canadian citizens?

• (1615)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you, Mr. Gill. Unfortunately, we're out of time for that round, so the witnesses, if they wish, could answer that as part of subsequent rounds.

We'll now go to Madame Fortier.

[Translation]

Hon. Mona Fortier (Ottawa—Vanier—Gloucester, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for joining our study.

With your expertise, we're trying to look at how we can strengthen and improve Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy. I'm going to give you the opportunity to expand on any concrete actions you may have in mind and would like to tell us about.

Canada has submitted its bid to host the ASEAN summit, which will take place in 2029.

First, I would like to hear your opinion on that. Is it worth it? Is it justified?

How could we take this opportunity to continue working on our strategy?

I'll start with Dr. Martel. I'll then turn to Mr. Caouette.

Stéphanie Martel: Are you talking about the ASEAN Regional Forum?

Hon. Mona Fortier: I'm talking about the one that Canada will host in 2029. Minister Anand is trying to show that Canada really wants to play a concrete role in the Indo-Pacific. This is an opportunity for ASEAN partners to contribute.

This is also an opportunity for you to tell us how we can improve Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy leading up to this forum, which will take place in 2029.

Stéphanie Martel: For Canada, any opportunity is a good one to offer reciprocity, to show that we're present, as well as to serve as a platform to host high-level discussions on a variety of topics.

I think there's one aspect of these exchanges that hasn't been mentioned but that is relevant if we want to hold this kind of event, this kind of high-level meeting. It's about leveraging more informal diplomacy channels or experts in diplomacy, for example, and better supporting them. Canada has access to these experts, but their participation has eroded over time, for all kinds of reasons. Fortunately, Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy has helped somewhat revive this kind of initiative. The Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada is making a very important contribution to this effort.

I think this is something that has to continue and that deserves to be taken a bit more seriously by Ottawa. I have attended a number of these meetings, and I know that these connections go a long way to demonstrating Canada's seriousness and its ability to contribute to discussions on key topics in a constructive way. However, many of these efforts are due to the goodwill of individual researchers and experts who are giving their time and research funding to—

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you, Dr. Martel.

I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I'd like to give Professor Caouette the opportunity to add something.

Stéphanie Martel: Of course.

Thank you.

Dominique Caouette: I personally think there are various opportunities. Just this year, the Sommet de la Francophonie will be held in Cambodia. It's important for Canada to be there. I think it's a way for Canada to demonstrate its commitment.

I want to go back to the previous comment. A few decades ago, Canada came up with the idea of forming coalitions. For example, there was a treaty on anti-personnel mines. Peacekeepers can be traced back even further. Canada had the ability to form unions with middle powers, with like-minded countries or coalitions.

Strengthening trade and relations with Southeast Asia, for example, can help create a balance of power with China. On a larger scale, Canada has to develop other partnerships so as not to depend solely on China for supply chains. This is important.

Beyond forming coalitions or alliances with groups of countries, it would be important to create alliances with countries that share a common discourse. With enough repeats, I think that could become a norm. Civil society initiatives, such as human rights groups, are one way we can advocate for human rights and exert pressure. It creates a context, or a space, in which the issue of human rights can be raised.

The next challenge is the issue of critical minerals. The development of the next strategy will have to include serious consideration of critical minerals. Critical minerals are being presented as part of the green transition, but there are also a number of upstream effects, such as pollution and the displacement of populations. This is a challenge that affects both Canada and the Indo-Pacific. That would be one way to show that we have common challenges.

• (1620)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you very much.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is a very interesting discussion. I want to congratulate and thank the witnesses who are here today.

Dr. Martel, the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development published a report, in 2020, concluding that a genocide was being committed against Uyghurs. It also stated that the regime in power in China was responsible. In 2021, my honourable colleague Mr. Chong, who is vice-chair of this committee, got the House of Commons to vote on a motion, and that vote recognized the Uyghur genocide by the Chinese communist regime. Members of Parliament, including Mr. Chong, Ms. Vandenberg and me, are still being sanctioned by China. I can't wrap my head around that.

Even with all the information we have right now, it's as if we're trying to have it both ways, when there are still unacceptable things happening in terms of international law under the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, for example, or the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

I understand that the issue is complicated and that we must continue to have diplomatic relations with this country, but the fact remains that it was awarded the Olympic Games and that nothing has ever changed. We were told that if China were to host the Olympic Games, we would be able to have discussions with the country.

Dr. Martel, how do we manage this relationship?

You don't have to give me the answer, because I don't think it exists, but I'll let you comment on that.

Stéphanie Martel: That's an easy question, but I would flip it back to you. How would you envision an approach to foreign policy or trade policy that prioritizes—if I understand you correctly—a form of decoupling or non-relationship with a regime, maybe not specifically China?

It's possible to think of many regimes that we maintain trade and diplomatic relations with, among other things, but that have been found to be responsible for gross violations of human rights. Since Canada is not securing a commitment, I think we also have to be realistic about the weight and influence that Canada can have on these issues, compared with China, as a self-proclaimed middle power.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Okay.

[*Translation*]

Stéphanie Martel: Does that mean that we can't exert pressure more effectively in co-operation with other countries? I think it raises the question. Unless we truly intend to approach our foreign policy in general by putting human rights first and deciding that we won't engage in relations with countries that commit human rights violations, we're going to have a number of problems.

• (1625)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you, Dr. Martel.

[*English*]

Next, we have Ms. Rood.

Lianne Rood (Middlesex—London, CPC): Thank you very much, witnesses, for being here today.

The Asia Pacific Foundation has stated that Canada needs to update its China policy with real guardrails on foreign interference, supply chains and economic coercion instead of just “selective engagement”.

Do you believe the current Liberal approach is actually protecting Canadian jobs, farmers and national security, or is it still being too soft on Beijing?

