

I will divide my comments into two parts - events prior to the detention of Meng Wanzhou on December 1, 2018 and events after that date.

In March 2017, I went to China as ambassador with the objective of doing more, more, more - gengduo, gengduo, gengduo. More trade, more investment, more tourism, more cultural and educational exchanges, and so on.

At the same time, our eyes were open to the areas where actions by the Chinese government diverged from Canadian norms and values, and we expressed ourselves as forcefully as any country in these areas. I will give you three examples.

In 2018, Canada spearheaded a letter from 18 ambassadors to the party secretary of Xinjiang province. The letter expressed our concerns over the treatment of Uyghurs and requested a meeting with the party secretary. I remember trying to move beyond the usual suspects of like-minded signatory countries to include a broader range of countries. While that effort did not succeed, 18 was still a significant number of ambassadors that signed the letter. The letter was intended to be private, but some unknown party leaked an early draft to the media.

In July 2017, then Governor General David Johnston had a 15 minute conversation with President Xi Jin Ping in which he asked the Chinese government to allow the ailing Nobel Laureate Liu Xiao Bo to be moved from a Chinese prison to Germany for medical treatment. Xi Jin Ping said that Liu Xiao Bo was too sick to travel, which turned out to be correct, as we later learned that Liu Xiao Bo had died that same day. Subsequently the Chinese government allowed Liu Xiao Bo's widow, Liu Xia, to travel to Germany, and I remember speaking to her a few days before her departure..

My third example relates to China's arrest of human rights lawyers in the summer of 2015, known as the 709 crackdown. We met several of the family members and supporters of the detained lawyers, and I particularly remember Li Wenzu, the wife of one of the lawyers [Wang Quanzhang], who had not had any contact with her husband for more than two years and who told me she was concerned because her husband had a stubborn streak. While other lawyers had offered confessions or quasi confessions and been released, she was concerned that her husband would refuse to do so and that was why he was still incommunicado. Later on, Li Wenzu shaved her head and went on a protest march on behalf of her husband. I made sure that she met our Prime Minister when he visited Beijing, and she also met Angela Merkel.

I spend some time on these human rights issues because I want to make the point that the government's agenda was BOTH to remain true to our values AND to do more, more, more with China. Certainly I believe that this was the right policy for Canada. We built on our longstanding friendship with China, beginning with Norman Bethune and moving through the first sale of what by John Diefenbaker and diplomatic recognition by Pierre Trudeau to make the case for stronger Canada-China ties. Our objective was to build on that friendship, while at the same time making it very clear that we disagreed with China on certain issues of human rights and values.

In some ways, by November 2018 this policy was bearing fruit. In that single month, we had six federal ministers and three provincial premiers visiting China and holding productive meetings. That same month, the Prime Minister held talks with Premier Li Keqiang in Singapore. We were making progress on environmental agreements with China as well as expanded ties which created jobs in Canada.

Then, shortly after our visitors returned to Canada, everything changed with the detention of Meng Wanzhou in Vancouver on December 1 and, a few days later, the arrest by the Chinese of Canadians Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor. This action was followed by other negative actions by the Chinese government, including the imposition of the death penalty on Robert Shellenberg and suspension of trade in canola.

From that moment onwards, the top priority of the government and of myself as ambassador was to secure the release of the two Michaels and clemency for Robert Shellenberg. I was in frequent touch with the family members of the three detainees, as well as with ambassadors of like-minded governments. As one of relatively few Canadians who visited the two Michaels in detention, I was determined to do whatever I could to secure their release. On more than one occasion, I tried to convince the Chinese that if they were unable to release Kovrig and Spavor, they should at least improve their living conditions and reduce the huge gap in living conditions between Meng Wanzhou and the two Canadians. My efforts in that regard were unsuccessful, and as you all know, some fifteen months after their arrest, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor remain in detention.

I think Canada is fortunate that Dominic Barton agreed to serve as ambassador. While some have commented on Ambassador Barton's prior work on business and economic relations with China, my major first impression of Dominic Barton as ambassador was different. I had a meeting with Ambassador Barton in Canada just before he went to China as ambassador, and I was impressed to discover from the families of the two Michaels that the ambassador had already reached out to them before taking up his post. That fact, as well as my subsequent conversation with Ambassador Barton, made it crystal clear to me that the release of the detainees was far and away his top priority. Statements by Minister Champagne indicating that he raises this issue at every opportunity demonstrate that this is also the minister's and the government's top priority.

With the ambassador and the government so directly engaged on the issue of our detainees, it seems to me there is limited value in former ambassadors and other outsiders offering public advice on how to achieve this objective. I would simply say the following. Right now, I believe that the release of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor is the top priority of Canada's China policy. When this committee considers advice on possible changes in our policy towards China, I think the main issue should be whether the adoption of any particular policy will make it more likely or less likely that we will secure the release of our two detainees.

Finally, I would like to use this occasion to convey my best wishes to my former colleagues in China and to wish them well with the challenges associated with the coronavirus. Indeed, my best wishes as well

to all the people of Wuhan and China in dealing with this problem. As they say in Mandarin: Wuhan jiaoyou! Zhongguo jiaoyou!

Hon. John McCallum, P.C.