Stéphanie Martel: Is that question for me or Dr. Caouette?

Lianne Rood: It's for both of you.

Stéphanie Martel: Again, situating the narrow scope of my expertise, which is not on trade and not on China, I will say that I don't think the current approach is too soft on China. That wouldn't be the kind of language that I would personally use. There is room for building granular, country-specific knowledge and distinguishing the facts and legitimate causes for concern from the noise in how we approach our relationship moving forward without losing track of realistic expectations for what kind of influence Canada can exert on China and of how, technically, we can build the safeguards we need while understanding the reality of China's centrality in the global economy.

There is a way to approach things with cooler heads when it comes to our relationship.

Lianne Rood: Thank you so much.

I'm going to move on to the next question, because time is very short here.

Taiwan is a vibrant democracy and a critical partner for semiconductors, cybersecurity and supply chain resilience. Other witnesses have stated that we should deepen ties with Taiwan and not treat it as a bargaining chip with China.

Do you agree that Canada should sign the trade facilitation deal, keep doing strait transits with allies, and expand tech and defence co-operation right now, regardless of what Beijing thinks?

Dominique Caouette: I think this is one of the key points. Canada has to show that it has an independent foreign policy. The tendency, sometimes, is.... We were saying that China is a disruptive country, and now we're saying that it can be a strategic partner. We don't gain anything by creating these polarizing narratives.

One way to demonstrate our independence is to maintain links with Taiwan, as I said before. It's also important that these links be part of a regional approach, and there are countries in Southeast Asia, such as Japan and Korea, that also value this relationship.

It's important to show China, for that matter, that Canada can build alliances and maintain an independent foreign policy. What has to be outlined is that one way of doing it is through trade. Often we forget that there are 23 flights every day from Taiwan to China, and there's a lot of investment by Taiwanese businesses in China.

It's important to have a complex understanding. The reality is complex, but I think Canada gains by having a foreign policy, a new revived or revised Indo-Pacific strategy, that maintains some consistency in the way it characterizes its relationship through that approach and uses language that does not place Canada in a rhetorical trap, so that afterwards people can't say, “Oh, but Canada said such a thing.”

This is what I was saying earlier in terms of the next strategy having more nuance but also a more specialized and better knowledge of the region. The Asia Pacific Foundation is doing great work—

Lianne Rood: Thank you so much.

I'm going to move on to my next question. We're just about out of time. I'm so sorry.

Canada has LNG, uranium, critical minerals and clean-tech resources that Indo-Pacific countries desperately need for their energy security; many call energy a strategic asset, not just a commercial one. Should the next phase of the Indo-Pacific strategy make exporting reliable Canadian oil and gas and minerals the top priority to strengthen our economy at home and our influence abroad?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong) : Madam Rood, who would you like to have answer that question?

Lianne Rood: He can continue.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Caouette, please give a brief answer.

• (1630)

[*English*]

Dominique Caouette: I will let Stéphanie go ahead.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Dr. Martel, please give a brief answer.

[English]

Stéphanie Martel: Beyond short-term, trade-focused priorities and exports, Canada has other ways to contribute that should not be downgraded or sidelined.

Dominique Caouette: Very quickly, on the way we frame the issues, “either-or” is not productive, because it forces Canada to put itself in contradictory policies. We want to fight climate change and we want to have environmental policies, yet we want to increase fossil-fuel energy, and then people say these cannot be reconciled.

Avoiding these binary concepts or ideas would benefit Canada, because in many ways—and Stéphanie Martel is the specialist—ASEAN functions in this non-confrontational way, and it has kept the organization going.

It's key to learn from the region as well.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

The last round goes to Mr. Oliphant.

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

Thank you to both the witnesses.

Just before we continue, Ms. Fortier asked me to correct the record. She mentioned that we are looking at hosting the ASEAN summit in 2029, but it's the APEC summit.

I think it's important for us to remember that ASEAN is 11 countries, whereas APEC is 21 economies. That's a really important group that brings together the economies of the Pacific, including Taiwan. That's why it's referred to as economies.

There are a couple of things I want to dig down on.

Professor Martel, you're giving us a high challenge, because it's always easier to be generalists than to be specific.

The Indo-Pacific strategy, which involves 17 departments and agencies, was high level, and it does end up leading, when we don't get specific, to some in-and-out thinking. You've asked us to be more specific about where we do our work, not just sectorally but digging down within sectors very strategically. I agree. I think it's really important. Dealing with 40 countries in that Indo-Pacific region is hard to do. Then you get into hundreds of sectors. How do we do that? How do we get the intelligence, the work, done?

What I want you to say, without putting words in your mouth, is that we need a larger foreign service that is able to be on the ground and out there gathering the information to be very specific about where we should be. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but I'm trying to get that out.

Stéphanie Martel: We have a significantly highly competent foreign service deployed across this region that operates with very limited resources. The Indo-Pacific strategy has, to an extent, contributed to additional support and new positions in some aspects. This is absolutely crucial if we are serious in the long term to have those ears on the ground, absolutely.

Ears on the ground can also be a whole-of-society effort and one that goes beyond trade missions. This speaks to my initial sugges-

tion of leveraging people-to-people ties in the higher education sector, and leveraging the expert capacity we have in Canada in ways that are more effective is also a very cost-effective way of showing the flag in various areas, keeping ears on the ground and getting a sense of where the wind is blowing at particular moments.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: I would add to that that we are in a number of clubs that can engage in a way. The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership has 12 partners. People forget that, of the 40 countries in the Indo-Pacific region, 21 are members of the Commonwealth. That's over half. Three are members of la Francophonie.

You start to put these groups together, and you realize that we have other multilateral vehicles with which to engage diplomatically as well as culturally, and we have people-to-people ties through a variety of funds. I think we often forget that we're able to do that.

I want to talk about India. It may not be the expertise of either of you. Recently, the President of Finland was in India. He said that, together, Finland and India make up 1.5 billion people. It was a bit of a joke. Together, Canada and India make up 1.5 billion people as well. India is absolutely critical as the most populous country in the world.

Do you have any thoughts on our new engagement with India, about opportunities, cautions, guardrails or anything that comes into the minds of either of you?

Perhaps we could go with Professor Caouette first, if he has anything.

• (1635)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Be very brief, because we need to move on to our next panel.

Go ahead, Mr. Caouette.

Dominique Caouette: India is like a continent in and of itself, so one thing we could do is work with regional governments, as opposed to the national government. This would allow us to have an approach that is more sophisticated, because there's quite a variety. Oftentimes, we talk of India as a whole, but it is a very complex society. It's very different from north to south.

We need to reinforce our expertise on India. I think that's also key. It was a two-pillar...with India and China. Now relations have been re-established, but that doesn't mean the regime has necessarily changed.

Beyond reinforcing the foreign service—I totally agree with my colleague that this is important—we should have an approach that takes NGOs and the role of civil society into account. I would also say that the young chambers of commerce throughout Canada... We have the young Japanese chamber of commerce and the young Vietnamese chamber of commerce. I think it's very important that we work with our diaspora and the new generation of Canadians of Asian descent. They can be very effective ambassadors for Canada, and—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you.

Yes, go ahead quickly.

Dominique Caouette: Besides universities, I think the cultural industry is one of Canada's areas of expertise. We could strengthen that sector—cultural relations with other regions.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you very much.

I appreciate the testimony from both witnesses today. I'm sure it will be incorporated into our study.

Thank you very much for your interventions today, members of the committee.

Without further ado, we will suspend for a few minutes to allow our next panel of witnesses to appear.

• (1635)

(Pause)

• (1640)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Coming out of suspension, welcome to the continuation of meeting 38 of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Under Standing Order 108(2), we are here to study the security situation in the Balkans.

We have Dr. Mujanović, advisory council member of the Nationhood Lab at the Pell Center, Salve Regina University; Dr. Maria Popova, associate professor of political science and holder of the Hiram Mills chair, McGill University, by video conference; and Jo-Anne Bishop, a representative to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Thank you all for appearing.

We'll begin with an opening statement from Dr. Mujanović.

You have five minutes for your opening statement.

Dr. Jasmin Mujanović (Advisory Council Member, Nationhood Lab, Pell Center for International Relations, Salve Regina University, As an Individual) : Thank you very much.

Honourable members, the overall security dynamics in the western Balkans are moving in the wrong direction and have been for more than a decade. This concerns Canada, because His Majesty's government has a vested interest in the stability of Europe and in demonstrating Canada's burden-sharing and energy capacities to its European allies.

The chief threats to regional security are a combination of factors that have remained largely unaltered since the 1990s—revanchist ambitions in Belgrade and Zagreb, which undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of vulnerable neighbouring democracies,

and an overall international posture of indifference to western Balkan affairs.

In the 1990s, divergent views within the Atlantic community delayed action to prevent the first systematic crimes against humanity and genocide in Europe since the Holocaust, most infamously during the aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Today it is not merely fractures within the democratic west that undermine the Euro-Atlantic agenda in the region; it is also the strident and expanding influence of China and Russia too.

During his recent visit to Beijing, Serbia's president, Aleksandar Vučić, whose government has engaged in large-scale election fraud and actively suppressed peaceful anti-government protests for nearly two years, received from Xi Jinping the Friendship Medal of the People's Republic of China, an award reserved for the CCP's closest allies. This comes after large-scale weapons transfers to Serbia from China, including sophisticated missile and drone systems, and as Chinese-manufactured facial recognition software has been deployed on the streets of the Serbian capital with successive tours of Chinese police patrols.

Serbia's acquisition of modern Chinese military equipment, along with similar systems from Russia, has not sat dormant either. In September 2023, a group of 80-plus Serbian paramilitaries with direct links to the most senior levels of the Belgrade government attempted to seize strategic sites in Kosovo's north with approximately five million euros' worth of heavy-caliber, Serbian-origin arms. The operation was clearly modelled on similar actions by Belgrade in Croatia and Bosnia during the 1990s. Local law enforcement intercepted them, and a day-long firefight erupted, which left one Kosovo police officer and three Serbian militants dead.

Simultaneously, Belgrade, along with the Kremlin, remains the chief international backer of the secessionist regime in Bosnia as a Republika Srpska entity. Milorad Dodik, the longtime nationalist strongman who presides over the R.S. regime despite having been formally removed from office by the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, threatens the territorial integrity of the Bosnian state and the Dayton Peace Agreement on a near daily basis. In May, he visited Moscow twice to meet with senior Russian officials to solicit support for this dangerous agenda.

Despite more than two decades of attacks on the single most significant diplomatic pillar of the post-Yugoslav era in the region, the Dayton Peace Agreement, the U.S. decided to lift virtually its entire sanctions regime against Mr. Dodik and his retinue in October 2025, with little coherent public justification. Regional observers, however, claimed that Dodik secured this major American policy shift, which has also apparently involved the U.S. effort to push out Christian Schmidt as Bosnia's high representative, by spending millions of dollars retaining the services of far right lobbyists and other hard right influencers in Washington.

Mr. Dodik also has important European friends. The former Orbán government was arguably his chief EU benefactor, explicitly blocking Brussels from imposing sanctions against him and his inner circle. Although Budapest is now expected to shift its Bosnia policy, there has been no movement on the EU sanctions file, largely because Dodik also enjoys the protection of Croatia.

Zagreb backs him because of his decades-long partnership with the HDZ BiH, the Bosnian-based Croat nationalist sister party of Croatia's governing HDZ, and because both he and the HDZ BiH are central to preventing the reform of Bosnia's constitution in line with the binding rulings of the European Court of Human Rights and the opinions of the Venice Commission. Thus, although Croatia claims to support Bosnia's entry into the EU and NATO, it opposes nearly every reform needed to realize those objectives.

In conclusion, as Canada looks to deepen its relations with the EU, the western Balkans are perhaps the most obvious region in Europe for Ottawa to demonstrate the meaning of what Prime Minister Carney has called “variable geometry”—the formation of ad hoc coalitions to defend peace and order and aid in the construction of good government.

While Kosovo and Bosnia may benefit most from a Canada that seeks to prove that pluralism works, its net benefits would be felt across the region, including in states like Serbia, which has struggled to throw off the yoke of despotism, and Montenegro, which hopes to overcome entrenched political skepticism at home and in several European capitals to become the 28th member of the EU before the decade's close.

Thank you. I invite your questions.

• (1645)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Yes, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I would like to remind the witnesses to speak at a pace that allows the interpreters to breathe. I understand the desire to say everything in five minutes, but it's important to think of the House employees, who are trying to do the best job possible.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe. I appreciate the comment.

[English]

We'll now go to Dr. Popova.

Maria Popova (Hiram Mills Chair and Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, McGill University, As an Individual) : Thank you for convening this session and for inviting me to appear here. Because the other two witnesses are specialists on the western Balkans, I will focus on the other Balkan countries that are members of NATO. I want to talk today about the security and political stability challenges on NATO's southeastern flank.

There are three primary challenges to security and democratic stability among the Balkan NATO members. The first is kinetic spillover from Russia's war against Ukraine. The second is persistent Russian hybrid warfare. The third is domestic political instability, which is fuelled by a hypersensitive public that distrusts institutions. I want to discuss all three in a bit more detail.

First is the kinetic threat and strategic testing that Russia is doing. The security threat from Russia is really acute in the Balkans. Regular Russian drone incursions into Romanian airspace have escalated in the last few months. Most recently, a Russian drone struck a residential area in the Romanian city of Galati. This is not mere Russian carelessness. These are deliberate tests of NATO resolve. They're designed to trigger or to deepen divisions among the allies on how to respond.

In addition, there are floating naval mines in the Black Sea that consistently jeopardize Bulgarian and Turkish Black Sea shipping lanes, which are also used by Russia's shadow fleet.

The danger of NATO not responding to this Russian escalation is that Russia may move on to targeting logistics networks that support Ukraine's war effort in the Balkans. A decisive, unified NATO deterrent is crucial here.

The good news here is that the Balkan NATO members have all increased their defence spending. They're committed NATO allies. The private defence sector in Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey is actively producing and also striking joint ventures with the burgeoning and improving Ukrainian defence sector. This is a source of strength for the NATO alliance.

The second threat is persistent hybrid interference and warfare from Russia. Russian hybrid warfare—in the form of cyber-attacks, disinformation and financial backing for pro-Russian parties—has low structural costs because it avoids traditional tit-for-tat military responses. Russia is going to keep doing this. Countering it requires vigilance and proactive policies from these countries.

The institutional response to this in the Balkans is somewhat mixed. On the one hand, Romania's judiciary reacted in a very proactive way when it became clear that a candidate in the presidential election in 2024 benefited enormously from targeted Russian disinformation. That candidate was taken down from the runoff. In this way, Romania avoided having a far-right, pro-Russian president.

On the other hand, though, this spring, Bulgaria became a bit more vulnerable. The winner of the April parliamentary elections was a brand new party called—somewhat oxymoronically, because these are not its policies—Progressive Bulgaria, which has a Russia-accommodationist foreign and energy policy. The new government has already started creating opportunities for Russian soft power expansion into Bulgaria. Not yet, but eventually, the Bulgarian government may pursue Orbán style obstructionism at the EU level.

- (1650)

Now, the third threat—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Please wrap up quickly so we can get to our next witness.

Maria Popova: Sure.

The third issue is the hypermobilization around issues of corruption. There are very often major and destabilizing protests in the Balkans over corruption, even though sometimes it seems that more trivial issues trigger them. This is something for Canada to keep in mind. There is a lot of variation in the region in terms of corruption. Not all of the countries in the region are endemically corrupt, and we need to avoid the catch-all stereotype of fragile new democracies and be attuned to the variations and diversity here.

I'm happy to talk more about this in questions and answers. I think I slowed down a bit too much.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you very much for the opening statement.

Madam Bishop, you have the floor for five minutes for your opening statement.

Jo-Anne Bishop (Representative to Bosnia and Herzegovina, UN Women): Chair and honourable members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to join this session.

On behalf of UN Women, I'm speaking as a country representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Allow me to begin on a personal note. I started my career in Bosnia and Herzegovina through a Canadian-funded program for young professionals. The experience of seeing both the human cost of conflict and the leadership of women in rebuilding communities continues to shape how I understand security and stability today.

More than three decades after the breakup of Yugoslavia, peace in the western Balkans has held, but it's not yet consolidated. Across the region, unresolved political, social and justice issues continue to weaken democratic resilience and long-term stability. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 30 years after the Dayton Peace Agreement, this is reflected in the lasting legacies of war. Displacement, trauma, contested narratives and conflict-related sexual violence continue to shape trust in institutions and intercommunity relations. Stability is not only about preventing conflict. It depends on institutional accountability, protection from violence, economic inclusion, civic space and meaningful participation in public life. Without these, trust erodes and peace remains fragile.

This is why sustained international engagement matters. Canada has been a key partner. Through the UN peacebuilding fund and

dedicated women, peace and security investments, Canada is supporting women's leadership, community peacebuilding and responses to emerging risks, such as gendered hate speech.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, transitional justice remains a critical gap. Survivors of conflict-related sexual violence continue to face stigma and barriers to services and reparations. In a recent meeting I had with survivors, they shared a clear message for the international community: "Do not forget us." From a security perspective, violence against women is not a secondary issue. During the war, it was used as a weapon. Today, it persists as domestic violence, economic exclusion, online abuse and political intimidation. These are not isolated incidents. They reflect structural inequalities, unequal power relations and gaps in accountability. When such violence persists, it undermines trust in institutions and weakens social cohesion. This is why addressing violence against women must be understood as a core component of security.

This is especially visible in political life. Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina hold only 19.7% of parliamentary seats, while 60% of women in politics report experiencing violence, particularly online violence. This deters participation, narrows democratic space and weakens institutional legitimacy, especially ahead of the upcoming general elections in October.

At the same time, women in civil society, and especially survivors, are central to sustaining peace and security. The women of Bosnia and Herzegovina did not wait to be included. They organized, advocated and bore witness, helping to lay the foundations for the global women, peace and security agenda. Today, they continue to rebuild trust and maintain dialogue across divides, yet they remain underfunded and unrepresented in decision-making. Targeted peacebuilding investments help close this gap. Supporting these actors strengthens social cohesion and acts as a frontline mechanism for conflict prevention.

Across the western Balkans, the pattern is similar: unfinished reconciliation, contested narratives, unresolved political questions and low trust in institutions, combined with the continued exclusion of women from political and security decision-making. The Belgrade-Pristina dialogue remains central to regional stability, and women's advisory platforms—supported by the EU and UN Women—will help ensure that women's expertise is systematically included after years of advocacy.

Looking ahead, the next phase of women, peace and security engagement must go beyond commitments and invest in conditions for meaningful participation, including predictable financing, protected civic space, survivor-centred justice, intergenerational dialogue and stronger links between policy commitments and budgets.

• (1655)

For Canada, the implication is clear: Continued support for women, peace and security in the western Balkans is not only principled but a strategic investment in conflict prevention, reconciliation and democratic resilience.

I thank you and look forward to your questions.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you very much, Madam Bishop.

We'll now have 30 or so minutes of questions and comments from members, beginning with Madam Rood.

Lianne Rood: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, witnesses, for being here today.

I'll start with you, Dr. Mujanović.

The U.S. lifted sanctions on some Bosnian Serb leaders last year, while the U.K. kept theirs. Canada still has no sanctions on anyone undermining the Dayton agreement. In your view, are sanctions an effective tool to stop secessionist threats and Russian-backed destabilization in Bosnia, or have they become meaningless without full partner co-operation?

Dr. Jasmin Mujanović: I maintain that sanctions are an extremely important tool that the international community can use to prevent the worst kind of behaviour. We know that from the very same people who were under sanctions. Mr. Dodik, by his own admission, spent upwards of \$40 million to \$50 million trying to get sanctions lifted by the United States. Unfortunately, he ultimately succeeded in that effort. However, it's absolutely an issue that is going to remain on the radar in Washington, and even the current administration has been very clear about the fact that it would be willing to reimpose those sanctions if it believes that is necessary.

I would think that greater coordination between Canada and, in particular, its European allies with respect to sanctions policy would be something that would definitely improve the overall security environment across the western Balkans, because it's obviously not just Mr. Dodik who warrants looking at in terms of sanctions policy.

Lianne Rood: Thank you very much.

Ethnic tensions, weak institutions, corruption and organized crime are still tearing at the Balkans, and Russia and China are actively exploiting it. What are the biggest security risks right now, and how can Canada, working with our NATO and EU allies, actually push back against this malign foreign interference instead of just talking about it?

• (1700)

Dr. Jasmin Mujanović: Well, first and foremost, the structural issue is that this region has not been at the forefront of western foreign policy for a very long time. That is something that has been recognized by our adversaries. They have come in with a lot of

cheap, easy cash. They have bought up enormous amounts of influence. They have also boxed us out of key projects in which countries like Canada, for instance, have a very obvious interest, like the energy sector across southeastern Europe. This is something in which Canada has fallen majorly behind countries like China and Russia.

I think what needs to happen moving forward is that, first and foremost, Canada needs to re-establish its diplomatic footprint in the region. Most of the countries in the western Balkans do not have Canadian embassies on the ground. That includes Bosnia. That includes Kosovo. That includes Albania. That includes Montenegro. It's very hard for Canada to engage in a substantive fashion when it doesn't have sustained diplomatic representation on the ground.

Once you have that, then you can actually begin identifying in a more systematic fashion what Canada's own priorities are. As I've said, energy is the most obvious one for Canada, because it's what benefits Canadians the most. However, it's also an area where we can definitely work with our European and, in particular, our British allies to improve the interconnectedness and interoperability of the region as a whole, including the NATO allies in the area and the non-NATO allies—but hopefully soon NATO allies—who, for instance, have a very robust munitions industry in the region. That is something Canada can help build up. That's something Canada can benefit from as Canada looks to improve its industrial military base here. There's a lot of synergy there.

Again, the first step needs to be actually having the diplomatic footprint on the ground.

Lianne Rood: Thank you very much.

I'm going to cede the rest of my time to Mr. Gill.

Harb Gill: Thank you.

Dr. Mujanović, despite years of dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, there are still serious issues between them. How do we get past those issues to lasting normalization? Are we any closer to that than we've been over the past five years?

Dr. Jasmin Mujanović: We're not, unfortunately, and that has largely to do with the recalcitrant attitudes in Belgrade. I spoke about the Banjska incident, so I won't repeat myself there.

What I will say in terms of moving the policy framework forward is that we've had an excellent suggestion from a representative in the U.S. House of Representatives, Keith Self of Texas, who has basically suggested that the U.S.—and I think it applies also to Canada—needs to start signalling to the five European non-recognizers of Kosovo's sovereignty that this is going to be a bilateral issue between them and the United States—or, in this case, Canada and them—in so much as they do not move forward on the recognition of Kosovo. There is no coherent reason that Spain, Slovakia—

—and others do not recognize Kosovo's sovereignty. The reason that matters is that it has artificially emboldened Serbia to completely freeze this dialogue, despite the enormous diplomatic and financial capital that Canada and other countries have put into normalization.

Harb Gill: What do we do to convince these five nations, then, as Canadians?

Dr. Jasmin Mujanović: I will defer to the government in terms of what sorts of strings we can pull, but there are obviously bilateral ties that we have with each of these countries, not least of all at the economic level. It's something that's going to be purpose-fit for each of these countries.

Obviously, our relations with Cyprus, say, are different from Spain's. I don't think it necessarily means that we need to imperil our relations with Madrid or anyone else. It's just to say that we need to make this a topic of conversation and say that Canada does not see why this is something that Spain and others have really dug in their heels on.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Madam Vandenberg.

You have the floor.

Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses.

I'd like to start my questions with Ms. Bishop.

Jo-Anne, I was going to start with women, peace and security, but you did mention in your opening remarks that you got your start internationally through the international youth internship program funded by Canada with OSCE in Bosnia. The reason I know this is that we were both colleagues as interns at that time, in 1999-2000. That's where we first met.

I want to ask you about that, because that was a period when Canada was supporting both youth and very senior secondments in some of the multilateral institutions like OSCE. You're now with UN Women. Can you tell us if you think it's important for Canada to continue to support Canadians to be within these multilateral institutions in the region?

• (1705)

Jo-Anne Bishop: Thank you, MP Vandenberg. It's lovely to see you and also to reference back to this start in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Backing up even more, I was a graduate of the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs. I studied international diplomacy, negotiation and conflict prevention. I was interviewing Canadians coming back from the Kosovo verification mission. I was interning at CANADEM. My path was set for where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do. I was actually seeing the first cadre of Canadians who went before that to Croatia.

For me, on the chance to go, I have to say that it was my first time across the Atlantic Ocean. I showed up in Sarajevo in 1999, and it was an incredible experience to immediately apply all of the

knowledge. I worked in the OSCE. It was a really critical time. I would add that it was a very hopeful time, which is a bit of a shift from the moment now. There was a lot of opportunity if you were someone who was hard-working, committed and able to exert a high degree of professionalism. I moved up quickly in the five years. I went from being a field officer to being head of the non-discrimination department in the OSCE.

From that, I then moved into ODIHR and set up the tolerance and non-discrimination department, really setting the ground for all of ODIHR's work on hate crimes in the OSCE. From there, my international career continued with Timor-Leste, Afghanistan, Liberia, etc.

Creating these opportunities for Canadians out of programs where they have that knowledge that's also grounded in practice through the research they do, it really creates an opportunity for Canada to be at the forefront of influencing and also of applying practices on the ground that work in influencing change and impact. For me, that's the whole reason I started international work: I wanted to see impact and transformation and make a difference in lives.

I think this is the case for many Canadians. I'm always ready to support other younger Canadians. I wish that the internship program had continued, quite frankly, because I know that institutions like my own would be very ready to host other young Canadians looking for the same opportunity that I had.

Anita Vandenberg: Thank you very much. I think you have had impacts. We really do need to make those opportunities for younger Canadians today and for all Canadians.

We're very limited for time, and I do want to touch on the women, peace and security funding you mentioned. I know that in the original Dayton negotiations, women weren't at the table. You were saying in your opening remarks that women are organically mobilizing. They're not waiting, but they're not being supported. How important is it that women be part of all these negotiations?

You also talked about—I got some key words—“sustained” and “funding”, and you said that Canada had “dedicated women, peace and security investments”. I know that the minister is going to reappoint an ambassador for women, peace and security, but what more can Canada do to support the women in this region and around the world?

Jo-Anne Bishop: Thank you. It's a very important question.

I'll just go back to your first point on why women have to be at the table for peace agreements. The data is very clear that peace agreements are 64% less likely to fail when women are involved, and there's a higher chance of them lasting more than 15 years. We know that, for example, in Kosovo, women such as Edita Tahiri were part of the Rambouillet process—she was the only one in that sea of men in the photo—but that was not the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I have to say that part of the work we are doing that is financed by Canada under the Secretary-General's peacebuilding fund has involved, for example, hosting a high-level women, peace and security conference to pay tribute to the legacy of women from this country who, through their lived trauma and experience, were the ones who shaped UN Security Council Resolution 1325. It was their experience that declared rape a crime against humanity.

These women took the space early on. We know what the situation of women in Yugoslavia was in terms of equality, but since the war, with PTSD and all of the issues that come after a war, women's political participation has been stagnating. It has actually been decreasing.

• (1710)

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you very much.

Jo-Anne Bishop: Okay. Hopefully we'll have a chance to elaborate further later.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here.

Ms. Bishop, I'll let you continue, since you were on a roll. I was also interested in what you were saying.

[*English*]

Jo-Anne Bishop: I think it's the part about what Canada can do to support this agenda. What is very important... Canada, in the past, has done a lot, and I want to note that when I spoke about survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, Canada was actually one of the donors, early on, to a program that was supporting conflict-related sexual violence survivors. This was approximately 10 years ago. Now, through Canada's contribution to the Secretary-General's peacebuilding fund, it is supporting a number of peacebuilding efforts worldwide, but Bosnia and Herzegovina remains one of the only countries in Europe and central Asia where there is targeted funding. There's \$20 million of investment in Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Secretary-General's peacebuilding fund. Canada is the fourth-largest donor to that fund.

Under that fund, a lot of work is being done. The largest program under the fund is on women, peace and security. This is a \$5-million program, which will be ending soon, in early 2027. It is having a huge impact. With issues regarding challenges with the level of the state, and sometimes with the rejection of the state—one example of that is the national action plan on 1325, which still has not been adopted—local peacebuilding efforts and engagement of

women in advancing intercommunity trust are having a huge impact. We know this from the past—very often, women have a lot of success when it comes to addressing divisive narratives, bringing together communities and really advancing social cohesion in their communities.

Now we're supporting, also with the peacebuilding fund.... Today, I just met 20 local women's organizations from the most remote parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, some of whom have never received funding, who are now initiating similar activities in their communities. These activities address the unmet needs of CRSV survivors and support trust-building between communities that are still challenged to speak with each other and co-operate, and are challenged by misinformation and disinformation.

Continued funding for work on women, peace and security, and for programs like this, is really critical at this point, and I would also add the Elsie fund to that.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Bishop, I'm very glad that you informed us of that. However, since the new Canadian government took office, a new direction has been taken in terms of funding certain international aid programs. Prime Minister Carney's first budget included major cuts. This is somewhat following the trend we're seeing with the United States Agency for International Development, or USAID, or in Europe.

Right now, there's a sort of cut in the budgets for international development. That's often related to the desire to spend more on defence. Through a strange kind of rhetoric, that gets tied to the budgets for international aid even though they should be considered two completely separate things.

We can see what's happening in Canada. We aren't the only ones doing it, but, unfortunately, we're doing it too. One of the first questions the Prime Minister was asked was whether Canada was going to continue its feminist policy abroad. He said that this was no longer the case.

Shouldn't we be concerned about that? Shouldn't we sound some alarms?

The new government in Ottawa has to be made aware of the concerns raised not only by your organizations, but also by local organizations that may have fewer resources but may be more affected by this kind of policy.

[*English*]

Jo-Anne Bishop: This is a global problem. Funds everywhere are shrinking, especially in the area of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Because it is a middle-income country with a very complex context, it still requires investments in everything you're discussing now.

The investments, even to the peacebuilding fund, have decreased. Also, if you look at Canada's contribution year by year, it has dropped, but this is the case for pretty much all governments because of global developments, the war in Ukraine and, I would add, the gender push-backs. A lot of our traditional donors that used to support gender equality, women, peace and security are not doing so anymore, and there are a number of them.

Obviously, this is having an effect on global funds and funding for women's organizations, women human rights defenders and so on.

• (1715)

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You say that this is a global problem and that Canada is somewhat following this trend. We agree that Canada is neither a military power nor a global economic power. However, it has a history of defending human rights. This is coming from a Quebec separatist. We need only think of Brian Mulroney regarding apartheid in South Africa or Lester B. Pearson regarding peacekeepers, to give a Liberal example, for the sake of fairness. There has been a history of defending human rights.

Precisely at a time when everyone is cutting these budgets, shouldn't Canada seize this opportunity?

Instead of following this trend, couldn't Canada emerge as a leader and say that it will fight this wave, which is having serious consequences on the ground, particularly in places like the Balkans?

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Answer very briefly, please.

Jo-Anne Bishop: I would add that Canada has been a leader in women, peace and security, and this is globally recognized. The issue of shrinking funding is having a huge impact on women's organizations across a whole range of areas. It requires those governments that are decreasing funds—not all governments, of course; some are actually increasing funds, but they are small in number—to compensate for the decreasing funds. Also, other governments need to continue to step up to support organizations during this critical time.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you very much.

Mr. Aboultaif, you have five minutes.

Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you, Chair.

Welcome to all of the witnesses appearing before our committee today.

The Russian presence in the Balkan region, in general, is historic. There are so many ties culturally, economically, in security and otherwise.

Dr. Mujanović, could you make a quick assessment of the last 10 years and Russia's role in the region? China is a bigger economic power, and it seems that it is also heavily involved in the region. I think a quick assessment would be of benefit to this study.

Dr. Jasmin Mujanović: I know we are very limited on time. I will just say I would be happy to submit a note to the clerk with any additional details regarding many of the issues.

The Russian presence in the western Balkans since 2014—since the first invasion of Ukraine—has grown by leaps and bounds. Russia has a very sophisticated intelligence footprint on the ground. Just yesterday, we had the news out of Montenegro that the Montenegrin authorities turned back several dozen Serbian nationals who are thought to be directly linked to both Serbian intelligence and Russian intelligence, and they were dispatched on what was basically a disruption mission for a summit.

We know Serbian nationals have been trained by Russian intelligence. We know Russian nationals have been trained in Serbia. We have very close ties between the secessionist authorities in Bosnia and in Russia. Mr. Dodik, as I said, is actually in St. Petersburg now, as we speak, for the third time in less than a month and a half. They have influence in Serbia. They have influence in Montenegro. They have influence in North Macedonia. It's a very sophisticated political and intelligence operation on the ground.

The reason they do this—this is where I'll end—is that they maintain that the western Balkans are a potential second front against NATO in Europe. The first front is Ukraine, and the second front is this region.

Ziad Aboultaif: Canada has had a wonderful rapport in the region since General MacKenzie was leading the forces, and his role in making peace in the region is significant. That legacy's still there, but we don't have the same influence due to the changes that are taking place and the aggressiveness of players such as Russia and China.

One thing Canada has is energy. We know LNG could be an item in our hand to have influence in the region in the meantime, to compete with the Russian supply and make their position there uncomfortable. I know you've written about that somewhere. Due to the lack of time, I would appreciate it if you could submit those statements or that research to the committee. It would be great to add them to the report.

I have a minute and a half left. Can you comment on this, and then we'll go from there?

• (1720)

Dr. Jasmin Mujanović: Yes, I will certainly submit all of those materials to the clerk.

This is a region that is in the process of decoupling from Russian gas dependency. This is because of the EU requirements. The Americans have stepped in and said they want to become the chief LNG provider, not just for the western Balkans but essentially for all of eastern Europe. Unfortunately, the way that is being done is very non-transparent and very questionable. There are, in fact, questions about whether some of these purported companies—I say purported because they're essentially shell companies—may themselves actually have ties to other unsavoury characters. Let's just put it that way.

For Canada, which is such a major LNG producer and is in the process of reinvigorating its relationship with the Europeans as a whole, the western Balkans are a very logical place for Canadian companies and Canadian industry to do business. I'm not going to tell you that the western Balkans are the world's biggest market—they're not—but they are a significant market. They're a market that would certainly grow in significance with credible, transparent investment.

I think it's very logical for Canadian companies to attempt to bid, with the support of the Canadian government, on some of these projects that are emerging in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, North Macedonia and elsewhere.

Ziad Aboultaif: What does Canada need to do in that regard? We don't want to be a subcontractor. We want to be a general contractor. We want to be the one that supplies directly to them. What should the Canadian government do to make that competitive edge available for Canadian companies?

Dr. Jasmin Mujanović: First and foremost, it needs to be articulated as a policy priority. It then needs to be articulated through high-level diplomatic engagement. I've spoken about the lack of embassies being a major problem. Then, it's to actually speak with these local governments and tell them what Canada can offer in terms of construction of pipelines and provision of raw materials—LNG and other.

The other major thing that needs to be highlighted is that this is a region that has recently been recognized for fairly significant raw critical mineral reserves. The Canadian mining industry, logically, could be interested in helping this region build up its capacities. That, of course, also speaks to the long-term Euro-Atlantic interests of the region. In that sense, there's a lot of obvious synergy, but it requires Canada to engage on the issue.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you very much.

Mr. Zuberi, you have the floor.

Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I'll start off with Mr. Mujanović. I'm really happy to see you here and to have your testimony.

We heard a lot of great testimony today and a lot about how important the region is. I'd like to recall that Canada had at one point in time put many troops into the region of the western Balkans. There were 40,000 there. We lost 23 lives. We did invest a lot into the region. We're talking today about what we can do in terms of focusing into the future.

America has been mentioned. Can you just elaborate a bit on the U.S. approach and how it's changed over the last recent years? Can you just share a bit about that?

Dr. Jasmin Mujanović: I think the quickest way to describe it is that there is official U.S. policy, and then there is what observers are seeing on the ground. There's a significant decoupling of the two.

There was a very significant piece of legislation passed by the U.S. Congress a few months ago, called the Western Balkans Democracy and Prosperity Act, which has allowed the U.S. Congress a much greater platform to essentially provide oversight over what the State Department and the administration are doing.

We've had the first of those reports submitted just a couple of days ago, and we've had a hearing by Secretary Rubio over the last two days that has also given some sense of what the policy of the administration is. Again, the problem is that what the administration has been saying and what we've been seeing on the ground are not in line.

The most significant policy shift, obviously, was the sanctions relief for Mr. Dodik and the secessionist authorities in BiH. We've also seen a kind of, I would say, subcontracting out of U.S. policy. I've mentioned this company that is incorporated in Wyoming as of a few months ago, which has been incorporated directly into Bosnian law. It is now supposedly going to be building this pipeline. It has no known funds. Its principals are directly tied to some senior political figures.

• (1725)

Sameer Zuberi: What can we here in Canada do to help bolster our situation?

Dr. Jasmin Mujanović: I think there are two things.

There needs to be Canadian coordination with our European and British allies. We're seeing that play out right now. The Europeans are actually trying to provide a distinct regional policy that the U.S. is pushing back on. We're seeing that right now with the attempted appointment of a new high representative in Bosnia. That's number one.

For number two, as we spoke about a few minutes ago, Canada does actually have a self-interest in the region. It's not just that there are large western Balkan diaspora communities that have significant economic investments in the region and that would be interested in seeing greater engagement by Canada. It's also a potential market for Canadian energy firms and Canadian construction firms. I would also specifically highlight Canadian defence production. Roshel, which is an APC producer out of Ontario, if I'm not mistaken, has been providing APCs for a number of local governments. Canadian industrial presses are being sold in the region to help munitions firms get off the ground. This is something that Canada can do a lot more of.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

Now I'll go to Ms. Bishop.

I really enjoyed hearing your words and hearing how you worked with my colleague Ms. Vandenberg, whom I've been working with over the last few years now and have learned a lot from.

I picked up on something that you mentioned in your testimony. You said that targeted peacebuilding investments are important. Do you have any in mind that you'd like to elaborate upon?

Jo-Anne Bishop: One of the main ones is the peacebuilding fund. This is a large-scale pooled fund under the Secretary-General.

I think sustained investment in that fund and continuing to prioritize the western Balkans.... There are questions as funds are shrinking about where to invest those decreasing peacebuilding funds across the UN, and there are other countries that are also in the midst of conflict or war.

I think building that case for the continued investment in Bosnia and Herzegovina is important—

Sameer Zuberi: Certainly, and you spoke about multi-year funding.

That's quite critical, isn't it?

Jo-Anne Bishop: Yes. That is very critical, because often there is a tendency towards projectized approaches, and we know that those do not advance system-level change. They often overlap.

Sameer Zuberi: Certainly.

Going back to your personal story, Anita was sharing her personal story about the international youth internship program, which both of you participated in. How important was that for you personally in your current trajectory, in terms of what you're doing today as compared to if that had not existed?

Jo-Anne Bishop: If it hadn't existed, I wouldn't be where I am now.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for appearing in front of us today. Your testimony has been valuable, and I'm certain it will be incorporated into our study as it continues.

Members of the committee, thank you very much for your interventions and questions today.

Without further ado, this meeting is adjourned.

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